



2022 – 2027
Strategic Plan consultation

Discussion Paper Six
Publication date: 5 May 2022

Enabling our academic mission

- 02 **Introduction**
- 03 **Work that has led up to this proposal**
- 05 **Emerging external pressures**
- 06 **The five themes**
 - 06 1: Enabling excellent research and innovation
 - 07 2: Enabling excellent education and student experience
 - 09 3: Recruiting, retaining and developing diverse talent
 - 11 4: Better use of better space for staff and students
 - 12 5: Agile and adaptable financial and strategic planning
- 15 **A cross-cutting approach to working together**
- 16 **Conclusion**

Introduction

A complex web of people, systems and processes supports all our academic activity, enables our academic mission and plays an important role in maintaining UCL as a world-leading research-intensive university.

In a world of continuous, rapid change, they will play an even more critical role in the next important phase of UCL's development. The quality and adaptability of our professional services will be crucial in sustaining areas where we are already excellent and improving those where we are ambitious to do better, including in the experience of our staff and students.

This paper will therefore focus on these people, systems, and processes. Using the feedback received to date, we have identified five areas, or themes, where you have told us that current systems and processes are unnecessarily complex, inefficient or not performing at the level you require. These issues add greatly to the workload of both academic staff and professional services colleagues working in these areas; create duplication of effort between departments and elsewhere across UCL; and mean that services cost more while delivering less. The five themes for concerted action are:

1. Enabling excellence in research and innovation
2. Enabling an excellent education and student experience
3. Recruiting, retaining and developing diverse talent
4. Better use of better space for staff and students
5. Agile and adaptable financial and strategic planning

In each of these five themes, we will describe the intended direction of travel towards a desired successful future state as it has been articulated by colleagues working in the associated professional services areas. Agreeing such a direction of travel will help to prioritise and align our efforts in moving from a current, unsatisfactory state to a desired future state. This will also help us understand how these changes will have a positive impact on the workload and experience of academic staff, students and professional services colleagues.

We will then outline the projects that are underway or about to start that will provide key building blocks to move us towards this future state. Each project is either funded from existing resources (including capital allocations to estates and digital infrastructure) or from previously approved business cases. This means that these projects will not require separate funding, except where specifically indicated.

The changes that are proposed here do not represent every single enabling activity at UCL, but pick out those particular themes that you identified as needing to be prioritised. As with every academic area, the Strategic Plan 2022–2027 does not remove the need for appropriate local strategies for each professional service area, or replace these important initiatives. Rather, this paper highlights particular areas we need to focus on in the next five years.

The projects that are presented here represent an ambitious programme of change, but one that can be carried out within the existing business-as-usual activity of large professional services areas.

Work that has led up to this proposal

As described by the *UCL Now* paper, our enabling systems, processes and people have developed in ways that did not always successfully connect staff in departments, faculties and central services, or successfully align with academic priorities.

Systems and processes were developed with variable attention to academic needs, and did not always coordinate across departments, faculties and central services, leading to fragmentation and duplication. New systems were often implemented based on our fragmented and complex structure and processes and, as we expanded, we did not take the opportunity to simplify and streamline how we work. An example of this is MyHR, which led to more work in departments and central teams.

As a consequence, when staff were asked to evaluate our performance, a disappointing picture was revealed. For example, the international Cubane Uniform survey¹ allows us to benchmark the cost and staff-evaluated quality of these enabling services against some of our global competitors. The 2018 Uniform survey revealed that, for the services that we delivered to each other, on average we ranked our satisfaction in the lowest quartile relative to our global competitors even though the average cost ranked in the highest quartile.

Between 2018 and 2021 the Transforming our Professional Services programme (TOPS) began to address this challenge through a series of service transformation initiatives. The programme was very successful in those areas where it was focused. In addition to achieving an assessed financial return of £76M in total, it contributed to specific improvements in these services. These included:

- the creation of the **Professional Services Hub**, which brings together many areas that are common to all services and has automated many routine aspects of ‘back office’ functions. By investing in this we have saved money, helped staff work across service boundaries, and future proofed our operations so that they can scale easily to handle greater volumes of transactions in future. For example, the Hub has been able to handle a 60% increase in the processing of employment contracts in 2021 compared to 2020, achieved through the implementation of automation technology and with no corresponding increase in staff workload.
- the introduction of the **Digital Services Enablement Platform**, which rapidly prototypes and automatically deploys digital services. This lowers cost while ‘future proofing’ our ability to respond rapidly. For example, the Inside UCL app now allows all staff to directly modify their personal details online in a secure way, no longer requiring an intervention by HR staff, thus releasing their time for more productive professional activities. This platform was also used in the pandemic to create and rapidly evolve the Connect to Protect service.
- the establishment of 21 **Communities of Practice**², bringing together people working across our organisation on common services and functions. This helps us improve workplace culture, creating professional communities and providing a mechanism for developing staff by identifying new opportunities to use their skills across our university.

1 <https://www.cubaneconsulting.com/uniform>

2 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/transforming-our-professional-services/programmes-and-projects/communities-practice>

- the professionalisation of **procurement** across the organisation, allowing us to simplify our supply chain, reduce the costs of processing the 300,000 invoices per year, speed up UCL's route to market through more commercially astute decision making, reduce the costs of goods and services, and leverage our scale to improve the financial and environmental sustainability of our supply chain.
- the reform of **short-term staffing provision** through a Master Vendor agreement that has reduced our costs for short-term cover by over £200,000 per month while simplifying and speeding up the process of securing short-term support for colleagues. This improves workplace culture and improves our ability to deliver services while lowering cost.
- the introduction of a new **digital expenses system** for all staff that has simplified the submission of expenses and reduced the number of steps needed to process claims. This lowers cost while speeding up the payment of expenses to staff and frees up professional services staff time to spend on more productive uses of their skills. It is scalable to meet future anticipated volumes.

Common to all these initiatives is a focus on functions that are essential for staff and students to work and study, but that are often hidden from view. The simplification and automation of processes reduces costs, improves quality of service provision, and frees professional services staff involved to deploy their skills at a higher level.

These and other initiatives have resulted in higher ratings for our professional services and in addition to cost savings and quality improvement, have introduced structures and functions that will scale up cost-effectively to meet future demand.

Emerging external pressures

Despite these major improvements in professional services, the environment in which we operate continues to rapidly change in ways that threaten our excellent academic performance. These include:

- major external financial pressures on income and costs
- increasing volume and complexity of research and innovation partnerships
- increasing student numbers, student expectations and regulatory demands
- intensified competition for talent and increasing staff workload
- high cost and increasing demand for space across education and research.

These challenges arise for several reasons. First, our academic success has created great demand for our research, innovation and education. To take full advantage of this demand while operating in an increasingly challenging global environment, we need to continue to evolve the capability of our professional services. We need to scale these services in a cost-efficient manner to enable the future academic growth and academic success aspired to in earlier papers. And we need to do it in a way that develops the excellence of our professional services staff alongside our academic colleagues.

A second reason for these challenges is the continually increasing regulatory and compliance burden. Established benchmarking processes such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF), Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) are increasingly complicated and time-consuming for both professional services and academic staff. They have also helped raise legitimate expectations in our staff and students that we will deliver higher quality education, research and innovation, which often increases workload. The regulatory burden shows no signs of reducing in complexity or demand. For example, compliance with important new legislation such as the National Security and Investment

Act or sudden policy changes like the withdrawal of Official Development Aid research support in 2021 is invariably devolved to universities without the provision of additional income to cover the associated bureaucratic and cost burden.

Finally, the entire university sector is experiencing falling revenue and cost recovery in real terms from our major income streams. After the 2012 UK education reforms ended the system of block grants to UK universities for education, income to support for teaching is almost exclusively derived from student tuition fees. Since 2012/13 there has been only one inflationary increase to the fee cap in England. While this is helpful to our students who are increasingly financially burdened, it also creates very significant issues for our provision of education. For example, the recently announced freeze on the fee cap for a further three years means that by 2024/25 there will have been no increase in student fee income for eleven of the twelve years it has been in place. This means it will be worth around £6,600 in 2012/13 prices, meaning that over a decade UCL (and other UK universities) have had to provide the same (and in many cases much better) education while income per student has been dramatically cut.

Research income provides a similarly challenging picture. While we have been ever more successful at securing research income and delivering positive impact, there is a growing financial gap between the income we receive and the costs we incur. This is because UK funders choose not to fully fund the indirect costs of research – the so-called ‘full economic cost’ of research. These include, for example, the estates investment and professional services that support our research and our researchers. Moreover, the Treasury funding directed at the indirect costs of research has fallen over time. Across the university sector in the UK this gap is now estimated at £4.6bn per annum and is growing every year. Every £1 we spend on the indirect cost of research attracts income of only 51-76p.

Despite these challenges, *UCL Now* highlights that we have delivered world-leading education, research and innovation. We have also addressed the financial challenges by becoming more efficient and cross-subsidising our activities. As a comprehensive research-intensive university, we can afford to do so. But these evolving external factors mean that we cannot stand still with respect to our professional services. We must continue to develop their productivity and align them to our academic needs to maximise their value in supporting the academic mission. At the same time, we must pay careful attention to the development and job satisfaction of staff involved in these systems and processes, ensuring that their value to the institution is fully recognised and supported.

The five themes

1: Enabling excellent research and innovation

We have heard that academic staff would value a more flexible and personalised service to support them to apply for both research and innovation funding. At an institutional level, this support needs to be scalable and flexible to deliver prompt research contracting for complex and multi-institutional awards. We need integrated risk assessment with customisable performance monitoring and reporting in real time. Research and innovation funding should be seamlessly integrated with research output reporting and estates/space utilisation, both retrospectively and in forecasting demand.

We are not yet delivering this level of performance. We currently offer a service that is often slow and inflexible, lacking personalisation and challenged by large or complex grants, or by anything to do with innovation. At an institutional level, we have found it difficult to scale effectively to accommodate our increasing funding, with limited automation, significant duplication of effort and large amounts now being spent on external legal resources. Risk assessments rely heavily on manual processes and personal responsibility, with limited real-time reporting. There is no integration with research outputs and no capacity for predictive forecasting.

Working towards a future state that addresses current concerns will free up academic and research staff time during the costing and application process; make managing grants and innovation easier; and reduce the time and effort spent reporting outcomes. Professional services staff involved in these processes will no longer spend time duplicating effort, repeating tasks or implementing necessary workarounds. Institutionally, compliance and governance will improve, while overall costs of applying for and administering research and innovation funding will reduce.

Two projects now underway to move us along this direction of travel involve teams across Research and Innovation services; Research, Innovation and Global Engagement (VP-RIGE), Health (VP-Health), General Counsel, Data and Insight, and Estates.

The first project is to define and achieve a **benchmarked service standard for inhouse research contract response time** and to reduce our reliance on legal assistance that is currently out-sourced and expensive. This will save money while improving service quality. Complementing this, we will provide all research support staff with the tools, resources and guidance to develop a greater knowledge and understanding of research management. We will create and publicise widely available dashboards that record the performance of research and innovation against agreed KPIs; and establish a continual improvement process with termly updates so that Worktribe can fully support end-to-end user experience and drive steadily improving data quality.

As part of this project we will define and implement institution-wide standards for costing and pricing commercial activity, including studentships. We will also reform the research ethics process, supported by appropriate IT systems, to align governance, simplicity and timeliness across clinical (Health Research Authority), animal (Animal Welfare Ethical Review Boards) and human (UCL Research Ethics committee) research. Finally, we will align the work of the UCL/UCLH Joint Research Office (which handles much of our extensive clinical trials portfolio with partner hospitals), UCL Research Europe Limited (our office for European clinical trials and orphan drug designations) and Research and Innovation Services to streamline the process of securing translational research income and delivering translational studies.

This activity is already funded from existing budgets by the Research and Innovation Support Transformer³. It is led by Research and Innovation Services working closely with VP-RIGE, VP-Health, our General Counsel and others.

The second project will support the cost-effective development of **excellent science and technology platforms** in research-intensive disciplines. We will ensure that cutting-edge equipment is available to support academic excellence by bringing it together under joint academic and professional services leadership as shared Science Technology Platforms. This has already been done for Biological

3 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/transforming-our-professional-services/programmes-and-projects/research-and-innovation-support-transformer>

Services and eight other platforms supporting life and biomedical science research⁴. Work is under way to harmonise the charges to investigators for using such equipment and with Research and Innovation Services and Finance to optimise timely billing to grants. By working together with the Vice-Deans (Research) and UCL Procurement, we can prioritise the £17.5m annual allocation to UCL from the UKRI Research Capital Investment Fund (RCIF) to ensure value for money in the purchase of shared equipment and leverage external equipment funding from research councils. Working with Estates, we can create shared high-quality space such as the UCL-Zeiss Multiscale Imaging Centre that optimises the space utilisation of this bulky equipment while also providing opportunities for education and commercial sponsorship.

This project will expand in 2022/3 to include shared platforms in the physical sciences and engineering and to incorporate learning from the creation of shared space and equipment at UCL East. Biological Services are embarking on a programme of maintenance (see theme 4) of our biological services facilities and will be putting forward plans (to be prioritised according to the investment criteria first proposed in *Academic opportunities for targeted investment*) to consolidate and renew these eighteen facilities into a hub-and-spoke model.

This project is funded from existing capital budgets for the digital and physical estate, and from existing operational expenditure in the corresponding services. The project will require commitment of time from professional services staff in Research and Innovation Services and the time of academic and professional services staff delivering the platforms in faculties and departments. However, it is already saving money from increased cost recovery of expensive science technology platform usage, and from securing discounts or external co-investment for expensive equipment.

2: Enabling excellent education and student experience

When prospective students apply to UCL, first impressions are important. We have heard that you expect that both undergraduates and postgraduates should experience a state-of-the-art application system delivering a timely and personalised response to applicants and delivering real-time tracking to departments. Institutionally, we need this to be scalable so it can serve increasingly large

numbers of applicants, and to be well integrated with widening participation initiatives. After acceptance of an offer, we would like to provide every student with a consistent and coherent electronic experience leading up to arrival on campus, including seamless links with visa travel and accommodation.

Currently we are not delivering this level of performance. We have one of the most outdated application systems in the sector. The system is challenged by large and increasing application volumes, with extensive manual intervention needed for every applicant. Personalised responses to applicants are largely impossible and there are often long delays in issuing offers. We have very limited real-time tracking, very limited post-application onboarding and no seamless links to student services.

When our students arrive at UCL, in-person education is a central part of their on-campus experience. Providing the best possible student and staff experience requires effective timetabling into appropriately equipped and configured teaching spaces. Our students need a user-friendly module selection process that avoids module availability difficulties and last-minute changes or cancellations. We have heard from staff and students that we should improve the quality of our teaching and learning spaces and align the use of these spaces with an integrated planning and timetabling system that gets the right student in the right class setting with the right teachers at the right time. This system should be fully integrated with student number planning and a medium-term estates strategy, with accurate forecasting of future teaching estates needs. We also need to develop learning analytics so we can support our students well while they are at UCL. And after programme diets have been completed, students expect a fair and easy-to-navigate assessment process that enables creative, authentic assessments and reduces the administrative burden for staff.

At the moment, we have a standalone and highly bespoke timetabling system that relies heavily on distributed manual input and heavy local customisation. This means that creating a timetable requires huge manual effort and often introduces significant delays. The complexity of our curriculum and programme diets further increases the difficulty of this task and the manual effort required. For students, module selection is often an extremely complicated and frustrating process, with variable module availability and cancellations. Teaching is

4 www.ucl.ac.uk/science-technology-platforms

sometimes timetabled into unsuitable rooms with variable quality IT provision. There is very limited ability to accommodate specialised teaching facilities in central timetabling and management. Timetabling is not integrated with student number planning or with any medium-term planning of teaching estate provision. None of these systems and processes are integrated with learning analytics, which are poorly developed. Assessment is very frequent and final examinations do not support creative or authentic assessment solutions. This creates not only a poor experience for students but a huge administrative burden for staff.

The desired future state of timetabling and our teaching and learning estate would significantly improve the experience of both students and teaching staff. It would reduce the amount of time spent timetabling and the poor experience of professional services staff involved in the timetabling process. It would reduce the assessment burden for students and staff alike and students would find it easy to navigate through high quality programme diets and options. Institutionally, we would be better able to meet our widening participation goals and more efficiently allocate capital to develop our teaching estate; the size of the estate itself would better meet the needs of both students and staff.

Three important projects are now underway towards this goal. They involve teams across professional services areas, including Student and Registry Services, Information Services (ISD), faculty operations, Education and Student Experience (VP-ESE), Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), Estates (Accommodation) and Communications and Marketing (CAM).

The first project is the **Student Experience Transformer**, which aims to transform the UCL student experience and drive efficiencies and effectiveness in delivery of a seamless student journey⁵.

The first of five challenges defined in this project is transforming the pre-arrival, welcome and induction experience. The overall positive impact of the new approach to Welcome and Induction was reflected in the 2021–22 edition of the New to UCL survey, which showed that 94% of UCL students are satisfied with the experience of arrival at UCL, up 8% from the previous year, and the highest ever score received for this question. Further work in this project is making year-on-year enhancements to the student experience of module selection. This includes greater automation, better information and advice, and significant reductions in rejections

of module choice. A single UCL student enquiry and relationship management system that helps staff better assist students on first contact is being rolled out, and the assessment and exams process for students is being transformed through the successful implementation and adoption of a new digital assessment platform, AssessmentUCL. This new platform will manage the end-to-end process of design, set up, marking, moderation and feedback process that is used throughout the academic year, and will support creative, authentic assessment solutions and reduce the administrative burden for staff.

A second project – the **Admissions Transformer**⁶ – is reviewing, simplifying and in some cases automating processes associated with student admissions in Student and Registry Services. This will help us manage our increasing popularity with applicants – up 25% over the last two years. Colleagues will have more time to concentrate on assessing more complex qualifications, references and personal statements while ensuring the process is fair and consistent.

These projects are funded from existing operational expenditure in Student and Registry Services, capital from our digital capital allocation and remaining budgets associated with the TOPS programme and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) project. They will reduce cost through the simplification and automation of processes while improving staff and student experience. There is a workload commitment for people in professional services engaged in the project, and there will be some time commitment within departments from academic and professional services staff responsible for admissions. In the longer term this will reduce overall workload associated with admissions due to automation and removal of duplicated processes and systems.

The final project addresses **timetabling and medium-term estates planning**. We will start work in 2022/23 on moving to a more structured approach that will schedule teaching from programme diets at predictable times. This will need extensive discussion with departments and students during implementation to ensure it aligns well with academic priorities, but it will simplify the task of timetabling our very complex curriculum. This process will align with the ongoing work in the Student Experience Transformer to simplify module choice (and that proposed in *Education priorities and programmes*) and create an easily navigable selection of properly timetabled programme diets. In

5 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/transforming-our-professional-services/programmes-and-projects/student-experience-transformer>

6 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/transforming-our-professional-services/news/2020/jan/were-improving-student-experience-admissions>

parallel we will continue to address the supply and quality of teaching rooms. While supply is generally sufficient and some of our space is excellent, the location and poor functional suitability of other parts of our teaching estate remains a significant issue – for example, there are a total of 383 teaching rooms on Bloomsbury in 61 separate buildings. Demand remains concentrated at peak times, often driven by staff preference and/or lack of application of best timetabling practice at departmental level. Meanwhile, the variable quality of many teaching spaces is widely known, as discussed in *Education priorities and programmes* which proposes a step change in quality and consistency of learning spaces on campus alongside technology-enablement. This may also require investment in additional teaching facilities, as highlighted in the proposal for a Gower Place Teaching Facility in *Academic opportunities for targeted investment*.

This project is funded through operational expenditure in timetabling and estates. It will be prioritised for capital allocation from our estates and ISD budgets where appropriate. There will be an associated workload for people working in these professional services to achieve a transition to a scheduled timetable, and it will require flexibility from academic staff in delivering their teaching, but the project will lead to long-term benefits by lowering overall academic and professional services workload for teaching administration and delivering teaching spaces that support teaching excellence.

3: Recruiting, retaining and developing diverse talent

Recruiting the best academic and professional services staff is critical to our future success as an academic institution. We have heard from staff that you do not value our current ROME recruitment system⁷ which is increasingly outdated and difficult to customise. You would like to move to a paperless recruitment system with an easy-to-use interface for staff, and a positive personalised experience for successful and unsuccessful applicants. At an institutional level we would like to provide real-time electronic management information, including diversity monitoring. An effective recruitment system would be integrated with onboarding, including prompt contract issuance, visa support, induction and the delivery of initial mandatory training.

Our current recruitment process is based primarily on forms that are completed in an outdated electronic system with a poor staff and applicant

experience. This is augmented by paper-based approaches during shortlisting and interview that are not properly integrated with the electronic system. As a result, we struggle to deliver a personalised experience to applicants and have no access to real time monitoring of data, including diversity data. Successful applicants have very variable experiences during onboarding, areas such as visa support and contracts, where the necessary administration is not always completed before proposed start dates. The staff induction experience is improving but we still find it challenging to ensure mandatory training is completed in a timely fashion.

Our people are our most important asset, and we must value and develop their skills and abilities. One important way to do this is through an effective appraisal and workload allocation framework. We have heard concerns from different staff groups that successfully monitoring and managing workload, providing effective routes to promotion and supporting personal development are critical. We would be better served by now developing a single appraisal system with an easy-to-use interface that is integrated with research, education, space utilisation and mandatory training as well as compliance, conflict and declaration of interest, and risk management, alongside an institutional framework for workload allocation.

As with recruitment, at the moment we use several electronic and paper-based systems for appraisal, with inconsistent use of workload monitoring (either informally or during appraisal). Our electronic system for professorial appraisal is not always up-to-date with information pulled through from other systems, can only be customised by adding paper-based workarounds, and is not integrated with workload or estates systems (which don't exist). There is no electronic real-time link to training provision, mandatory or otherwise, in any of our appraisal. Compliance and risk management use different and incompatible systems. We have no access to real-time management information, limited diversity data and limited annual reporting.

Introducing new systems and processes in recruitment and staff development would significantly improve the experience of all our staff. They would reduce the amount of time spent in recruiting new staff, improve their onboarding experience and lower the need for (and cost of) temporary bridging staff. They would improve our research and innovation work by bringing in excellent research talent in a competitive market. Our staff would save time on appraisal administration and an effective system would give

⁷ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/human-resources/working-ucl/hr-services/rome>

them more time to discuss their development and receive appropriate training and support.

Two priority projects are now underway towards these goals, involving teams across Human Resources (HR), ISD, EDI, Data and Insight, faculty operations, Safety Services and Communications and Marketing.

The first project will **replace our existing recruitment system** ROME with a new system called TalentLink. This will provide a better user interface for staff, a better experience for applicants and real-time management information (that we will report on in Tableau) on the diversity and timeliness of recruitment. This single integrated system will also allow us to link a central recruitment function to faculty and departmental processes, establishing a single end-to-end process with an accountable owner. We anticipate that this system, together with simplification of the processes, will halve time-to-hire (currently over 110 days on average). The total cost of the contracted workforce (including consultancy) is approximately £58.3m per annum, and much of this cost is for temporary bridging to cover gaps created by delays in hiring new permanent professional services staff – TalentLink will deliver financial savings by reducing our reliance on contracted workers.

Alongside TalentLink we will also create an **in-house search firm** available to all faculties and departments as well as central services. This in-house service will reduce our reliance on external agencies and allow us to build strategies to target the most appropriate talent. Many aspects of academic and professional services recruitment differ and we will ensure that our recruiters build long-term understanding and relationships in the disciplines and areas that they support. Funding is in place and recruitment underway for a team to support central professional services recruitment. More investment would be required to expand this across UCL, but it is anticipated that this could be funded through repurposed existing budget that is spent on recruitment and temporary staff.

This project is funded through existing HR budgets and allocation of capital associated with digital infrastructure improvement. All staff involved in recruitment will require some training time on any new system, but we anticipate that this time would be more than recouped by the ease of use of a new user-friendly system.

A second project will address **appraisal systems and processes**. A key tool for developing our staff is annual appraisal. However, at present we do not have an effective and flexible way for appraising all

staff in a consistent and helpful way. For professorial staff, the electronic Professorial Appraisal Review (PAR) system is difficult to navigate, often contains incorrect information, and is difficult or impossible to modify. As a consequence, multiple paper-based workarounds have been developed by many departments and faculties. Other staff groups have paper-based appraisals but the forms differ between professional services and research and academic staff. Mechanisms for tracking appraisal rates and ensuring positive and structured developmental conversations during appraisal are hard to achieve. This fragmented and inconsistent approach is a barrier to creating a single community, preventing us from developing all our staff to make full use of their skills and abilities. It also hampers workload monitoring, tackling high workloads and ensuring appropriate recognition for institutional citizenship.

This project therefore proposes to replace the electronic PAR and paper-based systems with a single flexible and functional electronic system that can be used for all staff groups. Many faculties already use an annual appraisal cycle. We propose to harmonise the annual cycles across all areas into a single university cycle, with online reporting of appraisal rates through Tableau. We will agree 'establishment' data for each department and function, so we can understand our existing structures and vacancies, and so we can understand whether everyone in a staff 'establishment' has had effective appraisal. We will also consider how we might link the values (and accompanying behaviours) proposed in *Vision, Mission and Values* to the appraisal process, in an analogous way to that in which Ways of Working has been aligned with professional staff appraisal. Some of this activity is already underway. For example, many faculties already have proleptic academic appointments processes and an annual appraisal cycle. But this is not aligned well across the institution and can present a confusing picture. We now seek to amplify and align that work with the transformation of recruitment, appraisal and performance management to deliver the most important outcomes we identify.

This project will require significant engagement from academic leadership in faculties, and is not currently funded. We would like to hear from the community whether this appraisal project should be a priority, or whether there are other projects under this theme that we have not yet considered and that should be prioritised over this project.

However, if our objectives are supported through consultation, the project would be funded from ongoing expenditure within HR budgets, together

with the allocation of capital from our ISD budget and operational expenditure within HR and other related services.

4: Better use of better space for staff and students

Our staff and students have told us that they would benefit from adaptable and contemporary space that, if based on open-plan working environments, must be accompanied by ample meeting rooms and private and social space to facilitate the academic mission. We have also heard strong feedback supporting a smaller, more environmentally sustainable footprint for our estate that accommodates flexible working practices with modern audio-visual technology. These needs have been amplified and extended by the ways of working that are emerging as the COVID pandemic ends.

Currently our estates do not meet these needs. Our space is highly variable in quality and quantity within and between departments. Space for research and teaching as well as professional services is often arranged inefficiently and with teams working in related areas often widely dispersed. Audio-visual provision is often poor and there is a lack of modern agile working spaces. We are not always well provided with separate meeting rooms and social spaces for staff and students. Although some of our buildings (such as our Student Centre) meet an exceptionally high environmental standard, much of our estate – and the underpinning heating and lighting – are environmentally unsustainable.

A second concern is the maintenance of our existing estate. We have heard repeatedly that we need adaptable, modern and well-maintained space retrofitted for environmental sustainability. This should be accompanied by modern heating and cooling systems with real-time monitoring and adaptations for energy efficiency. Institutionally we would seek to present attractive and welcoming public areas with well-maintained ‘green’ space aligned with our institutional sustainability strategy.

We do not invest sufficiently from our operating margin to achieve our desired future state. By directing previous investment to new buildings, we have created some exceptionally well maintained and suitable spaces. But at the same time we have also built up a significant backlog of maintenance, including some safety- and compliance-related

issues. An approach of fixing equipment only after it fails has led to frequent problems and downtime, including with heating. The quality of our public areas is highly variable and some are ‘tired’ and not environmentally sustainable.

Establishing a direction of travel for estates master-planning and maintenance will significantly improve the everyday workplace experience for all our staff and students. It will also create a campus that is welcoming and inspiring for visitors and alumni. Creating shared public spaces will improve the quality of staff and student experience and help develop a shared sense of community. Attention to maintenance and getting the basics right will ensure research and teaching is not disrupted by poorly maintained space or equipment and will help us reach our environmental sustainability goals.

Two priority projects are now underway under this theme, mobilising teams across Estates, ISD, faculties, departments, the Students’ Union and Vice Provost teams.

The first project is to create an **overarching estate masterplan** combining new and existing plans and principles (many of which are considered in *Academic priorities for targeted investment*) and delivering a 2050 vision for our campus, ensuring it is financially and environmentally sustainable for current and future generations. The plan will be dynamic and able to respond to new plans and changes in circumstance. Phase 1 of the Estates 2050 Masterplan will be delivered in May 2022 and will analyse our current estates to identify opportunities for improved efficiency, repurposing and redevelopment. This will have the potential for positive impact on staff and student experience and will future proof against changing demand. Phase 2 of the Masterplan, to be delivered in 2023, will be a detailed estates masterplan and blueprint, incorporating targeted investment needs, a real estate asset strategy, an infrastructure masterplan, carbon and accessibility plans, and a campus management plan.

This work is funded from existing Estates budgets. It will require significant engagement from faculty teams as well as estates, increasing workload while the maintenance requirements are identified. Estates maintenance teams will need to devote significant time to addressing needs in a timely fashion and this will need to be adequately resourced.

The second project, funded from existing Estates budgets, is the development of a strategic maintenance and operations plan. This will involve

assessing the condition of our current estate and developing a plan that will address our backlog maintenance, prioritising areas of greatest need. The plan will strengthen our energy and infrastructure capacity and overall resilience, and support our institutional commitment to achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2030. Some of this work is already underway, including the commencement of a market tested tender for an asset condition survey; and our Biological Services Units have embarked upon a five-year compliance programme, also funded from existing capital Estates budgets, that will ensure they are appropriately maintained and capable of effectively supporting our life and biomedical sciences research.

5: Agile and adaptable financial and strategic planning

Financially, we are a large and complex organisation, with an income exceeding £1.6bn in 2021, and, in financial terms, individual faculties at UCL are often the same size as small universities. The delivery of academic activity now requires closely coordinated financial and strategic planning, and faculty and finance teams commit significant time and effort to these tasks to ensure academic activity is well supported.

We have heard that faculty and departmental leadership teams would like our financial model to balance incentives for income growth and cost control and incentivise sustainable financial growth. Multi-year budgeting would allow academic initiatives that take time to build to be planned and delivered, and there should be consistent treatment and follow up of business plans. Stable patterns for the allocation of capital to digital infrastructure and equipment supporting research and education would provide consistent support, and should be paired with regular reporting and audit of efficiency. Procurement should support environmental sustainability and ensure value for money. Accurate forecasting and integration of planning and financial systems would be desirable to provide real-time management information.

Currently we are not at that level of performance. While our financial system and planning delivered very well when the COVID pandemic necessitated emergency budgeting, now that we are returning to a more normal planning cycle, some of the challenges are becoming apparent. Our current financial model of faculty contribution targets often

incentivises growth to meet those targets. Single-year budget cycles reduce incentives for multi-year investment for both strategic income growth and cost control. There is little alignment of central and faculty financial incentives and sometimes cost savings in one place lead to cost increases in another. Capital allocation can be inefficient and complex procurement with thousands of suppliers does not always achieve value-for-money. Institutionally we have limited follow-up on business plans and little integration of financial data with other planning and forecasting data. Our financial forecasting can be unduly pessimistic, which means we achieve a larger than expected operating margin.

Institutionally, we need to ensure that we are financially sustainable, maintaining an operating margin so that we can invest in estates and digital infrastructure while also supporting our staff and our day-to-day academic work. More effective allocation of resources aligned to our academic priorities will benefit all our staff and students by ensuring we have sufficient financial resources to recruit, reward and retain our staff and fulfil our academic mission.

Two priority projects are now underway, involving teams across Finance, faculties, Strategy (VP-Strategy), Data and Insight, VP-RIGE and UCL East.

The first project is to improve the coordination between strategic and financial planning (undertaken by the teams of the Vice-Provost (Strategy) and Chief Financial Officer (CFO) respectively) and better connect such planning to the day-to-day work and academic priorities of faculties and departments. We have made significant progress in structuring planning and budgeting in recent years at UCL, with an annual planning/budgeting cycle. However, some elements of this cycle are poorly aligned with our needs. For example, student number planning currently takes place in December each year, mid-way through the UCAS cycle. In 2021 we decided to move this process to precede the annual UCAS cycle in July. This opens up a broader opportunity to establish a rational and structured sequencing of the planning and budget process.

A coherent and structured strategic planning process, including student number planning, will comprise three distinct but related phases – Review > Plan > Decide/Approve – that will capture academic plans in the context of the UCL Strategic Plan 2022-2027. It will also inform and integrate with service, space and digital planning. The focus will be on institutional planning, informed by a common set of metrics. It will synthesise plans across UCL, evaluate their impact and risk and enable strategic choices to be made.

The diagram below outlines the three phases, occurring at different times in the academic year. The new review phase will be impactful in focusing all areas of UCL on delivering local and institutional plans supported by a common set of metrics.



Term One will now be a time when leadership teams review their progress; Term Two will be used for planning and budgeting, as now; and Term Three for decision and approval, including the student number planning process. This iterative annual review/plan/decide process should underpin the integration of financial and strategic planning, so that strategic planning, the allocation of the necessary resources, and decision-making on strategic investment in major projects and initiatives will take place together within a unified governance framework. This approach would both value and support ‘local’ plans and nurture a culture of collective strategic ownership.

All colleagues need access to relevant, accurate, logical, and consistent data and insights to inform and support meaningful planning and institution-wide strategic monitoring. This will include developing a framework of key metrics, including financial metrics, that will be linked to the Strategic Plan’s objectives, to track progress and learn lessons about what is working and where we need to re-double our collective efforts. Such data and insights will empower our leaders to make transparent decisions based on publicly available data. The framework will provide a transparent and accepted evaluation of success, with regular reporting on progress against objectives and KPIs

based on reliable management information and operational data.

This project is funded from existing budgets in the VP-Strategy portfolio. While the planning cycle is implemented there will be temporarily increased workload for the planning team, and there may be additional workload impacts for faculty leadership team. However once implemented it will smooth and even out workloads across the academic year for faculties and Vice-Provost teams.

The second priority project is to **evolve our financial model**. Our financial performance has been variable in recent years with a backdrop of significant external pressures. Our 2018 financial strategy set a surplus target of 6% in line with our anticipated capital investment. During the pandemic, the reduced target operational surplus agreed by our Council of 1.8% in 20/21 was exceeded. Our target surplus of 3% in 21/22 is also forecast to be exceeded. As UCL is not a commercial organisation with shareholders, every year these operational surpluses are reinvested in our academic mission and allow us to borrow to invest in our estate and digital infrastructure. Consequently, UCL was able to continue to invest operationally and in the capital programme throughout the pandemic to a greater level than many peer institutions. Research funding

and student recruitment has been consistently strong during this period. UCL also secured HE's first sustainable bond of £300m, which reinforces and supports our cashflow position through the creation of the new financial and academic strategy.

It is therefore a good time to review, consolidate and integrate UCL's approach to strategic and financial planning, to better support and drive the delivery of institutional goals and local strategies. We propose to end COVID-19 emergency arrangements for finance and planning and to replace (or revise) after consultation the previously used 'contribution model' to determine how UCL's resources are allocated. The new model will be clear, simple, transparent and aligned to the long-term financial sustainability of UCL, rather than short-term or unplanned local growth initiatives. We will renew the structured financial framework to set out how we use our cash and resources to best support the Strategic Plan 2022–2027. Replacing the current financial strategy, this framework will create an agreement with our governing body, setting out how much surplus for investment is required to maintain UCL's financial sustainability. We will establish funding envelopes aligned with our operating margin that will fund longer-term investment in strategic initiatives, estates and IT; establish principles in our financial framework that enable quicker and more transparent decision-making for prioritising and approving the allocation of funds; and review the financial regulations that form part of the proposed new financial framework.

This new financial framework will also apply the principles and mechanisms set out in *Academic opportunities for targeted investment* to consider very large resource allocations across our different academic needs. It will use similar principles to invest, where appropriate, in our enabling services based on academic priorities. We will develop the high-level planning model created in 2021 to support decision-making about future affordability and levels of investment over time. Finally, we will establish a zero-based budget process every five years, where we reset and re-evaluate budgets based on necessity rather than on a budget-based history that 'bakes-in' historic inaccuracies and trends.

This project is funded from current VP-Operations and CFO budgets. It will require significant time commitment from financial teams in consultation with faculties and Vice-Provost teams to implement.

A cross-cutting approach to working together

The themes we have proposed will also require our ways of working together to evolve. We propose here the cross-cutting approach that we will now need.

Integrated and strategically coherent faculty operations will be needed to align all our services with the academic mission. At present Directors of Operations play a key role in this process. However, there are variable approaches to organisation and leadership of functions across different faculties and limited mechanisms for incentivising cooperation across faculties for spreading best practice and reducing cost. We therefore propose a common approach to faculty professional services, with local variability only where required. To help deliver this we propose to integrate the Directors of Operations under a **single line manager** comparable to that for faculty Deans, who report to the Vice-Provost (Faculties). This will establish parity of esteem between academic and professional streams of work and develop mechanisms for spreading best practice across faculties and promoting inter-faculty coordination.

Within each of the themes, we will need to create **end to end processes**. This means that we will consider the entire process of delivering a particular service as a single entity, with a single accountable owner. This is not currently the case for many services, and there is extensive duplication of effort and often a huge number of steps required to complete even a simple task.

For example, we have heard in feedback that when applying for a research grant it is not uncommon for a member of professional services staff in a department to enter and check financial information in our Worktribe system, managed by other members of professional services teams. Meanwhile a second member of professional services in central teams, line managed by other members of professional services teams, then immediately checks and/or re-enters the same information. This duplication of effort, even when all members

of the team are performing at their best, results in a system which is neither efficient nor effective.

Moreover, the different line management of the different teams means that it is often unclear to all involved in the process who is responsible or accountable for delivering an efficient and effective service, or even the right person to contact when there are problems. When things go wrong in such complex processes, it is often extremely difficult for academic staff to identify who can help them solve the problem. In addition, customisation to deal with local variation (or to work around failures or gaps in the process) creates a very complex experience for those working to provide the service or who need it to enable their work.

Feedback from the consultation so far has identified that there is little clarity, with overlapping and unresolved accountabilities and a lack of clear goals in many areas. Where funding can be identified in faculties, it is sometimes used to close gaps and create capabilities that are missing in service provision, but in a way that is uneven across departments and can duplicate provision. Clarity and accountability are also diffused by our 'bottom up' nature, where the duplication and non-alignment of effort can make it challenging for all staff to identify who owns a particular process and how to make effective suggestions for improving it. As a result, we do not always capture best practice or diffuse it across a large and academically polycentric organisation.

Creating end-to-end processes with strengthened faculty involvement in defining the services that support our academic mission will provide **clarity and accountability**. In particular, because each end-to-end process delivering a service will have a named process owner, accountability for the delivery of that service will be immediately apparent. Delivering clarity and accountability in our enabling activities will thus reflect the values of integrity and mutual accountability proposed in *Vision, Mission and values*.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed an ambitious but achievable reorientation of significant areas of our professional services functions towards a set of defined end states that can deliver clear benefits in academic excellence to our staff and students. Each priority project taking us towards that end state will also deliver specific savings in staff time, workload and cost. The consultation process now seeks comments on this vision, and asks whether there are additional priority projects to consider that might further accelerate or enhance our efforts to achieve this end state.

LONDON'S GLOBAL UNIVERSITY



UCL

