

**UCL  
POLICY LAB**

“I am hopeful for the future because I have seen the goodness of humans and the willingness of many to demand change.”

Chrisann Jarrett

Tackling inequality with  
Professor Wendy Carlin  
and Professor Imran Rasul

Exploring the transformative  
power of empathy and  
collaboration with  
Professor Jennifer Hudson



# Welcome to the UCL Policy Lab

We face immense challenges right now, whoever we are and wherever we live. From the continuing pandemic to the climate catastrophe, or from intensifying economic inequalities to the impact of new technology and war, our world is being disrupted in profoundly worrying ways. Here in the UK, millions of people are being confronted with a cost of living crisis that leaves citizens of one of the richest countries on earth having to make a choice between feeding their families or heating their homes.

In the face of all this, policymakers the world over seem unable to come forward with new ideas that measure up either to the scale of these problems or the urgency of this moment. And our polarised and divisive politics threaten to make matters worse.

But we must not despair. The transformative ideas that we all need are already out there. We can find them in the papers our researchers write, in discussions in seminar rooms and lecture theatres, and also in office blocks, community centres, church halls, temples, pubs, on the factory floor and across Zoom calls.

The UCL Policy Lab exists to harness all of this energy, dynamism and passion.

We will bring together the world-class research in UCL's Departments of Economics and Political Science, with people from all different backgrounds who are hungry for real world solutions to the problems they face every day. We will do so knowing that, because the problems we confront are vast and complex, they can only be solved by people working together, across difference. When we are divided by background, ideology or geography, we are far less able to see what needs to be done and take the action required. When we work together, we can learn and move forward together too.

The wonderful stories that follow in this magazine will give you a hint of what can be done. Here you can read about what makes people from a whole range of different experiences and expertise hopeful about the future. You will get a sense of the ideas generated by some of our forward-thinking academics and the ways in which they speak to the needs of our whole community.

You can read too about the people who are ready to bring change, accompanied by a series of citizen portraits. Many people have talked to us about the real impacts of the cost of living crisis. And yet just as powerfully, there is always a spirit of resilience and hope; a belief that we can yet overcome our challenges if we're given the means to do so.

Too often in the past, universities have acted as the gatekeepers of knowledge, with scholars beavering away in libraries and laboratories, separate from the world. But that was never necessary — and it simply isn't good enough now. The UCL Policy Lab has been created to break down the barriers that keep the best research in economics and political science so far apart from governments, businesses, campaigners and communities at large.

I hope very much that you will get involved and that in time, the UCL Policy Lab will be your policy lab too. I believe that together, we can be confident about our ability to help overcome the challenges we all face.



*Marc Stears*

Marc Stears  
Director  
UCL Policy Lab



Please scan to register for  
Policy Lab updates  
[ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab](https://ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab)  
@UCLPolicyLab



# Research needs to be equitable, about the redistribution of power



**“From my perspective, research should require the direct experience of those impacted by the issues.”**

Chrisann Jarrett  
Chief Executive Officer of We Belong

**Chrisann Jarrett, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of We Belong and member of the UCL Policy Lab’s inaugural Advisory Council, is one of Britain’s most successful campaigners for social change. She reflects here on the role of universities in that process.**

Chrisann Jarrett came to social change activism earlier than many.

“In 2013, at the age of 18, I secured a place at the LSE to study law,” she recalls. “I was informed that despite living in the UK since age eight, I was classified as an international student. After being denied a student loan, I was hit with tuition fees of £17,000 a year, with no alternative financing.”

This was not the result of some bureaucratic error. It was the direct consequence of intentional policymaking.

“I later found out that I was one of the 2,000 young people each year from migrant backgrounds who had to watch their peers progress to higher education, and be left behind due to the fact that we were not British citizens, nor did we have settled status,” Jarrett explains.

Devastated, no one could have blamed Chrisann Jarrett for giving up on her dream to go to university. But instead, she built a campaign for change. She talked to teachers, to the press, to lawyers willing to help out, and found many others in the same situation. She organised with them and convinced them to campaign together. Eventually, their cause reached the UK Supreme Court. And they won. A career focused on how young people can play a leading role in changing the policies that shape their lives began.

Now, as CEO of the migrant youth-led organisation We Belong, Jarrett reflects on what different groups can bring to the cause of social justice and social change. She appreciates that the expertise of university research matters. After all, she has seen first-hand how it can shape opinion in the courts and in Parliament. But she also has concerns about how research is still too often conducted.

“The exclusivity of the research process can lead to tokenism,” she says. “From my perspective, research should require the direct experience of those impacted by the issues. This helps with credibility and overall fact finding — both essential components if we are to speak ‘truth of power’.” But that research process can also easily go wrong. Research, Jarrett tells us, “can be very extractive, if the communities being asked for their experience are not engaged

in the development and different phases of the research itself.”

The preferred alternative is clear, Jarrett believes. “Research should be collectively owned. The problem with researchers is that they often make researching social justice issues an academic exercise. It needs to be more than that; it needs to be equitable and about the redistribution of power.”

Creating that alternative in practice requires real commitment from all concerned. “A better relationship accommodates open and honest conversations between universities, researchers and organisations doing the direct work,” Jarrett says. “Research is sometimes a very opaque process where groups can feel like their oppression is simply being ‘studied’ and there is understandably a lot of scepticism about the impact of the research findings.”

“What is needed is for researchers to be open minded about the process and not make assumptions,” she continues. “The whole brief needs to be co-produced.” And when it is, attitudes begin to shift too. “Often when working on policy change, we are asked ‘what is the scale of the issue?’ It becomes very inhumane and about statistics,” she explains. But it can instead be built on the mutual respect required to “develop and aid the narrative for social change.”

This transformation of research practices and research culture might take time, of course. But Jarrett is hopeful nonetheless about what can be achieved. And that is because of all she has seen and experienced in the last decade. “Put simply,” she concludes, “I am hopeful for the future because I have seen the goodness of humans and the willingness of many to demand change.”



# Tackling Inequality through research, education and policy

Professor Wendy Carlin and Professor Imran Rasul on tackling inequality

**“Understanding how our society can allow everyone to fulfil their potential and enjoy economic security, and making sure that knowledge spreads, is something that is very important to me — as a father and as an economist,”**

Professor Imran Rasul  
Professor of Economics  
Co-Director Stone Centre

Department of Economics Professors Wendy Carlin and Imran Rasul are the co-directors of the Stone Centre at UCL. In particular, the centre advances research and teaching to provide a clear understanding of the causes of wealth inequality, and its economic and political consequences. Here, they reflect on the need to challenge inequalities and the role that the UCL Policy Lab might be able to play in their work.

Professor Wendy Carlin is clear about the advantages of drawing together the resources of the Stone Centre at UCL with the UCL Policy Lab. “It is the combination of firepower on the three fronts of research, education and policy that could make a difference,” she says.

Carlin and her co-director, Professor Imran Rasul, believe that research has powerfully demonstrated the long-term advantages that accrue to those who have wealth, and the powerful disadvantages that confront those who do not.

“Having wealth means being able to take risks and to innovate, like starting a business, or in even relatively modest ways, like moving to a different place or learning new skills,” Carlin explains. “The ‘many’ are excluded from the ‘risk and innovation’ club.”

“In many ways working on this agenda is very personal to me,” Rasul adds. “My parents came to the UK as migrants in the 1960s, and a combination of hard work and economic opportunities allowed their family to experience tremendous mobility over two generations.” Those opportunities now seem under threat for many. “Understanding how our society can allow everyone to fulfil their potential and enjoy economic security, and making sure that knowledge spreads, is something that is very important to me — as a father and as an economist,” Rasul says.

Enhancing understanding and generating action, therefore, are the two tasks now confronting all of us.

“The Stone Centre works with Curriculum Open-access Resources in Economics (CORE) Economics Education, which is transforming the teaching of economics around the world,” Carlin continues. “What is distinctive about CORE is that it begins the study of economics from big problems in the world and steps back from that to show how economic models and data can provide insight.”

In the long term, this may well lead to profound policy change. “By bringing students into economics this way,” Carlin argues, we can hope to “influence future policymakers, media and

policy professionals, and citizens. We hope it will recruit more economists to build and spread the knowledge base.”

But vital though this research and education is, Carlin and Rasul note that it is also crucial to build a broader coalition for change in the here and now.

In the UK, public figures from the food writer, Jack Monroe, to the footballer, Marcus Rashford, have recently done a huge amount to highlight the challenges confronting those who begin life without access to wealth.

And these efforts are vital. “They motivate new research by revealing how inequality is experienced and they show us new ways of getting the message out,” Carlin argues. As it seeks to build the case for policy action, “it will be interesting to see how the UCL Policy Lab goes about making connections like these.”

As it does so, Carlin concludes, we can have reason to hope, despite all of the profound economic challenges that research has revealed. “I am constantly buoyed up by seeing how people can be mobilised to do good,”

she shares. “From everyday gestures of kindness toward strangers, to large-scale acts of solidarity as we witnessed in the pandemic and in support for Ukraine, this willingness to make a sacrifice for other people is the aspect of humanity that gives us a chance of saving the planet.” Rasul agrees. “As a discipline,” he says of economics, “I believe we have so much to contribute to the public good, and it makes me hopeful that so many young people want to get involved, understand and use that to make a positive change.”



# Bringing researchers and policy together

Chief Executive of the British Academy and member of the inaugural UCL Policy Lab Advisory Council, Hetan Shah discusses the changing ways research can engage the public on key policy issues.

Hetan Shah has spent the last two years insisting to anyone who will listen that academics can make a major contribution to the world's recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. Through commentaries in prestigious journals like *Nature*, to one-to-one briefings with leading politicians and civil servants, Shah has become one of the world's leading advocates for the transformative power of research in the humanities and social sciences.

But even he is under no illusions about how difficult it can be to bridge the gap between academia and public policy.

"The UK is blessed with a lot of thoughtful experts at universities," he says, but "we have lost some impetus in recent years about bringing research to the table about the big social issues." There is "deep expertise" and "a lot of thinking," but making the fruits of that work available to people at large has rarely been a political priority. Although colleagues in the natural sciences have been rightly celebrated for their huge strides in vaccine technologies, for example, the benefits of social science have been less widely acknowledged. "Perhaps one of the questions for the future is how we make evidence available in a way that latches onto political priorities and interests," he suggests.

Shah does, however, see signs of hope. "Younger researchers coming through the system now think of public engagement and policy engagement much earlier, in a way that wasn't traditional in the past." And this is precisely where an initiative like the UCL Policy Lab can come in. "Institutions that are brokers are critical," he explains. "It's not just about having stellar academic credentials, wonderful though that is. It's about having these institutions creating spaces that bring policymakers and researchers together on the issues of the day. They must build relationships which can then be maintained on an ongoing basis."

He is convinced that the kinds of conversations that take place when these relationships are brokered will be transformative. "The levelling up agenda has often thought about place," he explains. But through debate and discussion, you see that it can also be about "groups and individuals." He goes on to say that "poverty in London is probably as high as anywhere else in the country, so how do we make sure that we level up not just in terms of geography? Even within areas traditionally perceived as richer, we can ensure everybody has the best possible start in life." These are the questions that can emerge when researchers and the community come together.

It is this spirit of collaboration that gives Shah the most profound hope for the future. A way forward has been demonstrated by "the powerful role that civil society played during the pandemic," Shah says. "We can and are building upon that. The fact that it wasn't just the government that helped people through the pandemic — we were all supporting each other, whether that was through community groups or charities — shows the way forward for our society and for public policy as well."



Professor Jennifer Hudson explores the transformative power of empathy and collaboration

# Moving the dial on climate change and international development

“The world feels out of control to people right now,” says Professor Jennifer Hudson, one of UCL’s leading thinkers on international development. “There are really big problems we hear a lot about, whether that’s Covid-19, climate change, gender inequality, racism.” Together, they “feel like big, intractable problems and a lot of people we need to inspire are feeling the weight of these big problems.”

And what is worse, no one in authority, including leading experts and researchers, appears to be presenting people with very clear answers. Hudson gives an example from her own area of expertise. “We are not good at giving people menus or recipes to say: ‘if you want to engage with sustainable development, here are the five things you can do as an individual that add up in this way.’ That’s not our narrative.” Instead, “we say that if the temperature goes below 1.5 degrees Celsius, then the world will burn. And with that mindset, they feel a lack of control.” In part, this is because the problems are very big and are each driven by immense structural issues, which no individual can hope to address by themselves.

But even so, Hudson explains, there is no reason to be fatalistic. One of the chief roles of academic experts, she argues, is to “figure out how to convince people that individual behavioural change is important and that collectively, it adds up to something,” she says. At the same time, we need to “persuade them to look at the bigger picture, motivating governments to take up the big structural changes without making people feel that this is out of their control or a lost cause.”

That is no easy task, of course, and taking on the challenge requires academics to learn new skills and develop fresh techniques.

“People can be moved,” Hudson outlines, “but attitudes and behaviours are hard to change. In the environment we’ve seen this unfold in the last 10 years with increasing polarisation. We can shift people, but we are working against entrenched beliefs about what is right and what is good.”

“I was brought up as a traditional academic and all my thinking and all my engagement was with other academics,” Hudson continues. She says that learning how to help “move the dial” on the politics and policymaking of sustainable development demands something else altogether.

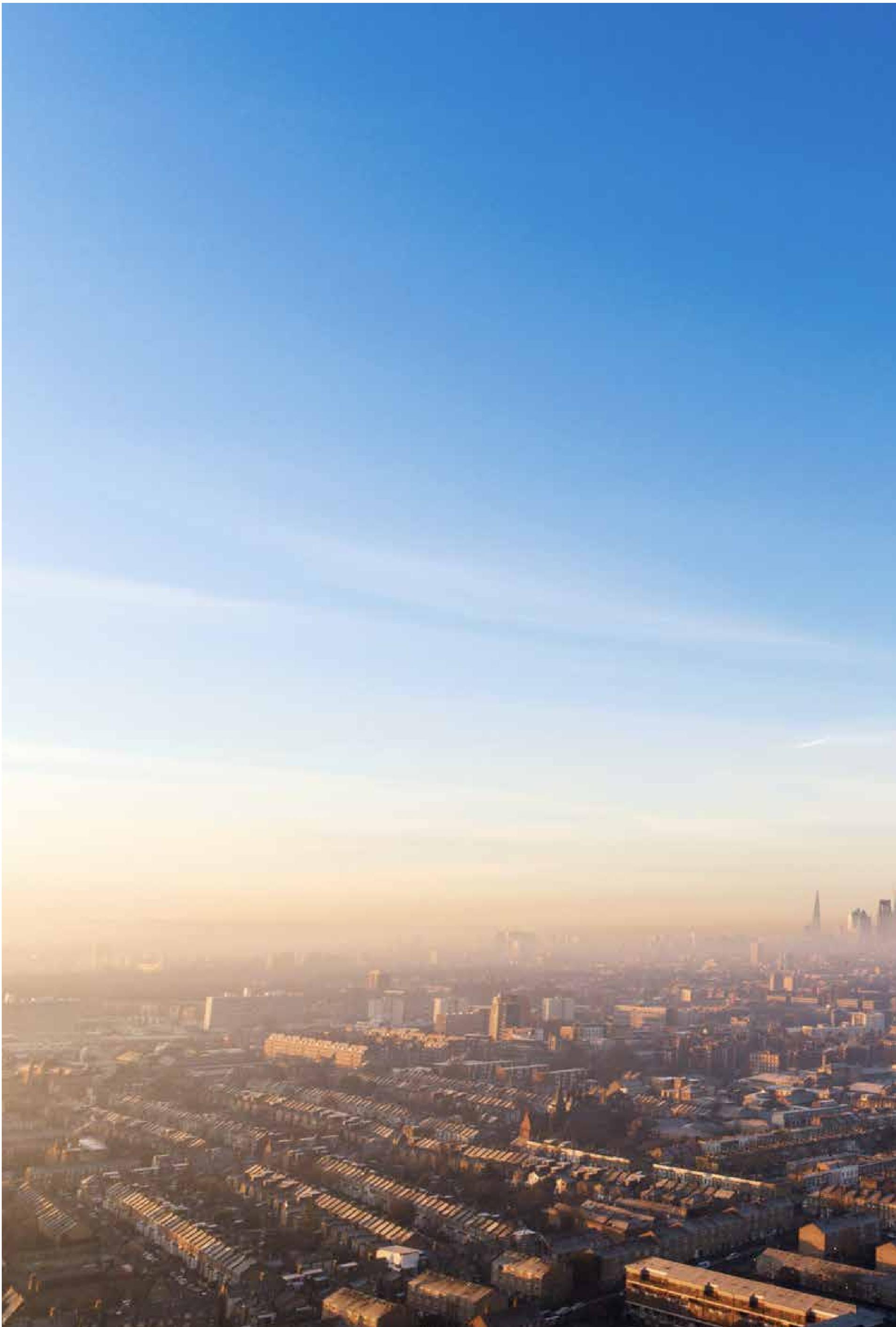
“We need to be better at talking to people where they are at. Academics have their own language; we exist in our own kind of bubbles and the public are very distant from that, by and large. And you can’t come to the public with a communications piece or a message that isn’t their starting point, because they will immediately reject it. You have to engage people at the point where they are willing to listen, because you are saying stuff that validates their experiences.”

The answer, she insists, lies in real partnership, sustained collaboration and, most of all, empathy. “We need to be empathetic to people and their positions. You are not going to move people by browbeating them into something. You really must put yourself in their shoes and ask whether you can have a conversation that is meaningful and move people along.”

And that, Hudson explains, is the very heart of a new research practice.

If we want to do better research and also contribute to change in the world, then there are clear guidelines about what to do. “It’s vital to sit and talk with external partners, to understand their constraints and what they’re thinking about. Then you have to figure out how to do the research part of it, and bring it back to them to keep the conversation going.”







# The power to transform the world around us

The Citizen Portrait project aims to highlight the voices of individuals and communities too often unheard and yet always vital to our understanding of the complex challenges we face.

For many of us, it has felt like we've spent the last decade lurching from one crisis to the next. And yet those we look towards for leadership or inspiration have lacked the ideas or energy to move us forward. We are left asking, in a time of constant disruption, what gives us the power we need to transform the world around us?

Well, scratch the surface, look a little closer, and we find individuals and communities with the ideas and energy to show us the way — people with the hope and ideas to overcome the challenges we face.

In our first series of Citizen Portraits, taken by the photographer Jorn Tomter, we've tried to capture the hopes of our own city — part of a society that has been through so much, has achieved so much and yet has so much more to accomplish.

By putting these portraits together with the portraits of researchers, activists, organisers and leaders, we invite you to imagine the new collaborative, innovative approach to public policymaking that the UCL Policy Lab aims to facilitate.





# Really taking control

Renowned business leader, philanthropist and member of the inaugural UCL Policy Lab Advisory Council, Sir Trevor Chinn, shares his vision for the future of public policy in the UK.

The next few years are critical in relation to the future of the UK and whether we will retain a United Kingdom.

From 1945 to 1979, politics followed the consensus created by the Attlee government. From 1979 until 2019, politics followed the consensus created by the Thatcher government. We are now in an interregnum.

To me, it looks likely that the new consensus is levelling up. It is clearly what the country requires if our population is to prosper and if we are to remain a United Kingdom. It would appear that the Prime Minister is working in this direction and he has appointed his most able minister to run it, Michael Gove. However, they have a huge opposition, in the Treasury and across parts of Whitehall.

Britain is one of the richest countries in the world and yet we have serious poverty and inequality. The result is that large parts of the country do not make the contribution to national wealth that we and they need.

The opportunity is to recreate prosperity in the areas of the Midlands and the

north. Reading the literature on these areas, one senses the feelings of loss and grief they are experiencing. We all define ourselves by our work. People's parents or grandparents had good jobs in factories or mines; jobs of which they were once proud.

I believe we need an industrial policy built around the green industries of the future and reshoring the everyday necessities. We need to create the jobs on which everyone can raise a family and where the young don't need to leave their home towns to find opportunities.

This process of rebuilding will only succeed if we create real devolution. Take power away from Whitehall — not to mini-Whitehalls in our big cities — but devolved to towns and communities. Let people really take control of their lives.

The opportunity for the UCL Policy Lab is to think about all of this thoroughly and creatively, with new ideas and energy. The country and our politics need this initiative. I very much look forward to being involved with the work of the UCL Policy Lab.



## We need to improve communication

**Sonia Sodha, a member of the UCL Policy Lab's inaugural Advisory Council, is chief leader writer and columnist at The Observer, and associate editor of Prospect magazine. She reflects here on the challenge of translating big ideas into political action.**

Sonia Sodha is in no doubt about the need for big ideas to challenge the major problems of our age. There is an urgent requirement, she thinks, for policymakers and policy commentators to put aside their preconceptions and to think about what needs to be done with a genuinely open mind.

"Often when I am approaching an issue to write about, I feel as though it is best to ditch the baggage," she explains, "and start from a position of thinking. If you were starting this policy area from scratch with certain commitments in mind, how would you approach it?"

The consequence of such truly creative thinking, she continues, is likely to be a call for wide scale change. For example, if we took the time to step back and plan anew, "we wouldn't have our system of elder care in an ageing society as we have it today," Sodha theorises.

While the need for bold ideas is strong, Sodha also believes that the audience is not anywhere near as attentive as it ought to be at the very

top of politics. Even when we "already have the answers" to a complex policy problem, she worries that politicians lack the willingness to listen and to act. "I think there is a lack of political willpower in terms of implementing long term structural reform over 20-year positions that would tackle certain social inequalities," she contends.

The answer to this dilemma, Sodha suggests, will eventually have to lie with the broader public. Politicians will respond only when people demand it, when they "put pressure on the political system."

And that work begins, for Sodha, with campaigners working together with those who can generate the new ideas for change. The key task for the UCL Policy Lab, seen in this way, lies in communication. People with transformative proposals for the future need to "communicate their ideas to build popularity" both within the political class and, perhaps even more importantly, with the public. Sodha believes that if the UCL Policy Lab can help with this, it can play a vital role in improving society for all.



# Collaboration is in our DNA

The Provost and President of UCL, Dr Michel Spence, lays out why the UCL Policy Lab is uniquely placed to help society meet the challenges it faces.

Ahead of the UCL Policy Lab launch, Dr Michael Spence sat down with communications manager, James Baggaley, to discuss his mission for UCL and his hopes for the new UCL Policy Lab.

You arrived here at UCL as we were coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic. UCL's research and expertise were vital for public understanding and policymaking during that time. As we plan for the future, what role do you think UCL will play in the big post-pandemic debates?

UCL was London's first university, and is today its largest and most comprehensive university too. It has always been engaged with the major questions of the day. Today, we're stepping up to understand a post-imperial, post-Brexit and post-Covid future. There is no better place to engage with those big issues than UCL. It's what excites me about my job and what excites me about initiatives like the UCL Policy Lab.

**We've been walking around campus today, and I'm struck by the feeling of "interdisciplinarity made real" here in Bloomsbury, both in terms of history and the present day. Artists, scientists, economists, architects and more — they are all coming together in this space. Does that remain a vital ingredient for UCL's future?**

Absolutely! You know what? Many universities like to talk about collaboration and interdisciplinarity, but UCL just does it. It's in the DNA of the place. Now, of course, as academics, we love to critique and test our institutions, but coming from the outside, it's absolutely a UCL trait and strength, almost unique.

I think this interdisciplinarity is vital to understanding some of the challenges the UCL Policy Lab will be seeking to tackle. For example, climate change and inequality don't respect academic disciplines. Today's problems never will. It's why the lab will be vital as a convener and collaboration space, bringing together those ideas from across UCL.

**Universities often shy away from setting challenges, perhaps preferring to develop questions**



**organically. UCL has four grand challenges, including tackling climate change and inequality. How helpful is this approach in making progress on these big policy issues?**

Hugely helpful. The last 300 years have been about dissecting knowledge and developing expertise in lots of ways. And, of course, great beauty can come from getting to know something deeply. However, the difficulty is that there is no real world problem that fits neatly into individual research disciplines. Fortunately, UCL has had the curiosity and the courage to let others shape the questions we seek to answer. And, of course, we get new and exciting questions when we do that. It allows us to have a real world impact in London and globally.

**You've mentioned the need for UCL to reach beyond academia and established networks, and to serve the wider community. For example, UCL East is opening this year. How much of that project is about recognising this evolving role of service and collaboration in UCL's mission?**

One of the things that impressed me when I arrived at UCL is the importance UCL places on its immediate community, both here in Camden and in Newham. As with the UCL Policy Lab, the university works to answer questions the community sets. We take that responsibility to serve our local community seriously. And that's important because these local challenges are not dissimilar to the challenges faced by communities

globally. Be it mental health, climate change or inequality.

**You've spoken a lot about your mission to support UCL in engaging and affecting major policy debates. How important is the UCL Policy Lab in that mission?**

It's incredibly important. The UCL Policy Lab is key to that mission. One of the things about universities is they are often complex, and for a university to be successful, you have to allow great people with ideas to run with them. That inevitably means that you end up with a huge variety of networks, institutes, centres and initiatives, which is great. But for those not from the institution, that can be incredibly bewildering. So having the UCL Policy Lab, a place where policymakers, researchers and communities can come together, is vital. The lab will not only enable greater collaboration across UCL, but it will also be a portal for external engagement on policy issues.

**You've spoken before about the university being an important place for us to learn to "disagree well." What do you mean by that?**

Yes, I have a firm view of the critical role of universities in liberal democracies. We need to be places that equip and sharpen the skills that keep liberal democracy going. And the implication of that is that universities must be a forum for debate, and they ought to be places where opposing views are heard and thought through, challenged and discussed.

Yet all of this is only possible if we answer the question, "how?" And

that means practising epistemic virtues. If we're listening to one another, asking questions with a desire to increase understanding, and choosing language that advances knowledge and respect for one another, then we are seeking both difference and commonality.

**Finally, ahead of the UCL Policy Lab launch, we've been speaking with members of the public about what makes them hopeful for the future. So, what makes you hopeful for the future?**

My faith. And how that faith is strengthened by the young people I meet as Provost every day. I'm struck by how so many of those young people are striving to understand and tackle things that genuinely matter in life — creating a fairer society, improving the lives of the elderly, transforming mental health debates, and perhaps most importantly, tackling climate change. It's a privilege to get to see that each day. In truth, I'm inspired by the students here at UCL. Meeting them makes me think that, in the end, we're going to be alright.



Celebrated political playwright, James Graham, discusses the political moment.

As the UCL Policy Lab's first Visiting Professor, James Graham sat down with Communications and Engagement Manager James Baggaley to talk about the lack of inspiring narratives, the democratic importance of empathy, and the shrinking of public space.

## Inaugural Advisory Council

**Sir Trevor Chinn CVO**  
Business leader and philanthropist,  
former Chair of the Mayor's Fund for London

**Henry Curr**  
Economics Editor, The Economist

**Chrisann Jarrett**  
Chief Executive and Founder, We Belong

**Hetan Shah**  
Chief Executive, British Academy

**Sonia Sodha**  
Chief Leader Writer and Columnist,  
The Observer and associate editor, Prospect

**Dame Julia Unwin**  
Former Chief Executive of the  
Joseph Rowntree Foundation  
and the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust

## Meet the core team



Director: Marc Stears

**The UCL Policy Lab launches at a time of enormous political and economic challenges in the UK and globally. What do you think the lab can bring to the conversation?**

The world is desperate for new ideas right now. There are just so many problems and too often it seems as if nobody in power knows what to do about them. My biggest ambition for the UCL Policy Lab is that it can convene discussions which give people belief in politics and policymaking again, showing them that it is possible to raise our sights collectively and tackle all of the challenges that confront us.

**What makes you hopeful for the future?**

Living in London makes me hopeful, every single day. I've just arrived back in the city after almost five years away and being reminded everyday of just how energetic, creative, vibrant and brilliant it is brings me immense optimism about the future. The streets of this city are crackling with creativity. I just hope the UCL Policy Lab can channel some of that into the ways in which we work.



Academic Co-Director, Political Science:  
Christian Schuster

**The UCL Policy Lab launches at a time of enormous political and economic challenges in the UK and globally. What do you think the lab can bring to the conversation?**

The UCL Policy Lab is at its heart both collaborative and evidence-informed. We bring stakeholders – policymakers, civil society representatives, journalists, private sector representatives and others – together with more than 100 world leading researchers in economics and politics. Our colleagues research many of the world's key challenges – from ensuring a just transition towards carbon neutrality, and understanding citizen preferences in Ukraine's separatist regions, to addressing local inequalities in the UK. Their research can help spur collaborative discussions to think differently about core societal challenges and find solutions.

**What makes you hopeful for the future?**

Technology has transformed both how we can generate evidence and how we can collaborate to find solutions. For instance, the kind of data science techniques and big data sets our colleagues employ to shed light on better policies simply did not even exist a decade back. The lab is there to leverage these transformational changes and spur collaborative discussions to get to a better future.

# The art of political storytelling

**In your show *Brexit: The Uncivil War*, it felt like you went to the heart of how the Leave campaign crafted and delivered a message which ultimately led to the UK leaving the EU. Does the idea of political storytelling offer you a way to write about the world?**

I'm obsessed by how they find the language and the storytelling in politics. I'm interested in how you communicate these often difficult and complex ideas. On a personal level, this is what hurt me about the referendum. The Vote Leave side were such good storytellers in a way that the Remain side wasn't. The Leave side had a straightforward story to tell. "Democracy! We make our laws!" It was a simple and effective idea. And of course, multilateral, global decision-making is a harder story to tell. Mainly because we haven't found the words, the characters, or the structure. You can't start from nowhere and have it done in six weeks. The ideas won't seep down, will they?

**It did feel like the story the Leave campaign successfully told began long before the formal campaign.**

I remember speaking to Craig Oliver from the Remain campaign. Going into the campaign, he thought there would be a moment with a starting pistol where both sides set off at the same time. But in fact, he soon realised that the other side had been telling their story for 25 years.

**Your work has looked at some of the most contentious moments in political history, be it the ideological battles portrayed in *This House*, or the racial divisions of the United States in the 1960s in *Best of Enemies*. The UCL Policy Lab is launching at what feels like another moment of growing uncertainty. How bad is today's political and economic situation?**

I think it's really bad. And I say this as a perpetual optimist, who is often criticised for the work that I do, which is more empathetic or tolerant of political systems. I try to be sympathetic to politicians, representing them as flawed but ultimately decent people — and I've believed that for as long as I can

remember. But that view is being really challenged at the moment. We're at a low point, intellectually and philosophically, even spiritually and morally. We are simultaneously facing some of the biggest social challenges in modern history, I'd say as equivalent to the 1960s in the United States with the civil rights movement, or the industrial collapse in the 1970s. Yet unlike those moments in history, there is not the intellectual force to meet this one. There are not the big ideas; the alternative or competing visions of the path out of these problems. Whatever you think of the democratic socialism of labour in the 1970s or the Thatcherism of the Tories — there was at least a choice. I loved writing *This House* because it felt like the prequels to *Star Wars*. Where depending on your politics, you turn to the light side or the dark side. There were two vivid and striking competing visions of what a country should be economically, culturally and socially — and you see none of that now. Those oppositions don't exist.

You could argue that's what Corbynism tried to provoke. But even then a lot of that in its tone, in its leading characters, felt like something from the past. Thinking of the intellectual stagnation of the past 12 years, I don't think it's just a Conservative problem or a coalition problem. You could take any post-war decade in recent history and say, "I know what happened in the 50s," whether it's house building, or rebuilding the economy, or getting the welfare state up and running. I can define the 60s and 70s. And yet I just don't know what has happened in the past 12 years that I, as a writer, can describe as changed or improved. Except Brexit, which is not an inherently inspiring thing, as it is just bringing us back to the status quo of the 1970s again.

We have the first generation that will be worse off than their parents, which is such a breaking of the social contract. People should be saying: "that can't happen, we need to have a radical reformist agenda."

**What do you think makes our politicians incapable of putting forward a vision stronger than the status quo?**

A combination of factors. The media landscape has changed, so the way that political ideas are communicated to us has changed. Everyone blames social media for everything and so I won't fall into that trap. But there is something about the rhythm with which we receive information that has changed.

I know from a drama point of view that sometimes nothing makes sense moment to moment, until you put it in a frame and give it space, time and perspective. So I wonder if our politicians and our "ideas people" just don't have time to form a nuanced, detailed and complicated answer to these questions? They are always reacting to the moment with these things, rather than thinking of a long term five-year, 10-year or national plan. And within this culture, there is no benefit to these long term ways of thinking about solutions. One of the obvious policies that could have slowed down our current intergenerational inequality would have been house building. But if that takes six, seven or eight years, and you're a politician who is reacting to Twitter that day — you don't get political capital from planting seeds that you won't see grow into a tree.

But maybe we just don't have the new idea yet. Maybe it hasn't emerged. I feel that in most periods of history there is always a reset after 30 to 40 years. The Berlin Wall comes down, the Second World War ends, and now we keep trying to reset but seem unable. The financial crisis happens, and we say "right, we've had this consensus, we're going to pivot to something else." But it didn't happen. Then we had the pandemic. In a drama, it would be such a cliché that it takes people being locked in their homes for six months, and for society to literally shut down, to wake it up from its inertia. The pandemic exposed the underfunding of the health service, the inequality. But then the world opens up and we crack on, and we go back to normal?

**We often say that the UK is now a country divided. Specifically there is London and not London. You grew up in Ashfield in the Midlands. Do you think the UK is a necessarily conflicted nation?**

I just don't know how real the culture wars are. I know they are currently being waged on social media and comment threads and shock jock radio stations. I always thought that London was a different world when I was growing up, but I didn't hate it; I didn't think of it as a threat to my existence, and vice versa. There was a sense of humour about it. They had fancy restaurants and ate really late, and we had tea at 5pm. It was the stuff of stand-up comics. But now it's framed as an existential threat to our society. My experience in Ashfield is that people are generally getting on with their lives. Yes, those lives are vastly different from 30 years ago. Without romanticising it — because going down the pit was awful — the social structure we have lost was important. Working men's clubs, the miner's welfare, the collective elements that gave people a physical sense of their own togetherness and identity. That's all gone. The fact that most pubs can't survive in their communities is really telling. I don't know how you recognise yourself as a group, when you are not together as much as you once were. There has been a shrinking of the public realm. Yet the desire to be an actual community in the physical sense still exists.

**In London, although there is massive inequality and deprivation, people still come together. There are spaces for communal joy or celebration. And what went with de-industrialisation elsewhere wasn't just jobs, but also the places we could come together. Is that right?**

Absolutely. It's always been on a trajectory. But it has been accelerated by austerity and exacerbated by the pandemic. In all this talk of levelling up, Michael Gove listed transport as one of his 12 points. I couldn't help but think, "yeah, fine, build a tram — but what's on the other end of the tram when I get off it?" And this is where I really believe culture plays such an important role. Culture within these communities was crucial in providing a space to get together. A place to assemble and discuss the issues of the day in an empathetic and reasonable way. I believe that one of the most significant ways you could revive the social and mental health of my community would be to revive

the club circuit of musicians going around on Friday and Saturday nights. Or bingo, live entertainment, cinema, and, yes, amateur and professional theatre.

**A lot of your work is about translating complex political ideas and making them accessible — even entertaining! How do you do it?**

I don't know if it's conscious or intuitive. I think we intuitively know what makes a good story. I think what's surprising and what I'm grateful for is that for 15 years, the assumption was that people weren't interested in how political institutions worked. That it was too niche. For example, the Whip's office and how it operated in the 1970s (*This House*) or how a newspaper operates (*Ink*). Or a referendum campaign — what is it, how does it work, where do you put the desks, who funds it, how do you come up with a message, and how do you sell that message? But in reality there is an audience, people enjoy opening up that Swiss clock of it, and understanding how the cogs work.

Being given the opportunity to walk in the footsteps of people you probably disagree with, certain problematic characters like Rupert Murdoch or Dominic Cummings — I think that's the value of drama in that space. Theatre has always done that. aken villains, warriors, kings and queens, and tried to understand them emotionally — what they want, what's driving them — and then created empathy.

**What makes you hopeful for the future?**

History tells us that even if things feel lost, they are not lost forever. Everything changes, everything turns. There will be moments that feel more hopeful, positive and achievable than today. There is also a generation of younger people. For all we are told about snowflakes, trigger warnings and safe spaces, and being intellectually uncurious and inflexible — my experience is that this is not the case. Their general compassion and awareness of the complexities of life, the damages of social media, and the seriousness of the climate crisis gives us hope.



Academic Co-Director, Economics:  
Marcos Vera Hernandez

**The UCL Policy Lab launches at a time of enormous political and economic challenges in the UK and globally. What do you think the lab can bring to the conversation?**

We bring a unique perspective, drawn from a combination of leading research in economics and political science. We aim both to elucidate policy debate and to be guided by it, thereby enriching our research and extending its reach. This virtuous feedback loop helps inform solutions to the major societal challenges that surround us.

**What makes you hopeful for the future?**

The power of increasing education. Across the globe, populations are getting more and more educated, and demand for evidence-based policymaking, informed by rigorous multidisciplinary research of the type the UCL Policy Lab does, will only continue to grow. This will ultimately lead to a more prosperous and sustainable world.



Communications and Engagement Manager:  
James Baggaley

**The UCL Policy Lab launches at a time of enormous political and economic challenges in the UK and globally. What do you think the lab can bring to the conversation?**

I've seen up close how frequently great ideas are missed because they either failed to capture the public imagination, or failed to understand the lived experience of those affected. I know how passionate researchers are about their work. If we can harness that passion and the world leading expertise, I think the lab could be transformative for solving major challenges.

**What makes you hopeful for the future?**

I've always been an optimist but these last few years have tested that. One thing that makes me hopeful is that I believe my generation and those younger genuinely recognise the scale of the challenge, often due to our experiences. It might be the challenge of finding well paid work, the housing crisis or the fight for racial justice. Yes, it's tough, but I've seen people come together to fight for something better, and that gives me hope. We have huge challenges ahead, but that also means that we could achieve so much together in tackling them.



Operations Manager: Phoebe Couzens

**The UCL Policy Lab launches at a time of enormous political and economic challenges in the UK and globally. What do you think the lab can bring to the conversation?**

To address such big challenges, difficult conversations need to happen, and the last few years have taught us that to achieve anything we need to work collaboratively. The UCL Policy Lab is important because it looks to open a dialogue by working together with people from a broad range of disciplines and areas of expertise. It's looking to challenge old ways of thinking so we can have honest conversations which ask those difficult questions. This will ultimately bring us closer to finding better solutions.

**What makes you hopeful for the future?**

Hope requires perseverance, which has been continuously tested over the recent past as people have been through several 'once in a lifetime' events. One consequence born out of those experiences, however, is that it seems the apathy people had before has been replaced by energy. People seem more engaged and want to get involved to address the big issues and create real change.



Communications Assistant: Jamie Ranger

**The UCL Policy Lab launches at a time of enormous political and economic challenges in the UK and globally. What do you think the lab can bring to the conversation?**

John Stuart Mill said that "however unwillingly a person who has a strong opinion may admit the possibility that his opinion may be false, he ought to be moved by the consideration that, however true it may be, if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth." He was talking about free speech, but he could just as easily be talking about our political status quo. What is the UCL Policy Lab if not a space for the refutation of dead dogmas?

**What makes you hopeful for the future?**

We have everything we need to solve any crisis. As a political theorist with a research background in ideology, I am of the opinion that a lot of political decisions are not informed by what a given actor believes, but what they believe others believe. And a lot of those beliefs are informed by an assumption of what is supposed to be believed. This kind of collective muddled thinking can be challenged and overcome, and it's the only thing in our way.

