



UCL Research Strategy



Executive Summary
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Foreword

From the UCL Vice-Provost (Research)

Inspired by the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, UCL's founders committed our university to innovation, accessibility and relevance. Almost two centuries later, that commitment remains at the heart of our activity.

It falls to each generation of the UCL community to remind its successors of the special responsibilities gifted to us by our founders. And it falls to each successive generation to reinterpret UCL's radical tradition in response to their contemporary circumstances and the needs of society. Introduced in 2014, our university's institutional strategy, *UCL 2034*¹, restates our founding ideals as a mission: "London's Global University: a diverse intellectual community, engaged with the wider world and committed to changing it for the better; recognised for our radical and critical thinking and its widespread influence; with an outstanding ability to integrate our education, research, innovation and enterprise for the long-term benefit of humanity".

Never has that mission been more critical. Regrettably, the key question for our generation of researchers has become: "How will society survive to the 22nd century?" By survival, we do not mean simply the continued existence of the human race, but also of the environments, institutions, structures and values that underpin and enhance society and enable humanity to thrive. We also recognise the profound imperative to tackle the persistent injustices and inequalities in society today, and to help to deliver a more equitable future for all of humanity.

Society will not secure its survival without the knowledge and wisdom generated by multifaculty research-intensive universities. Such progress will inform the innovations needed to address the enormous and critical challenges that humanity faces. Investment in the pursuit of enquiry and advancement of knowledge is critical; so too is an absolute commitment to collaboration in the generation and application of knowledge, and to ensuring

that knowledge benefits society. Researchers and their institutions cannot deliver the necessary insights if they operate in isolation.

UCL is well-positioned to make major contributions to help humanity survive and prosper. This is due not least to our distinctive ability to sustain a breadth, depth and diversity of expertise and research across disciplines and methods. The purpose of this strategy is to enable UCL's individual researchers and our research community as a whole to maximise their contribution to public good. I believe this also requires us to consider: how our research environment supports our researchers, both as individuals and collectively; the cultural and structural barriers we may need to overcome to achieve our ambitions; and how we can redefine traditional concepts of leadership, collaboration and research impact to reflect, enable and drive the vision, aims and objectives set out in this strategy.

In this strategy, heeding Bentham, UCL endeavours to reach for the stars, while not forgetting the flowers at its feet. We define aspirations for our community while also seeking to address the interests of the individual. Our intent is to support the ambitions of individual scholars, both empowering them to pursue their own research agenda and enabling them to realise their ambitions through collaboration. This strategy recognises our achievements, but does not lose sight of the need for humility: we do not wish to bask in glory, but rather we must constantly challenge ourselves to do better.

– Professor David Price, UCL Vice-Provost (Research)



What we mean by a research strategy

This strategy provides a vision for the nature of UCL's research over the next ten years, irrespective of geopolitical events. We seek to build upon the radical tradition – of innovation, accessibility and relevance – established by our founders and embodied by successive generations.

This strategy asserts an adaptable framework through which we can sustain and add value to

our academic excellence, thereby discharging our responsibilities to the people of the world and its future generations, as well as our debt to our visionary predecessors. It defines a series of mechanisms through which UCL researchers can, individually and collectively, fulfil their potential.

Ultimately, this strategy speaks to UCL's enduring qualities, values and philosophy, and describes how the fundamental aspirations for research at London's Global University can be achieved in a 21st-century context.

What this strategy does not do

This strategy is not intended to provide a detailed road map, nor does it attempt to craft solutions to unforeseeable geopolitical scenarios. It does not seek to predict the opportunities and challenges that will be created by future research breakthroughs. It does not define 'priority subject areas'; such an approach would undermine our university's agility and constrain the dynamism with which our research leaders determine the shape and future of their activities. That would be the antithesis of the disruptive thinking that characterises our academic community. There already exist effective and flexible mechanisms at departmental, faculty and institutional level to anticipate and respond to the rapidly and continually changing external

environment. Institution-wide planning processes exist to examine and prioritise proposed major initiatives, while major support for cross-disciplinary themes comes from UCL Grand Challenges, UCL Research Domains and our cross-disciplinary centres and institutes.

This strategy does not seek to constrain research activity, but to provide a renewed context in which discovery, analysis and invention are part of a greater programme that engages with and delivers benefit to the world. We will encourage individual researchers, research groups, departments and faculties to interpret and respond to this framework in ways that reflect the circumstances of the day and their own specific aspirations.

What this strategy means for individual researchers

For the individual UCL researcher – and for those contemplating becoming one – this strategy seeks to define a nurturing environment in which: your research leadership is encouraged, cherished and sustained; your expertise can be creatively linked with

and enhanced by that of other disciplines; impediments to you reaching across traditional boundaries are minimised; and the consequences of your work are amplified. We encourage all researchers – and professional staff supporting the research endeavour – to view their work as part of a collective effort to help UCL to make the most of its potential as a force for public good.



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What we seek to do

UCL is committed to using its position and unique set of strengths to develop and disseminate original knowledge, not only for its own inherent value but also to address the significant challenges facing the world today and those that will arise in the future. Our capacity to do so depends on our continued and expanded ability to fulfil this strategy's three aims: to inspire and empower research leadership; to cross boundaries to increase engagement; and to deliver impact for public benefit. UCL is uniquely placed to fulfil these aims, given the breadth of our research activity, our commitment to challenging orthodoxy and conventional wisdom, our rich culture of collaborating across disciplinary borders and beyond, and our enthusiasm for harnessing the value of our research to advance and enrich society.

We want to stimulate disruptive thinking across and beyond our university to transform knowledge and understanding, and to tackle complex societal problems. We wish to help to enable society not only to survive to the next

century – an urgent challenge requiring unprecedented collective action and partnership – but also to thrive, so that the lives of future generations are worth living: prosperous, secure, engaged, empowered, fair, healthy, stimulating and fulfilling.

As a community of scholars and those who support them, we must each focus our efforts, based on our founding values and driven by our intellectual curiosity, to be a force for positive social change. The role of our university is to understand society in order to transform it, in particular increasing society's fairness and resilience.

This strategy seeks to enable and empower all our researchers to thrive as research leaders, providing opportunities for engagement and impact while ensuring that they retain the freedom to steer their own course, experiment and develop in unique ways. We see this as crucial in order to maintain the richness and diversity of research at UCL.



Our aims

The three aims of this strategy describe our aspirations relating to research leadership, crossing boundaries and delivering public benefit.

Aim 1 – Inspire and empower research leadership

More than anything, our individual and collective research leadership underpins the contributions that we can make to humanity. We seek to identify, attract, inspire and empower those who demonstrate – or show their potential to develop – research leadership, regardless of their background. Leadership is exemplified in diverse ways, by researchers at all career levels. Research leaders advance their field, develop novel lines of enquiry, support and mentor their colleagues, and are engaged with the research community (within and beyond their discipline) and the wider world.

Aim 2 – Cross boundaries to increase engagement

Rarely can the most interesting questions or the most significant societal challenges be adequately addressed by one discipline, one university or one sector alone. While disciplinary excellence is at the heart of everything that we do, to amplify and inform our research we need to cross conventional, but often artificial, boundaries – between disciplines, between communities (disciplinary, academic and otherwise) and between different kinds of activity – in order to increase mutual knowledge and engagement, and develop co-design and co-production approaches to research and complex societal problems.

Aim 3 – Deliver impact for public benefit

We consider the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake to be a fundamental good and the basis of all our research impact. We also seek to maximise the public benefit resulting from our research, including by furthering academic disciplines and scholarship, enhancing our cultural contribution and engaging in public discourse, growing national and global prosperity, providing policy advice, informing professional practice, contributing to positive environmental change, and improving health and wellbeing. We will support activity of these kinds and the myriad other ways in which our research can deliver public value.

Our objectives

- 1.1 Support breadth and diversity
- 1.2 Nurture, develop and celebrate those engaged with research
- 1.3 Cultivate diverse forms of research leadership

Our objectives

- 2.1 Champion cross-disciplinarity
- 2.2 Build and support partnerships
- 2.3 Encourage our research to thrive beyond traditional boundaries

Our objectives

- 3.1 Champion a broad definition of research impact
- 3.2 Foster open and engaged research
- 3.3 Stimulate societal impact through cross-disciplinarity and collaboration



Our cross-cutting themes

Our three aims describe what we are seeking to do. Each is reinforced by our three cross-cutting themes, which draw on our founding principles and current capability, and characterise how we will advance those aims through responsible research, our institutional influence and a global perspective.

Cross-Cutting Theme A – Pursue a responsible research agenda

UCL 2034 states that we will ensure that our “research and education are rooted in our ethical principles”. The key elements of this are: understanding the distinctive role (and limitations) of the university in advancing knowledge and enquiry; nurturing cultures of integrity in all our research activities, and supporting rising standards across all fields; leading in ethical consideration of research and its applications; engaging with those who will be affected by our research activity; minimising the negative environmental impact of research; and enhancing the public benefit derived from research.

Cross-Cutting Theme B – Exert our institutional influence for the greater good

The growth in UCL’s size, breadth, impact and reputation in recent decades presents us with both opportunities and – drawn from our founding values – obligations. We have considerable potential to help shape the environment in which academic endeavour takes place, to influence others’ thinking and to advocate rational, evidence-based and inclusive decision-making.

Cross-Cutting Theme C – Maintain a global perspective

As London’s Global University, we will marshal our collective expertise to: extend our local and global knowledge in order to increase our cultural sensitivity, make us better partners and increase the ‘grassroots’ relevance of our research; support the growth of independent research capability globally, and facilitate partnership working at all levels; help our students to bring their research-based education to bear on their global careers and lives; and deliver impact to address global problems.



This is the Executive Summary of the UCL
Research Strategy, which can be read in full at
www.ucl.ac.uk/research



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