



**2022 – 2027**  
**Strategic Plan consultation**

Discussion Paper Five  
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# Education priorities and programmes

**Education unbounded: towards a futures-oriented  
approach to education at UCL**

- 02 **Introduction**
- 03 **The external context for education**
- 06 **UCL (education) now**
- 09 **Education change projects**
- 10 Project One – Engage with the UCL community to design and deliver a UCL Teaching and Assessment Framework for the Future
- 11 Project Two – Empower staff and students by designing an Empowering Programme Architecture framework to ensure UCL education is futures-focussed, unbounded and sustainable
- 13 Project Three – Connect existing staff development, student skills development and careers to create a new sector-leading Institute of Higher Education Development and Support
- 14 Project Four – Modernise the structure of the academic teaching year to improve the student experience and create space for our distinctive UCL unbounded approach to education
- 16 Alignment between the education projects and other projects and activities
- 17 **What next?**

**Cover image: Mr Gilles Rainer, Computer Science**

*Seven Spheres* This is a fully synthetic, photorealistic rendering of spheres textured with different materials ranging from stone, wallpaper, to wood or fabric. Each sphere's appearance is represented by a approx 10 texture maps that describe color, surface bumps, shininess etc. This method is based on our research that allows us to convert real-world materials into these texture descriptors and render arbitrary objects covered with the respective texture. From the Doctoral School 'research images as art' competition 2019/20

# Introduction

This paper, the fifth in the series of discussion papers that inform our strategic direction, focuses on *Education priorities and programmes*.

It is grounded in our Vision and Mission as expressed in the *UCL 2034* strategy, the wider context for higher education, and internal evidence about the experience of our students and staff. It is informed by preceding consultation papers – *UCL Now*, and the accompanying papers on *Vision, Mission and values*; *Evolving the UCL Grand Challenges*; and *Academic opportunities for targeted investment* – and our community’s responses to them. It feeds into the forthcoming *Enablers* and *UCL Size and Shape* papers and is aligned with recent work on student admissions and widening participation. The experience of all taught students – defined as undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate taught (PGT) students – is in scope, and there are some implications for postgraduate research (PGR) students. The overriding ambition is to ensure that in the future, we are regarded as highly for education as we are for research.

This paper outlines a vision for an ‘unbounded’ and ‘futures-focussed’ UCL education that is ambitious and distinctive. In a period of considerable change for higher education (HE), we need to ensure we are resilient, sustainable, and inclusive, while protecting our academic excellence. The term ‘unbounded’ signals features that will be critical to a UCL ‘futures-oriented’ approach to education, for example: offering all students opportunities to study across disciplines; creating new configurations of on-campus in person and online modes of teaching, learning and assessment; opening our education offer to a wider range of learners; and developing new synergies between education and graduate lives and careers of the future. The descriptor ‘futures-focussed’ uses the plural ‘futures’ to signal not only the many career paths open to UCL graduates, but also that ‘the future’ is not a given. Instead, different futures are there to be influenced and shaped by UCL students, staff and graduates through our teaching and research.

A number of assumptions underpin this paper. First, based on our high global ranking, the quality of education and the student experience (ESE) at UCL should be consistently outstanding and recognised as such. Second, we must retain the best of our current ESE provision and learn from existing good practice. Third, there is a shared institutional belief in the synergies between research and education, described variously as research-led/informed/based teaching, although in this paper a more ambitious ‘research-intensive’ descriptor is used. Fourth, as a UCL community, we share a commitment to challenging education-related issues and discriminatory structural barriers that have a negative impact on our equalities, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and wellbeing ambitions. Fifth, this strategic plan for education must deliver clear and measurable benefits for students and staff.

The paper is organised into four main sections: (i) a review of the external context for higher education; (ii) ‘UCL (education) now’, summarising internal long-standing challenges and emerging opportunities; (iii) proposals for four change projects that would address the challenges and deliver a distinctive UCL education; and (iv) next steps.

Although this paper begins by outlining external and internal challenges, it is important to remember that we retain considerable *institutional autonomy* in how we structure, design and deliver education. We can use that autonomy to reshape long-standing practices that were designed for previous times and that now place additional demands on staff and resources while no longer meeting the needs of current (let alone future) students.

# The external context for education

## The external context and its implications

UCL is consistently one of the highest ranked universities in the world, based largely on its research. As a result, we have been very successful in attracting large numbers of students of the highest quality. We also have outstanding employment outcomes, and our graduates go on to become leaders in their chosen careers. It is obvious that we are not facing an immediate existential threat, although the external context is changing rapidly and we cannot afford to be complacent.

A scan of the current and future UK higher education environment identifies some new opportunities for UCL and surfaces challenges to the ways in which we have operated traditionally. It seems inevitable that tensions will arise as a result of the cumulative impact of reductions in the real value of the home tuition fee; increased costs in everything we do (from salaries and pensions to estates and energy); a rise in student numbers and student expectations; new demands on how the tuition fee must be spent (for example, improving attainment in schools); meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student body; reductions in public trust; and cross-subsidising the indirect costs of publicly funded research. In the case of the home tuition fee, dataHE<sup>1</sup> estimates that “even the relatively low inflation over the past decade has been sufficient to erode the real value (in 2012 money) of that fee from £9,000 in 2012 to around £7,760 in 2020. Universities now have 15 per cent less to spend on teaching each student than they did in 2012”. Projections about the impact of higher

levels of inflation over the next decade are very concerning.

Creeping regulatory burden is also challenging some aspects of our institutional autonomy (and increasing costs still further). At the same time, with our current home student fee regime, it seems inevitable that the ‘student as consumer’ will expect more for their fee, and public narratives about poor value for money will persist. More broadly, competition from international universities and new digital providers is likely to increase, challenging our sector to innovate further in our pedagogies and enhance the student experience.

Looking at the international context, it is apparent that comparator universities around the world are facing some similar challenges. As the *UCL Now* paper outlined, geopolitical shifts can impact UCL in myriad ways and our dependence on student recruitment from China is both a strength and a potential weakness. We can also see that competition from different countries is intensifying and this may, in time, affect our international student recruitment. Among our existing international students, there is a growing trend to question the value of their international fees and to want assurance that they are receiving value for money in areas such as skills and careers support.

There are other challenges to note. The expectations of home and international students are changing and will continue to change, accelerated by the pandemic. It is unclear at this stage, for example, which ‘blends’ of on-campus and online teaching will best meet the needs and expectations of future students. Meanwhile, the UK government is pushing universities to offer more flexible modes of learning and credit transfer between universities to support the needs of a wider range of learners and learner journeys. Looking across our national and, especially, our international comparator group, it is also apparent that cross-disciplinary study opportunities are already offered routinely and at scale in most parts of the sector and demand for

1 <https://datahe.uk/2021/07/14/universities-students-and-inflation/>

these opportunities will likely grow. No matter how all these issues evolve and settle over time, we can be certain that students will continue to join UCL with exceptionally high expectations about the quality of their education and wider student experience.

Based on the direction of travel in the regulatory environment and evidence we already have from current students, there is little doubt that future students will also – rightly – demand faster progress from us in a number of important areas of their experience. This includes access to curricula and pedagogies that are inclusive, more opportunities to address the grand societal challenges in which they are so invested, and access to ever higher standards of digital content and engagement. At the same time, students will expect more personalised and meaningful engagement with staff and peers to enrich their learning and to support wellbeing and a sense of belonging.

Turning to our physical and digital estates, substantial investment will be required over the next ten years to address legacy under-investment and to bring them up to the standards common elsewhere in the sector. As part of a reimagined campus, we must recognise that while on campus in-person education will continue to be our core provision, the campus itself will be used differently in the future as we adapt our pedagogies to new digital/in-person blends. Students will increasingly expect a high quality blended physical and digital campus experience for curricular and co/extra-curricular activities that matches their expectations of UCL as a leading global university. Recent investment in technology platforms is already having positive impacts on the student experience (for example, in assessment), although much remains to be done with regard to systems/data integration and assuring the quality and consistency of technology-enabled teaching spaces.

The current focus on graduate employment and ‘employability’ is likely to grow even more in the future, as the Government seeks to recoup more of the student loan book and grow the number of degree apprenticeships on offer. It is particularly important that we focus on preparing our graduates for entering, leading and shaping the workplaces of the future and for the challenges they are likely to face in their lives. We will need to consider, for example, how to embed career planning<sup>2</sup> and a wide range of employment-related skills<sup>3</sup> and experiences across the existing curriculum in more systematic and consistent ways (see QS’s Global

Skills Gap Report 2019 and The World Economic Forum Future of Jobs Report 2020<sup>4</sup>). This needs to be the case across all programmes and certainly beyond those programmes traditionally understood as ‘vocational’ or ‘professional’. We will also wish to consider whether and how we might extend our provision of degree apprenticeships.

The task ahead, then, is to take advantage of what we have learnt through the pandemic about embedding digital capability in modules and programmes. We can use online platforms to engage much more regularly and easily with a wide range of UK and global employers and to support additional work-related learning activities (video-conferencing; scenario sessions; mini-projects etc). We might also wish to develop a more ambitious strategy for offering internship opportunities, including virtual and micro-internships, across more (or even all) programmes where they do not already exist. Creating new embedded partnerships between students, staff and employers will enrich education and equip our graduates to lead and shape the sectors in which they will live and work. An embedded approach will be of particular value for our widening participation (WP) students, who face additional challenges in accessing co/extra-curricular activities. There are also likely to be some exciting synergies with the work of Research, Innovation and Global Engagement (RIGE) in the innovation space.

Realising these opportunities in such a dynamic context will require us to do numerous things that can feel incompatible and somewhat daunting, for example: retaining flagship traditional programmes and modes of study while opening up alternative routes to study; embracing digital innovation while increasing in-person engagement with students; preserving strong subject disciplines while further developing new cross-disciplinary programmes; being more explicit about employment and employability skills in all programmes; and maintaining academic excellence in teaching while also protecting academics’ time for research. Providing new opportunities for our talented students and staff will challenge our established ways of doing things. If we are to build on our strengths and experience, and support staff to deliver new things in new ways, we will also need to offer an innovative and accessible professional development programme that builds on and extends the work of Arena to ensure maximum reach and impact. We will also wish to reassure ourselves that we are incentivising, recognising and rewarding

2 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/604170/Graduates\\_\\_career\\_planning\\_and\\_its\\_effect\\_on\\_their\\_outcomes.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/604170/Graduates__career_planning_and_its_effect_on_their_outcomes.pdf)

3 <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020>

4 <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020>

adequately those senior education leadership teams in faculties and departments who will be critical in helping to steer us through this next phase of UCL's development. Given that approximately 40% of institutional income is derived from student fees<sup>5</sup>, and the role of fees in sustaining our essential research base, investment in an innovative project in this space seems prudent.

It is in the online space, however, that some particularly interesting external developments are emerging.

## Digital and online expectations and possibilities

The pandemic has taught us (at least) two things simultaneously about online and on-campus education. For most students who are expecting, and have signed up for, an on-campus experience, a wholly online offer does not meet their expectations. At the same time, expectations about the quality of the digital enhancement supporting on-campus provision have grown and, for many students, digital enhancement is an important enabler for them to succeed. Indeed, for contemporary students, our education must be digitally enhanced and enabled in ways that acknowledge their lives prior to university, their digital experiences outside university and the digital requirements of their future careers. Added to that, there is a growing market in wholly online education, though there remains some uncertainty about how it will evolve and whether a broader spectrum of 'blending' will become the norm to better meet the needs of different kinds of learners.

Educause, the organisation that represents IT in education in the US, has analysed how institutions are shifting their culture, workforce and technology post-COVID. The 2021 Educause Horizon report<sup>6</sup> identifies a number of trends – social, technological, economic, environmental and political – that will affect the way global HE will emerge from the pandemic. They further identify some key technologies and practices, including AI, blended and hybrid models, learning analytics, micro credentials, Open Educational Resources and online learning. None of these features are new to education and, looking ahead, we will need to continue to adapt and adopt them in considered

ways. For example, as part of the consultation on this paper, we should identify some key features of a futures-focussed framework for teaching, learning and assessment at UCL, and consider new and optimal blends of physical and digital provision. We also have to recognise that learners can access, with ease, just-in-time practice-based lifelong learning that is designed to be self-directed and to meet the requirements of the job market. As a result, the competitive landscape is seeing an increase in Edu-tech entrants from beyond the bounds of the 'traditional' HE sector<sup>7</sup>, and we will want to agree how to locate ourselves in that potentially huge market.

Close HE competitors, both in the UK and internationally, are taking advantage of the available opportunities through innovations in strategy, portfolio and systems development, and partner collaborations. For example, MIT, Oxford, Stanford and Cambridge, the top four institutions in the QS 2022 rankings, are all developing their online portfolios and seeking out new markets. The latter two, Stanford and Cambridge, have established dedicated online units to support the development of online markets. There certainly appears to be a market for flexible learning and whole-career continuing education, delivered online and offered by institutions with high academic reputation and rigour. Given the comprehensive nature of the institution, UCL could be well positioned to meet this need and provide students with an experience that would be difficult to find elsewhere. As currently configured, however, and with our existing digital systems and lack of a coherent strategy, we are unable to realise that potential.

*In summary*, the external context can feel challenging at times and the pace of change overwhelming. Yet, we have the institutional autonomy to make changes that address these challenges while charting our own course through them

5 UCL Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 July 2020: [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/finance/sites/finance/files/2020\\_ucl-annual-report.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/finance/sites/finance/files/2020_ucl-annual-report.pdf)

6 <https://library.educause.edu/resources/2021/4/2021-educause-horizon-report-teaching-and-learning-edition>

7 For example Coursera, Pearson, 2U and many others, all of whom have expanding ambitions.

# UCL (education) now

Outstanding UG and PGT students are the mainstay of UCL, supported by many talented academic and professional services staff.

This is a great starting point for the next phase of UCL's development. We can also celebrate numerous features of our current education provision: its research-based and research-informed foundations; the opportunities for students to learn from leaders in the field and for some to contribute to those fields; notional access to a wide range of elective options; the *potential* for some exciting cross disciplinary study; and the wide range of careers in which UCL graduates flourish. At the same time, we can also recognise persistent challenges across many aspects of the student experience and growing pressures on staff as they seek to meet ever higher student and external stakeholder expectations. In this context, our institutional autonomy to make the changes that work for our students and staff presents real opportunities.

The UCL Now discussion paper states that: "UCL is now a comprehensive, large and highly successful research-intensive university of global standing. UCL is also now a very large, polycentric, complex and fragmented institution". It notes that UCL has grown primarily through a series of mergers over time rather than as a result of strategic planned growth, and that this presents us with both challenges and opportunities.

The unplanned 'add-on' approach to growth is certainly evident in the complexity and fragmentation of our education portfolio. As UCL Now highlighted, we currently deliver 465 undergraduate programmes, 592 postgraduate taught programmes, 179 postgraduate research programmes and 41 affiliate programmes. Underlying this are 5,779 modules – one for every seven students. This combines to create an overwhelming level of complexity in the potential choices and streams that students can make although, of course, we can rarely schedule all that

they select.

Complexity *per se* is only a problem if it results in barriers to innovation and change, additional bureaucracy, unnecessary cost that could be better spent when budgets are under pressure, and/or a poor/inconsistent experience for key stakeholders. We can probably recognise some of these challenges. Similar points can be made about 'choice'. It could be argued that more choice is always a good thing, yet there are different types of choice, and some decisions about choices might constrain others. For example, offering students ever more choices *within* a discipline sets up an unrealistic expectation that all those choices can be scheduled, and it can also result in constraints on other more adventurous choices *across* disciplines. Designing ever more individual and siloed programmes offers one type of choice but it also constrains our ability to offer applicants and students a coherent experience while they are on their programmes and, at the same time, leaves them with comparatively few choices to evolve and personalise their exit pathways if their interests change after they have joined us.

These factors raise important questions about the sustainability of our current approach to education. We care deeply about the experience, success and wellbeing of our staff and students, so we should question the wisdom of clinging to some of the ways we did things in the past when everything around us is changing. In addition, although we should never be driven solely by metrics, we do have to be mindful of the growing importance of the external metrics against which our education is measured and what they tell us about our own students and their experience at UCL. Although in recent years the metrics have centred mainly on the National Student Survey (NSS) for UG students and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), the Office for Students (OfS) has confirmed its intention to deliver a PGT NSS and this is an important development for us as a major PGT provider. The PGT NSS will be a national survey with published results and the inevitable league tables, so its impact will go well beyond anything generated by

the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES). Given its importance to UCL, we have already opted to engage with the OfS pilot of this new survey in 2022 in order to try to shape the final survey and its timing. The OfS has also just confirmed that the next iteration of the TEF is scheduled for the autumn of 2022, and a national consultation on its structure has now opened.

In the strategy consultation paper on *Vision, Mission and values*<sup>8</sup> there are cues to help us think about education in the future. For example, our aspiration in that paper is that UCL will have “a distinctive approach to research, education and innovation”; we will “transform how the world is understood... and the way that global problems are solved”; and our mission is to be “recognised for our radical and critical thinking...with an outstanding ability to integrate our education, research, innovation and enterprise...”. These are exciting ambitions, and they should lead us to ask questions of ourselves about education, the strength of the evidence for our distinctiveness, and whether all students at all levels of study would recognise our claims about a *distinctive* integration of education and research.

The Vision paper also highlights the importance of *change*, supported by the core concepts of ‘partnership for change’, change ‘for the better’ and being a university that is ‘fit to bring change’. The institutional values are expressed as ‘integrity and mutual accountability’, ‘openness and diversity’, ‘care and respect’ and ‘rigour and innovation’. For education, it is suggested we ask ourselves a question about ‘the extent to which a UCL education equips our students to work in partnership with others and to be agents of change for the better’. That is a good challenge, and we might also pose questions about openness and diversity in all aspects of our teaching and learning, perceptions of care and respect for and between staff and students, and innovation.

The *Evolving the UCL Grand Challenges* paper also offers insights that could inform the development of transformational opportunities for education. The ambition is to scale up the earlier grand challenges initiatives and to bring together “education, research, health and professional services activity... so that we come to be known as the ‘go-to’ place for cross-disciplinary solutions to global challenges”. Importantly, the grand challenges identified are those in which many of our students have experience and expertise, as well as strong

personal affinity and passion: climate crisis, data-enabled societies, mental wellbeing, and inequality. Meaningful (i.e., credit-bearing and integrated with their core curriculum) engagement with these cross-disciplinary challenges will inspire our students and some of our alumni too.

The challenge for the education element of our next Strategic Plan is to ensure our talented students – UG and PGT – can engage fully and meaningfully with these global challenges through the programmes we offer and the ways in which we structure them. One of the distinctive features of research-intensive education at UCL in the future could be the way in which we design-in opportunities for all students to bring their strong disciplinary knowledge to addressing the large unbounded questions that are a feature of our proposed grand challenges.

Having said all that, as a research-intensive organisation, we would wish to draw on evidence to challenge ourselves about the current student experience. Looking across the whole university, our students are telling us that our rhetoric and their reality are not always aligned. They tell us that the way we organise and support their education is frustrating and difficult to navigate; they struggle at times to feel like members of a learning community (let alone a research community); they don’t always feel supported in their studies; their perception is that their voice is not always heard; and they experience assessment as stressful and burdensome rather than intellectually challenging and authentic, and this impacts on their wellbeing and mental health. This is not to suggest that these issues arise everywhere, nor that we should reduce the intellectual challenges of our programmes; instead, we need to better understand why students report these concerns and how we can support them to engage with the challenges.

Our student experience and satisfaction survey scores (UG and PGT) reflect this disconnect. While we have seen some modest improvements in our NSS and PTES scores in recent years, our students’ feedback does not accord with what we would aspire to as a leading university. We remain stubbornly in the third quartile in the Russell Group for Teaching, Assessment, Organisation and Management and Learning Opportunities. Benchmarked against the rest of the HE sector our scores look concerning. We may not want to make satisfaction surveys the only measures of our

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8 [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/strategic-plan-2022-27/sites/strategic\\_plan\\_2022\\_27/files/introduction\\_-\\_vision\\_mission\\_values.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/strategic-plan-2022-27/sites/strategic_plan_2022_27/files/introduction_-_vision_mission_values.pdf)



success in education, but equally we should not be complacent about our poor performance.

A key challenge will be to address the inconsistency in feedback across the university. Some of our departments routinely and consistently score at the highest level in the sector in NSS and PTES, but some also record scores in the low teens, for example in one department as few as 14% of students confirmed that feedback on their assessment had been timely. Addressing this inconsistency in experience will need to be at the core of our approach. Similarly, the metrics and free-text comments on ‘learning community’ are a good example of something that should give us pause for thought because they describe something that is the very opposite of what we intend. Undoubtedly, this is one of the contributory factors in the rise in student mental health and wellbeing issues.

Some of our physical estate for education is dated in both quality and layout and is no longer fit for purpose. Contemporary students have the not unreasonable expectation that they will be taught in high quality digitally enabled ‘formal’ spaces with adequate access to a range of more informal high-quality study and social learning spaces at a scale that can support the number of students we recruit. Despite recent investment, we have some way to go to address the gap between the quality of our physical campus and the norms of the sector.

Added to that, although we have made recent improvements to our digital platforms and tools, we must make faster progress if we are to offer an integrated digital experience that meets the expectations of students today, let alone into the future. It is a major concern, for example, that we are currently unable to provide students and staff with a comprehensive learning analytics dashboard, updated in real time, to support students to better understand themselves as learners. Many universities across the sector have had this facility for some time, although the Russell Group in the UK has lagged behind other types of universities (for example, Nottingham Trent). It is certainly a feature of most top ranking international universities who are already on new iterations of their original dashboards<sup>9</sup>. This puts us behind our global comparator group and it makes it difficult for staff to support students optimally, particularly those students who are at most risk of under-achievement.

Overall, the evidence tells us that in some areas of the university, we struggle to make consistent improvements in key student satisfaction metrics to the extent that would reflect the level of excellence we would wish to claim. We are also falling behind

our peers at a time when value for money and the prominence of a high-quality education and student experience are increasingly scrutinised by potential students, funders and regulators. While all students have high expectations for the quality, consistency and coherence of their education, *these expectations are particularly high for a university such as UCL* and this is an important contextual factor.

*In summary:* If we think about our claims and our rhetoric, and then consider some of the things our students are telling us – repeatedly – about the quality of their experience, we can see that while we have some clear strengths, there is a strong case for change in some aspects of our provision. Of course, this can seem daunting when staff feel weighed down by day-to-day pressures. Yet, if we do nothing differently, nothing will improve. We should use this strategic plan development process as a chance to reboot. Can we do things differently and together that would be better for all parties to ensure we are in the vanguard of education provision in the global HE sector?

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9 See, for example, <https://its.umich.edu/academics-research/teaching-learning/my-learning-analytics>

# Education change projects

Horizon scanning is always fraught with difficulty but considering the discussion so far, we might conclude that our future UG and PGT students will:

- continue to have exceptionally high expectations for education at UCL and for successful career outcomes
- become increasingly aware of and vocal about value for money
- expect to experience a distinctive and inclusive UCL education grounded in our research excellence
- expect greater flexibility in what and how they study
- expect high quality campus facilities and online provision and a seamless transition between the two domains
- wish to engage in both curricular and co/extra-curricular activities
- require more consideration of and support for their mental health and wellbeing
- expect to feel part of an academic community with a strong voice in all aspects of their education and meaningful interaction with academic staff
- expect high levels of personal and academic support appropriate to their individual requirements, including regular feedback and access to coherent and relevant academic skills provision
- expect assessment to be authentic, challenging and intellectually stimulating, and to align with their future career/employment ambitions
- become increasingly interested in global challenges and their personal role in addressing them, and
- expect opportunities to build valuable networks and connections with their peers and external organisations, facilitated by UCL.

Linked to those student expectations, we will need to find new ways to support staff to develop their pedagogies to ensure teaching and assessment practices are appropriate and inclusive. Some staff may also want to find new ways to collaborate with and support each other to better manage workload and/or to offer new kinds of cross-disciplinary programmes linked to their research on our global challenges. For many staff, developing new links with employers is another area where additional guidance and also peer support might be welcomed.

Drawing on the analyses outlined in earlier sections of this paper and discussions that have already taken place internally with our staff, students and education leadership teams in the faculties, four education projects are proposed. These projects are described individually, but they are interconnected. Three of the projects are focussed on the development of broad institutional frameworks or principles within which local determination and interpretation can flourish. For each project, the ambition is identified, a timeline for delivery proposed, the rationale explained, and one or more examples of project issues or actions identified. Detailed plans for each project will follow the strategy consultation process.

## Project One – ‘Engage’ with the UCL community to design and deliver a UCL Teaching and Assessment Framework for the Future.

**Ambition:** to engage students, staff and external stakeholders in the design of education, for the period of the Strategic Plan and beyond. In turn, this will inform the ways in which we develop our education-related facilities, structures and processes. Importantly, the focus will be on designing on-campus, online and blended education that will support the future lives and careers of our graduates, as influenced by factors such as the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution, climate change and sustainability, and equality, diversity and inclusion, and reflect priorities set out in *Evolving the Grand Challenges*. The aim is to agree a set of principles to underpin a distinctive Teaching and Assessment Framework for the Future (TAF) that codifies teaching excellence at UCL.

**Timing:** a UCL community conversation will begin as soon as possible led by the Vice Provost (Education and Student Experience) and a project team. The agreed TAF will be delivered by the end of 2022.

**Rationale:** this is identified as the first project because the process of engagement with UCL stakeholders will generate new ideas that will inform the design of the remaining projects and some of those in the *Enablers* discussion papers. It is difficult, for example, to determine exactly how we should upgrade our physical and digital campuses if we have not determined the nature of education required to support our current and future students and graduates.

**Example 1:** we could usefully revisit the claimed and actual synergies between education and research or, more precisely, between our students and our research. The Connected Curriculum was an initiative designed at UCL and while it has drawn global attention (free to download, and with 200 citations in 2020) its uptake at UCL has been patchy, and it is difficult to evidence how it has influenced our pedagogical practices at scale. Its purpose – to connect students with research, their discipline, each other and employers, and to assess students authentically – remains laudable, but a refreshed and perhaps more pragmatic approach is needed. It is proposed we use the concept of ‘research-intensive education’ to signal our intention to provide tangible opportunities for all students to engage in and contribute to our research community and culture. This is **not** to suggest that all students will/should conduct research that

results in publishable outcomes. Instead, it might better describe the research-intensive pedagogies we adopt as our signature approach to organising and delivering teaching, learning and assessment, and the myriad practical ways in which we invite our students at all levels to feel more fully part of our research community and culture.

**Example 2:** whereas our cross-disciplinary research capabilities create unique opportunities for an extensive cross-disciplinary education offer, there is remarkably little evidence that we have deliberately seized those opportunities at any scale. This is a concern when we consider the cross-disciplinary skills that graduates will require in the workplaces of tomorrow. Of course, there are institutional structural barriers to extending education opportunities across departments and faculties, but if we believe in our mission to “transform how the world is understood...and the way that global problems are solved”<sup>1</sup>, then we need to commit to working together to remove those structural barriers (see also Projects Two and Four). This is one characterisation of an ‘unbounded’ education.

UCL East offers us some insights into how cross-disciplinary initiatives could be developed when they are properly planned and supported (although it is early days). We should commit to ensuring that more of our students have an opportunity to learn and innovate in the intersections between our traditional disciplines and particularly in the areas of the institutional global challenges. In our education practices (and some research practices), the pandemic has taught us that when the world is changing around us, the way we have always done things is not necessarily the only or best way.

Interesting questions for our UCL community arise:

- Over the next period, can we design *and then deliver* a distinctive and productive TAF that would offer fresh inspiration for students and staff?
- Can we use the concepts of ‘unbounded’ and ‘futures-focussed’ to guide our discussions?
- Can we shape a new vision of on-campus, online and blended approaches to education that also offers new lifelong/career-long learning opportunities?
- Can we revisit the links between education and research, given that this is not just an area in which we have institutional autonomy; it is *the* area in which we as a research-intensive university are expected to use our autonomy to show leadership and to differentiate from other parts of the sector?

Of course, other aspects of our education will also be considered in this conversation. In almost all the future careers that can be imagined, graduates will require understandings of sustainability and carbon-reduction; the role of ‘digital and data’ (to include AI, communications etc); diversity, inclusion and respect in the workplace; ethical leadership, effective collaboration across boundaries, and more (see the [World Economic Forum Future of Jobs Report 2020<sup>2</sup>](https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020)). It is our responsibility, therefore, to ensure all students are able to gain such knowledge, skills and experiences as part of their programmes, and clearly staff will need support too (see, also, projects Three and Four).

## **Project Two – Empower staff and students by designing an Empowering Programme Architecture framework to ensure UCL education is futures-focussed, unbounded and sustainable**

Ambition: building on the outcomes from Project One, to rethink our programme architecture to deliver a number of improvements for students, including:

- ensuring our programmes have a clear academic core and are more easily navigable
- designing better curated pathways
- offering more flexibility to study in different ways
- creating space in the curriculum to study (for credit) academic areas outside the main discipline, and
- developing opportunities for engaging with skills and activities that support futures-focussed graduate outcomes – including the potential for more internships.

This is a second characterisation of an unbounded UCL education. The aim is to make the most of our comprehensive disciplinary coverage and the depth of excellence across our disciplines that distinguishes UCL from some of our competitors. Where appropriate, we should support students to explore this diversity of excellence in their education and do so with well-designed and structured opportunities that can be timetabled in ways that meet student needs. Reviewing our programme architecture also provides the opportunity to simplify our offer in some areas and ensure we are optimising our resources and valuable staff time.

Timeline: undertake an initiation project in autumn 2022 to consider a range of architecture models from across our national and international comparator group, consult widely across UCL, determine the level of our ambition, agree our underpinning principles, and identify an appropriate design for UCL. Deliver the agreed programme architecture *principles* by summer of 2023 to empower local implementation as appropriate.

Rationale: education at UCL should be at the cutting edge of content and pedagogies and should offer world-leading opportunities for students to learn within and across disciplines in order to help change the world for the better. We know that the grand challenges facing the world require strength and depth within and between disciplines and across the growing range of elements within disciplines, and this is what we should aspire to offer. We also

know that we have gaps in awarding and graduate outcomes, and persisting challenges with mental health and wellbeing, so a review of our current structures to remove barriers to progress is overdue.

We are a large institution that, over recent years, has become considerably larger and more complex. Many of our education structures, processes and practices were designed for a smaller, less diverse student body and a smaller portfolio of programmes, and the evidence suggests we are struggling to meet our own aspirations for our student experience.

Example: In the past, we have argued that more is better; more programmes, more modules and more options. Yet, as was noted earlier, a focus on one type of choice can result in restrictions to other types of choice. This point from *UCL Now* is instructive: “Our polycentric academic world has led, in 2021, to the creation of 465 undergraduate programmes, 592 postgraduate taught programmes, 179 postgraduate research programmes and 41 affiliate programmes. Underlying this is a veritable cornucopia of 5,779 modules – one for every seven students. This combines to create an overwhelming level of complexity in the potential choices and streams that students can make”.

This means we have a level of administrative and organisational complexity that is unsustainable for us and unhelpful for students. Implying that students will have almost limitless module options within a discipline sets up expectations that we can rarely deliver in practice and reduces the opportunities for students to select modules outside their discipline. Moreover, the complexity and fragmentation of our offer is confusing for applicants and for students in the early phases of study, and can lead to a loss of cohort identity and a poor student experience. In offering so many modules at 15 credits, we are also contributing to the fragmentation of the learning experience for students. Taking all this together, there may be merit, therefore, in considering ideas such as the introduction of more 30-credit modules to allow students opportunities to study topics in depth and to reduce assessment complexity and burden. There is evidence that attention to assessment design can better support student mental health and wellbeing<sup>3</sup>. This change would also have a positive impact on staff by encouraging teamwork in modules, thereby reducing (consumer) pressure on delivery and marking, and protecting time for research.

If we take a decision to simplify the number and

range of degree entry programmes or pathways and increase the size of more of our modules, that does not mean that we will be ‘culling’ programmes or subjects. On the contrary, if we can make our degree programmes more interoperable (i.e. modules are designed, structured and organised to be more easily shared) we will be able to increase the flexibility students have to take personalised pathways through our modules and programmes from a more coherent base (i.e. fewer entry pathways but more exit pathways). This could include creating more major/minor pathways that offer new employability opportunities and that are routinely available in our global comparator group.

Simplification of our entry points with greater interoperability between programmes would help our WP students. As the OfS has recently pointed out, WP students are less likely to have access to good advice at school and may make the wrong choice of degree programme as a result. This view has been borne out by the recent experiences at UCL East, where colleagues have worked closely with local schools. In addition to lessons learnt about the difficulty these students had in understanding our offer, and ensuring we have adequate advice available, we need to ensure we have enough flexibility in our programme architecture to allow students to switch or adjust programmes (within reason) once they are with us, rather than having to start over.

It will be essential to hear and understand the views of our students and applicants as we embark on any effort to change, and this work has already started. For example, our students have told us that while they appreciate the range of possibilities presented to them, they are left frustrated and angry that the choice is illusory because they are often rejected from their first choices. In other words, we set up expectations that neither we, nor any other institution, could ever meet. We can also learn from the positive and negative experiences of students in cross-disciplinary programmes that we already run at UCL (i.e. BAsc, NatSci, Human Sciences) and from the experiences of global comparators in the US and Asia who offer much more flexibility and more open programmes. Importantly, the design of our institutional programme architecture is another area in which we have institutional autonomy even for professionally accredited programmes where our challenge will be to reconfigure how we deliver some content.

Developing an institutional programme architecture will require changes to our financial/resource model

3 <https://openpraxis.org/articles/10.5944/openpraxis.13.2.126/> and [https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/2408604/MCSHE-Student-Wellbeing-Handbook-FINAL.pdf](https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/2408604/MCSHE-Student-Wellbeing-Handbook-FINAL.pdf)

and timetabling, and both these enabling projects are currently under consideration as part of the wider strategy consultation process. In addition, we will need to better support staff and increasingly diverse cohorts of students to gain the most benefit from the changes we deliver, which leads directly into Project Three.

### **Project Three – ‘Connect’ existing staff development, student skills development and careers to create a new sector-leading Institute for Higher Education Development and Support**

**Ambition:** to bring together several existing UCL activities and functions into a coherent Institute for Higher Education Development and Support (HEDS) to better support teaching, learning, skills and student outcomes. This will be a new approach for UCL and is another characterisation of our ambition to offer an unbounded education. HEDS will combine staff development, student skills development (for example writing skills, numeracy skills and languages), student co-creation of education and pedagogies, careers and employability support for students, and support for staff to engage with employers and embed futures-focussed employability skills in the curriculum.

**Timeline:** consultation will begin as soon as possible to engage all interested parties in shaping this new, high profile and high impact institute.

**Rationale:** currently, staff development for teaching, student skills development and careers/employability are all in separate units. Student skills support is also highly fragmented, and faculty colleagues become frustrated when we are not able to optimise the resources we have. If we bring together a redesigned UCL Teaching and Assessment Framework, new work on the UCL Pillars of Employability, a strong co-curricular offer, and clear connections to the changing world of work, we could develop an ambitious, coherent and efficient offer.

**Examples:** the new institute would deliver a range of activities in a coordinated way:

- *Staff development and support for teaching and learning* (currently delivered by Arena) with a strong focus on developing new micro and accessible/convenient peer-learning opportunities that can reach a much wider staff constituency than is currently the case. Learning with and from peers and students will be a key feature of the offer to ensure the activities feel useful and applicable for staff (as in a ‘Learning Lab’ or ‘Incubator’ model) and students gain new opportunities for (paid) engagement in co-creating their education. New and appropriate targets will be agreed for achieving reach and impact in the UCL staff community. There will be an additional focus on recognising educational leadership and supporting those staff who will lead us through the next period of change

- *Support for programme and curriculum design and review:* having established a refreshed Teaching and Assessment Framework (Project One), it will be important to align support for staff who are developing new programmes or reviewing existing ones, and to engage students in meaningful ways that, in turn, support their wider skills development.
- *Support for students to develop and engage in academic and broader employability skills and experiences in and alongside the formal curriculum:* targeted firmly at addressing awarding and employment outcome gaps. For example, building on the research undertaken in the development of the new Employability Framework, it is apparent that we must ensure all programmes have employability embedded in the curriculum as well as refreshing the co/extra-curricular offer. This, in turn, will support the wellbeing of students: as the annual Careers Registration Survey has shown, two-thirds of students feel they are not ready to actively apply for work or further study when they start their final year or PGT course.
- *Careers:* the focus on employability and employment outcomes will ensure the careers team can support staff to embed employability across the curriculum, engage with employers to ensure that the offering remains aligned to the needs/future needs of the workplace, and offer stand-alone careers advice and activities. In addition, close alignment with RIGE and their work on student entrepreneurship skills would be useful to explore.
- *Engagement with the wider HE sector to develop (and lead) good practice in teaching, learning and student outcomes:* building on the visibility of the Connected Curriculum and the work undertaken to date by Arena, HEDS will ensure even higher visibility for the work undertaken at UCL and a strong policy voice in the sector. All staff development material, blogs and publications will be online/open access – mirroring the direction of travel in research – to ensure maximum engagement and learning with and from the wider HE community and maximum impact on HE policy.

## **Project Four – Modernise the structure of the Academic Teaching Year to improve the student experience and create space for our distinctive UCL unbounded approach to education.**

Ambition: to better space education across the full academic teaching year for UG students; create new spaces in the academic year for all UG and PGT students to engage in signature (for credit) projects centred on the UCL global challenges; develop a renewed focus on future employment skills and experiences; undertake a feasibility analysis to offer more internships as an integral part of more of our programmes; and offer better academic support to more students by ensuring that module teaching and assessment are contained within a term or semester. This project is also integral to our ambitions to deliver an unbounded UCL education and it links closely to Project Two on programme architecture.

Timeline: model agreed by the end of 2023 and implemented in 2026.

Rationale: the current three-term model was designed at a time when all UG students had many more traditional examinations in the summer term. (Indeed, it could be argued that we still offer too many exams that test the same kinds of skills multiple times and that this model lacks futures-oriented authenticity.) The current term model was more logical for UG students when they tended to study courses continuously across two terms, with final module assessment placed in the summer term. As things have evolved, however, with the introduction of modules and with coursework becoming an increasingly important method of assessment for many modules, some UG students now have little or no formal education for much of the summer term. In some programmes we also have a severe bunching of work that puts students and staff under too much pressure in terms one and two. On the other hand, there are some UG programmes that offer a range of additional activities in the summer term, and it would be useful to map these and to consider whether such opportunities can be made routinely available to all students.

For PGT students, the challenges are different because they study continuously across a calendar year. Yet, even here, in many programmes we have a crowded curriculum that offers very little space for our PGT students to bring their talents to our Grand Challenges research agenda in any meaningful way and at scale, and this undermines our claims to be distinctively research-intensive.

In addition, our physical estate is struggling to cope with the ways in which we load much of our standard teaching into 20 weeks, leaving large parts of the campus under-used for the rest of the year.

Examples: there are many ways in which we could adjust the structure of the academic year to benefit students and reduce pressures on staff, and further consultation on potential models would be the first step.

- We could, for example, consider a novel ‘2 Semester+’ model that frees some credit space in the autumn and spring terms, ensures all assessment is completed in the term in which teaching takes place, and schedules a new ‘grand challenges’ cross-discipline (for credit) project module in the summer term. With a little adaptation, this would work for UG and PGT students. The assessment of these challenge projects should be engaging and inspirational for students and staff, with high internal and external profile afforded to the most outstanding projects each year. Importantly, by ensuring these projects are credit-bearing, we are signalling the value we place on them and their positioning as a core part of our education offer. In some instances, we could even decide to combine these projects with short for-credit internships that have linked assessments. The critical step to be taken is to create space in the academic year structure.
- We might prefer a more traditional 2 semester model (common across the national and especially international sector) where each semester is self-contained (including all teaching and assessment) and the teaching and learning are spaced more evenly across the existing three terms of the academic teaching year. Importantly, in both this and the 2 Semester+ model, all students will receive formal feedback on their progress at the end of each semester, which ensures we are able to identify and support those students who are at risk of under-achieving. In this model, we would need to consider how to offer new (for credit) opportunities for engagement in grand challenges projects, for example, in the inter-semester week.
- Alternatively, a UCL ‘Leading change in Education’ group visited the Netherlands in 2019 and was impressed by the University of Twente academic year model<sup>4</sup> (4 terms of 10 weeks with staff only ever teaching in two terms). This model could have advantages for optimising campus use, although it is a more radical change for the UK than the previous examples.

Whatever we elect to do, we should ensure that we collaborate to agree the principles on which the model should be based, and that we are addressing multiple challenges evident in our existing model so the change process future-proofs education at UCL and is worthwhile. At the very least we would wish to see:

- improved inclusion
- faster progress towards closing awarding and employment outcomes gaps
- that we have ensured self-contained modules (teaching plus assessment) are the norm across the institution, thereby opening access to a wider range of students in the future
- a new and ambitious vehicle for bringing the student voice into our research agendas and global challenges
- answers to questions about value for money concerns regarding the sparse summer term for some UG students
- reduced pressure in the winter and spring terms to support staff and student wellbeing, and
- reduced transactional staff workload.

Of course, any new structure must be flexible enough to accommodate the requirements of different types of programmes, especially those with professional accreditation. It will also be essential for the university to minimise the amount of paperwork required to make the transition and to offer exceptional support.

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4 <https://www.utwente.nl/en/ces/planning-schedules/academic-calendar/ut-academic-calendar-2021-2022-012021.pdf>



## Alignment between the education projects and other projects and activities

There are four areas where the priority education projects are aligned with or dependent upon projects already in progress or outlined in other documents, in particular the *Enablers* discussion paper:

1. An upgrade of our physical and digital campus infrastructure
2. Enhancements to timetabling
3. Admissions Review
4. Student mental health and wellbeing

In addition, the four education projects are underpinned by our long-standing commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion in our education provision. We want to increase the diversity of our student intake, but we must ensure we are supporting those students to succeed. We cannot make meaningful progress on these commitments until we remove the structural barriers that have a disproportionate negative impact on some marginalised groups of students.

It is also worth noting that while PGR students are not defined as taught students, some will wish to engage with the upcoming discussions about education because they are involved in teaching or supporting teaching, have ambitions to build a career in academia, or wish to gain transferable employability skills. We might consider, for example, how PGR students could be involved in the new for-credit global challenges projects that could become a feature of a restructured academic year.

Finally, while research is not the major focus of this paper, there are clear synergies with education. If we aim to offer a distinctive research-intensive education to all UG and PGT students, we will need to ensure staff have adequate time for teaching *and* research. The focus on reducing unproductive bureaucracy and load in education (for example in our programme architecture) is an example of this synergy in action. In addition, everyone would benefit if we were able to offer new (administration-lite) opportunities for research-only staff to engage with students and enrich education.

# What next?

This is an exciting moment for education at UCL. We have an opportunity to place our students and their experiences at the heart of our thinking and join with them to take a whole-of-institution approach to planning for their futures. The ambition is to design a distinctive, unbounded and futures-focussed UCL education that draws directly on our research excellence.

This paper has considered the challenges we face externally and internally, the ambitions we have as a leading global university, and the changes we will need to make to ensure our education provision meets current and future student and staff expectations.

The next stage in the process is to generate discussion on the paper and, if the proposed change projects are broadly the right ones, to draw up detailed project plans for each, confirm the final timelines for their delivery and begin the process of securing the investment required in the context of all the other institutional priorities.

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