



UCL

A guide to the

Programme Excellence Project

Education & Student Experience
October 2023

Executive Summary

**The Programme
Excellence Project
(PEP) is one of
UCL's strategic
priorities over the
next five years.**

Ambition

By 2026/27, UCL will be ready to enrol new students on a streamlined portfolio of programmes that is attractive, legible and deliverable for applicants and students, and easier to administer and support for staff.

A comprehensive review of UCL's undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes will build on good practice, improve student and staff experiences, and ensure we are more consistent in delivering excellence in education and student experience.

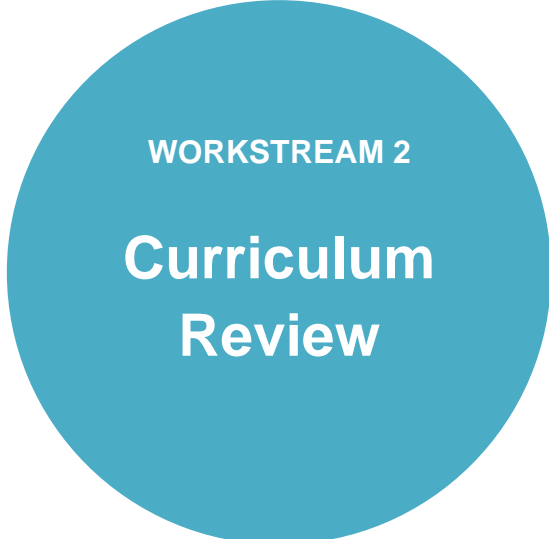
PEP is one of the core academic initiatives in [UCL's Strategic Plan 2022-27](#):

“We propose to conduct a full review of the pathways through our taught programmes, simplifying and agreeing the most desirable set of options for each programme so that we are confident that the flexibility and choice we offer students is academically coherent and achievable within campus and other practical constraints. This undertaking will also address existing, ultimately unsustainable, levels of administrative and organisational complexity that create huge frustration and challenging workloads for those teaching and for those engaged in supporting education.”



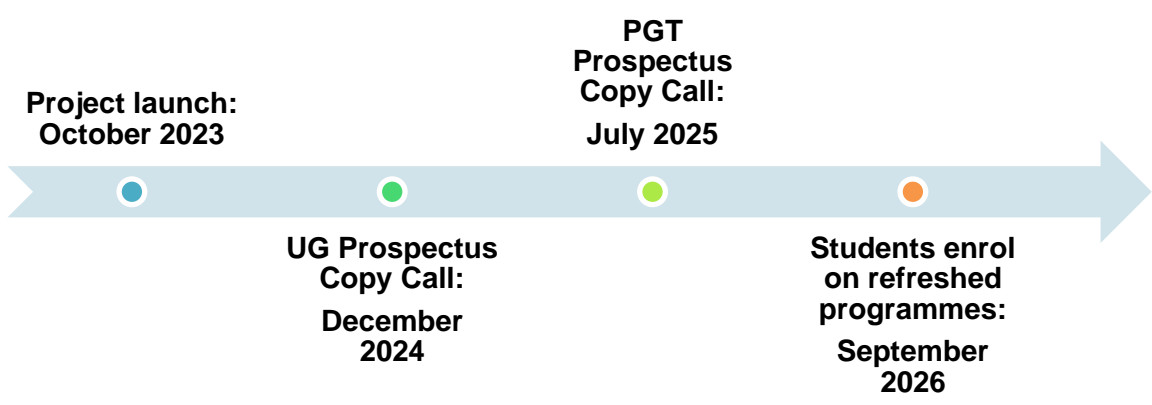
Workstream 1: Portfolio Review will look at UCL’s lists of programmes, routes and pathways to ensure that we are offering realistic and coherent choices to applicants and students, to reduce complexity across a wide range of systems and processes, and to ensure that all students belong to a substantive community.

Workstream 2: Curriculum Review will look at diets, modules and assessments. The aim is to reduce the high degree of variability in programme structures across UCL whilst also ensuring that disciplinary differences are respected and supported. By reducing complexity we can also create more shared spaces for our educational priorities, such as research-intensive education, employability, the Grand Challenges, Sustainability, and the Student Life Strategy.



Roadmap

Changes will be implemented for new students in 2026/27. Key milestones include:



PEP will be taken forward by individual Faculty Steering Groups, supported by the new ‘HEDS’ Faculty Partnership Teams. Faculties will receive data, templates and guidance, while UCL’s Programme Development Unit will provide workshops for staff and students. A central Academic Advisory Group will provide oversight and support, while a Student Advisory Group will ensure that the student voice is at the heart of our curriculum design.

A guide to the Programme Excellence Project

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Introduction

The Programme Excellence Project (PEP) is a comprehensive review of UCL's curriculum. It seeks to embed excellence across all our taught programmes, improve student and staff experiences, and ensure that UCL is prepared for the future.

PEP is one of UCL's strategic priorities over the next five years:

“We propose to conduct a full review of the pathways through our taught programmes, simplifying and agreeing the most desirable set of options for each programme so that we are confident that the flexibility and choice we offer students is academically coherent and achievable within campus and other practical constraints. This undertaking will also address existing, ultimately unsustainable, levels of administrative and organisational complexity that create huge frustration and challenging workloads for those teaching and for those engaged in supporting education.”

[UCL's Strategic Plan 2022-27](#)

Vision

In 2026/27, UCL will enrol new students on a coherent, future-facing portfolio of refreshed and revitalised programmes which prioritise excellence in education and student experience.

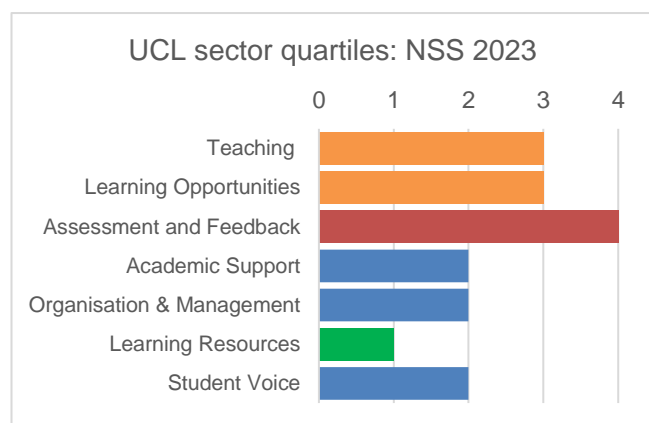
Aims

The overarching aim of PEP is to agree a common framework within which UCL's undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes are designed and run. Through this shared framework, we aim to:

- Improve the student experience by offering realistic choices and ensuring that all students are part of a community.
- Improve the applicant experience by offering the right choices and making our portfolio more legible.
- Improve the staff experience by reducing complexity, administrative burden and unnecessary costs for departments.
- Create shared spaces in the curriculum for our educational priorities, such as research-intensive education, the Grand Challenges, Education for Sustainable Development, cross-disciplinarity, employability, and the Student Life Strategy.
- Improve UCL's systems and processes – such as timetabling, module selection, assessment and programme approval – so that they support departments and students effectively.
- Ensure that UCL is making the best use of diminishing income streams.
- Ensure that UCL can respond in an agile way to future changes in funding, workplace requirements, and student demand.

Securing UCL's future through Programme Excellence

In September 2023, UCL was awarded the [University of the Year 2024](#) by the Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide. While UCL has much to celebrate, we are still facing challenges which, if left unchecked, will make it difficult to maintain our world-leading reputation into the future. The Programme Excellence Project aims to address, at a fundamental level, some of UCL's most difficult and long-standing educational challenges:



In the recent Teaching Excellence Framework 2023, UCL received an overall 'Silver' rating because of our ongoing challenges around the student experience. The TEF panel emphasised the need for UCL to take a consistent, strategic approach to ensuring that *all* students have an excellent experience.

UCL's National Student Survey performance also pulls us down in national league tables. While we approach league tables with caution, we also need to

“Almost two centuries since its founding, in 1826, UCL continues to challenge its students, raises the bar for research and provokes global debate on everything from detecting cancers to legal action on behalf of those affected by climate change. The expansion of its curriculum, and its campus into east London, is visionary.”

Helen Davies, editor of the Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide

recognise that prospective students pay close attention to our rankings. It is vital that we maintain our world-leading position if we are to maintain student numbers.

By refreshing our curriculum, PEP can help to address some of these challenges. For example, the SU's [Student Priorities for Education Report 2023](#) highlights continuing student dissatisfaction with the bunching of assessments. PEP can support departments in spreading their assessments more evenly throughout the year, which will enhance student wellbeing and make it easier for staff to return feedback quickly.

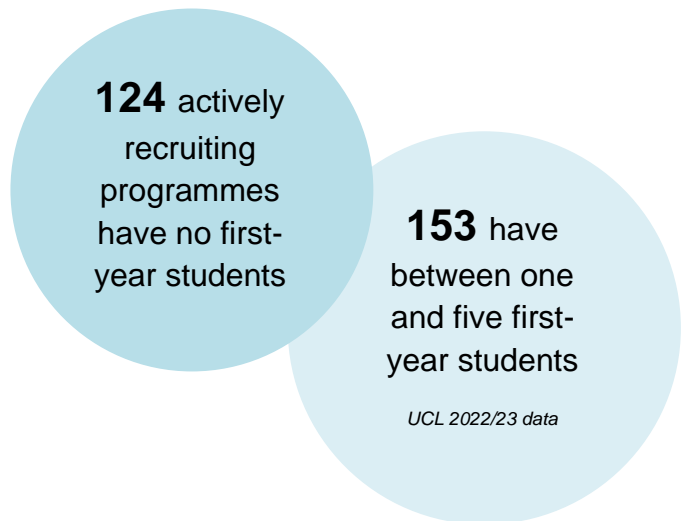
PEP can also help UCL to improve student satisfaction with Organisation and Management. For example, many students are frustrated by module choice rejections and timetabling clashes. PEP can ensure that departments are offering realistic options and pathways which reduce the likelihood of rejections and make programmes much easier to timetable. Simpler programme diets will also make it easier for Personal Tutors to give students good academic advice (another area where UCL underperforms in the NSS).

PEP can also help UCL to improve NSS outcomes in Learning Opportunities. By reducing programme complexity, we can find more shared spaces in the curriculum for innovative student learning opportunities such as research internships, cross-UCL modules or cross-disciplinary projects.

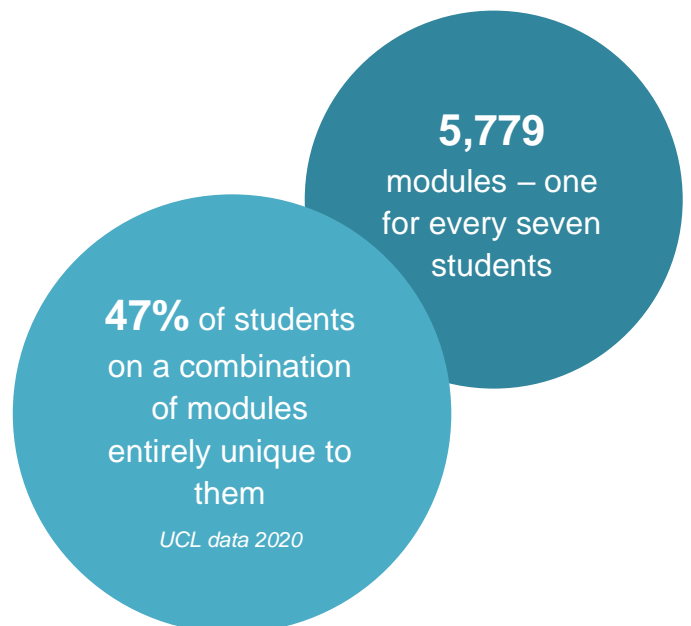


PEP can also help to address the student experience challenges associated with very small cohort sizes. In our [University Mental Health Charter](#) assessment in 2023, UCL was encouraged to support student wellbeing by creating a greater sense of community and belonging, but this is very difficult to achieve with very small cohorts.

Small cohorts also prevent us from fully understanding students' experiences – for example, in 2023, around 400-500 UCL programmes did not meet the publication threshold for the National Student Survey and PGT Annual Programme Survey. By reviewing our programmes, routes and pathways, PEP can help to ensure that every UCL student is part of a substantive community.



A further challenge is the high number of programmes which are recruiting no students. Historically, UCL has been in the fortunate position of being a selective university, but it is becoming more difficult to attract PGT and overseas students. PEP can help UCL to remain competitive by ensuring that the choices in our portfolio meet applicant needs.



The complexity in UCL's portfolio is further exacerbated by the extensive range of options, electives, pathways and pre-requisites within many programmes. Student choice and cross-disciplinarity are important facets of a UCL education, but the net effect is "an overwhelming level of complexity in the potential choices and streams that students can make" ([UCL Now](#))

[Discussion Paper](#)). This complexity creates a high volume of ‘busy work’ for staff across a wide range of systems and processes. By simplifying our programme diets, PEP can support staff to spend more time on their core roles in teaching, research and supporting students.

425 actively recruiting programmes include a structural complexity which needs bespoke systems, processes or workarounds.

UCL 2022/23 data

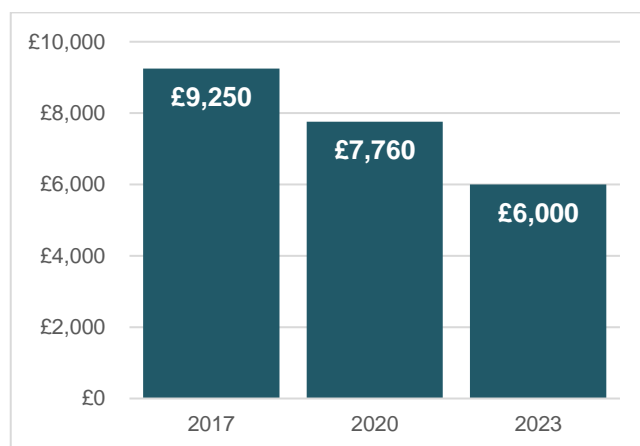
These challenges are compounded further by the high number of programmes with structural complexities and exceptions, such as academic partnerships, apprenticeships, study abroad, placements, extra credits, non-modular programmes, alternative student regulations, etc.

UCL will need and want to keep some of these exceptions: Some are academically desirable, some are requirements of professional accreditation, some represent new and emerging research interests, etc. However, many of these programmes are enrolling very low student numbers, and each exception leads to higher staff workloads and additional costs for departments. When combined, the sheer number of exceptions - and all the possible combinations - makes it very difficult for UCL to support all departments effectively.

“Universities have lost a third of their money to inflation since 2012, and most of that loss has been in the last 18 months”

dataHE, July 2023

In order to secure UCL’s future, we also need to recognise the high financial cost of our programme complexity, especially when our sources of income are diminishing.



Source: dataHE, July 2023

In 2012, the undergraduate Home tuition fee was set at £9,000. In 2017, it was raised to £9,250, where it has remained ever since. When inflation is factored in, that fee is now worth around £6,000 in 2012 terms.

In recent years, UCL has been able to fill this funding gap by increasing student numbers, but our estates are struggling with capacity, and we are starting to experience challenges with PGT and overseas recruitment. As we cannot easily increase our income, we need to reduce costs. By reducing the complexity in our curriculum, PEP can help UCL to make the best use of our resources.

Workstream 1: Portfolio Review

Overview

UCL currently offers around 1,100 separate undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes, and students can graduate with over 1,600 different degrees. However, many of these are not truly distinct entities and are instead a variation of another programme (e.g. study abroad, major/minor, specialisms, exit qualifications). Many are recruiting very small student numbers, and a substantial number have no enrolled students. This indicates that we are not always offering the right choices.

The array of options is confusing for applicants and each additional 'programme' creates extra work for staff, taking them away from their core roles in teaching, research and supporting students. It also creates complexity across a wide range of systems and processes as well as unnecessary costs for departments. Very small cohorts also make it difficult for students to feel a sense of community and belonging, which is essential to an excellent student experience.

The aim of the Portfolio Review is to rationalise our lists of programmes, routes and pathways so that they are legible and attractive to applicants. A more coherent portfolio will also improve the student experience by ensuring that all students are part of a substantive cohort and are being offered realistic module choices and pathways.

Support for faculties

Faculty Steering Groups

A central tenet of PEP is that curriculum development should be academic led. For this reason, we have established individual Faculty Steering Groups to take the project forwards.

Each Faculty Steering Group will be supported by their new 'HEDS Faculty Partnership Teams'. HEDS - or Higher Education, Development and Support - is one of the core education initiatives in UCL's Strategic Plan 2022-27. This new institute will support faculties and departments to embed the characteristics of an outstanding UCL education in their teaching and assessment practices.

Each HEDS Faculty Partnership Team includes:

- An Arena Faculty Lead, supported by a Programme Development Team Lead
- A UCL Careers Lead, supported by a Work-related Learning Lead
- An Academic Communications Centre (ACC) Lead.

Each faculty will also have a strategic planning advisor and support from the PEP project team. A central Academic Advisory Group will provide oversight and support, while a Student Advisory Group will support student reps taking part in the project.

Preparatory work

Revising the definition of a 'programme'

Different faculties have set up their programmes, routes and pathways in many different ways. The aim of this preparatory task is to revise UCL's definition of a 'programme' so that it better meets UCL's needs by making our overall portfolio much more legible to applicants, students and other stakeholders, and by reducing complexity across a wide range of systems and processes. This work will be led by a Task & Finish Group with a cross-section of Faculty and Departmental representatives.

Impact assessment

The Task & Finish Group will also conduct an academic and operational impact assessment for the Portfolio Review workstream to ensure that all dependencies are identified and risks mitigated. Academic Board has established a PEP Academic Impact Statement Group to support this assessment.

Guidance

Written guidance and prompts will be developed to support Faculty Steering Groups in thinking about the development of their portfolio.

Data dashboard

The Student Operations team will provide a data dashboard to support Faculty Steering Groups in analysing their portfolios. This will include up-to-date programme and route data, as well as contextual information such as cohort sizes and NSS/ APS outcomes.

Rebuilding the data structures in Portico

The Curriculum Information Management project will work to rebuild the data structures in Portico to support our new definition of a 'programme'.

Timeline

The Portfolio Review will be completed for 2026/27 entry.

Faculties will be asked to start thinking about their portfolios in the Autumn term 2023. There will be an interim deadline for faculties to submit a first draft of their proposals (February 2024 for UG, September 2024 for PGT), and these will be scrutinised by a specially-convened UCL panel. Faculties will then be asked to submit their final proposals by June 2024 for UG and January 2025 for PGT.

The Curriculum Information Management team will then rebuild the data structures in Portico, and Marketing and Communications will revise the Prospectus around UCL's new portfolio.

All changes will need to be finalised by the prospectus copy call deadlines for 2026/27 entry (December 2024 to February 2025 for UG, July to September 2025 for PGT).

Ambition

By 2026/27, UCL will be ready to enrol new students on a streamlined portfolio of programmes that is attractive, legible and deliverable for applicants and students, and easier to administer and support for staff.

Workstream 2: Curriculum Review

Overview

The Curriculum Review will look at the structure of the diets, modules and assessments underpinning each UCL programme. The aim is to reduce the high degree of variability in programme structures across UCL whilst also ensuring that disciplinary differences are respected.

Faculties will be supported in developing some common curriculum structures which are appropriate to their subject areas through new 'Faculty Curriculum Templates'. These will help simplify and improve a wide range of systems and processes, including timetabling, module selection, assessment, and programme approval. By creating more alignment across different programmes, we can also identify more shared spaces for our educational priorities, such as research-intensive education, the Grand Challenges, Education for Sustainable Development, cross-disciplinarity, employability, and the Student Life Strategy.

Preparatory work will include conversations with the UCL community on some shared design principles, refreshing UCL's curriculum terminology, the development of some new curriculum features such as an optional mid-year assessment period, and new cross-UCL learning opportunities.

Support for faculties

Once the preparatory work has been completed, the individual Faculty Steering

Groups will take the Curriculum Review forwards. Each Faculty will be supported by their 'HEDS Faculty Partnership Teams', while advisors from Arena's Programme Development Unit will provide workshops and guidance for staff and student reps.

Faculties will also receive a range of supporting data to help them analyse and review their curriculum, as well as a proforma for their Faculty Curriculum Templates.

Preparatory work

Impact assessment

We will conduct an academic and operational impact assessment for the Curriculum Review to ensure that all dependencies are identified and risks mitigated. Academic Board has established a PEP Academic Impact Statement Group to support this assessment.

Shared design principles

UCL has many different types of programme, so there will not be a one-size-fits-all approach to curriculum design. However, if we can agree a broad set of shared design principles, this can support faculties in developing their Curriculum Templates around UCL's priorities for the future of education. A UCL-wide consultation process is planned for Autumn 2023 – Spring 2024.

Student advisory group

A student advisory group is being established in partnership with the Students'

Union. They will focus on designing opportunities for students to feed into the project and ensuring that the student voice is at the heart of our curriculum design.

Extended Learning Opportunities project

One of the greatest benefits of simplifying our curricula is that we can create more shared spaces in the academic year for our educational priorities.

The 'Extended Learning Opportunities' project will explore new opportunities for students to expand their learning, such as collaborative projects, volunteering, research internships, or cross-UCL modules. We will also explore how we can make better use of Term 3.

The aim is to design a suite of options which faculties can build into their Curriculum Templates.

Common curriculum definitions

A review of UCL's curriculum definitions - such as 'pathway', 'elective', 'option', 'minor' – will help to ensure they are clear, up-to-date, and recognised across all faculties and departments. The revised terminology will support faculties in designing their Curriculum Templates.

Mid-year assessments

The Student's Union wants more departments to spread their assessments more evenly throughout the year to support

student wellbeing and help staff return feedback more quickly. However, some faculties have told us that a barrier to doing this is a lack of central support for mid-year assessments. Student and Registry Services will investigate the options further and assess the impact on the rest of the academic year, so that faculties can include mid-year assessments in their Curriculum Templates.

Timeline

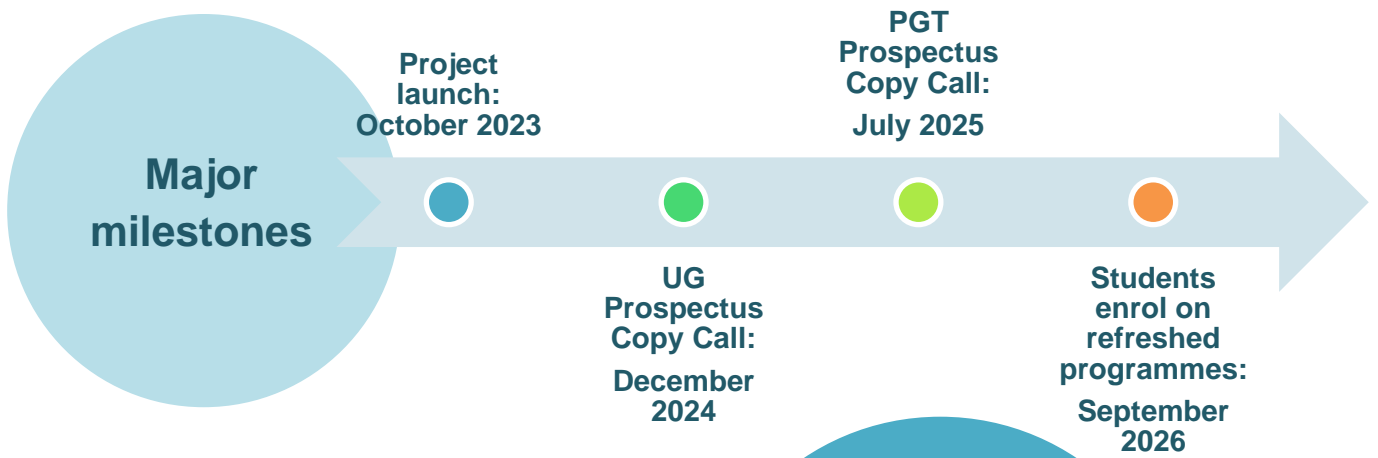
Preparatory work will start in the Autumn term 2023, with a view to starting the Curriculum Review in the Spring term 2024. A more detailed timeline will be provided to faculties once the preparatory work has progressed.

The deadline for curriculum changes for 2026/27 entry will be the UG prospectus copy call in December 2024 and the PGT call in July 2025. However, we anticipate that some curriculum changes may take longer to work through, so some faculties and departments will be working towards 2027/28 entry.

Ambition

From 2026/27, UCL's curriculum will be streamlined and legible, offering students realistic choices and supporting students to achieve their own personal ambitions for the future.

Roadmap



Indicative timeline

For 2026/27 entry		2023/24					2024/25					2025/26														
		S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S
Prep work																										
UG	Faculties review Portfolios																									
	Faculties review Curriculum																									
	Prospectus Copy Call																									
PGT	Faculties review Portfolios																									
	Faculties review Curriculum																									
	Prospectus Copy Call																									
Students enrol 2026/27																										

Exact dates will be confirmed to faculties as the project progresses