

TRANSFORMING OUR PROFESSIONAL SERVICES



UCL

TRANSFORMING OUR RESEARCH SUPPORT SERVICES TO BE WORLD CLASS – PRINCIPLES AND EMERGING IDEAS

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Research in UCL is enabled, organised and supported via different parts of the university, including OVPR, OVPE&I, Research Services (within Finance and Business Affairs), Legal Services, HR, Estates, Library, UCL Culture, RITS (within ISD), Schools, Faculties and Departments. Together we call all of these elements “UCL Research Support”. The support provided runs across the research lifecycle and therefore includes:

- **Finding funding opportunities**
- **Applying for funding**
- **Securing funding – including research contracts negotiation**
- **Management of funds – including research finance activity**
- **Management of publications in alignment with the obligations of the research programme**
- **Closing funds down at the end of the research programme**

Given the scale and scope of UCL’s research activity there are very few equivalent organisations with similarly complex research support demands. This complexity is a function of both the external environment, with changes in demands from funders, industry and partner institutions, and the internal structural complexity which has developed over time in response both to organic growth, mergers and increasing complexity in the nature of the research programmes themselves. It is of note that the research completed through some of UCL’s faculties exceeds the total research income at other Russell Group institutions. The clear success of UCL in research must be protected, and so any change must not jeopardise this position.

It is the objective of TOPS to make the pathway for research academics through this complex UCL Research Support landscape more transparent, less burdensome and time consuming, and ultimately to enhance researchers’ success in winning more research, and to enable UCL to maximise the impact and return on that research.

Clearly some external factors, including REF2021, the new UKRI and the as yet unknowable impact of Brexit on research and funding, will force further change within UCL Research Support. However, the ongoing ambition for the institution to continue to deliver the world-leading research for which it is renowned remains undimmed. UCL Research Support is likely to continue to require increasingly innovative solutions – to deliver more inter-disciplinary, cross-faculty, cross-institution research and to improve partnerships with industry.

Given the criticality of research to UCL’s mission, it is unsurprising that the emerging ideas for the future of UCL Research Support are substantial contributors to the overarching TOPS objectives. The emerging ideas summarised in this document reflect the desire to address critical capacity issues in the current delivery, simplification of the pathways and interactions through which research colleagues receive support and a professionalisation of, and investment in, research support as a discipline.

1. We have heard from a large number of colleagues regarding the issues they are facing. These include:

- Growth in the research portfolio has not been matched by the parallel growth in the central processing teams. This has led to backlogs in processing, a reduction in the level of service received and an increase in the reported stress levels of staff members especially for research services
 - There is a need for embedded standardised processes that allow for local tailoring (where appropriate) to speed processes up and ensure that we can respond in an agile way to incoming work
 - There are, in many cases, too many approval layers, and not enough transparency about pathways for progression and tracking within the institution. This slows researchers' ability to respond to demands from funders and represents a significant challenge in setting up research programmes and administering them
 - The appropriate pathways for researchers and professional services staff to follow are not always clear and there are duplications or disjointed activities – likewise it is not always clear that service level standards are being monitored or enforced
 - In common with other areas of UCL Professional Services, there are unclear career paths for staff, both within some of the central teams and in departmental research support roles
 - Changes in staffing means that there are not always named contacts for each area / department which would help understanding and reduce queries being passed around
 - Planning between Faculties and the various areas of UCL Research Support and between the component parts of UCL Research Support itself are fragmented or non-existent
 - Overarching governance and authorisation processes are required, with an appropriate governance/oversight body.
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2. Overview of the principles and emerging ideas

The emerging ideas build on the significant successes in UCL's delivery of research. They additionally address the key issues that were voiced during the design workshops and in interviews with key members of the research support community, including senior members of the Office of the Vice Provost Research, Departmental and Faculty research support and academic colleagues, Research Services, UCL's Legal Counsel and wider input from aligned areas including Innovation.

The emerging ideas suggest that UCL Research Support would retain a hybrid model, with strategy and policy functions continuing to be provided by the OVPR, and core operational delivery through appropriate professional services, School, Faculty and Departmental teams. There would continue to be substantial local (departmental and faculty-based) support for academic colleagues. There would be investment in training, systems and processes for all staff to make roles more effective, and rewarding.

The key principles and emerging ideas are:

- Services for Research Support could continue to be delivered locally with support provided from central professional services. Academics would therefore have access to local support who understand local complexities, and are empowered to enforce policies and escalate issues.
 - Central professional services will continue to provide specialist resource and services, and will benefit from improved governance structures and consistent standards of local support.
 - Staff based locally could be line managed locally, with central professional services staff continuing to be managed centrally
 - All staff (whether based in departments or in central teams) could be better supported as processes, systems and information are redesigned, simplified and made consistent with clear ownership and accountability, clearer ways of working and a defined service delivery model
 - Better support (including improved integration of associated support functions) for research contracts to address resource constraints and improve turn-around times
 - Clear progression paths aligned to operational and strategic roles.
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3. What could potentially change through these ideas?

In practice, the emerging ideas could mean:

1. Increase clarity for governance, oversight and accountability for research support delivery:

- We could create a governance board, to introduce a consistent operational governance and delivery support for research across the research lifecycle, including coordination with strategic policy and development functions
- This Board, may require “sub-boards” to ensure delivery of Outputs and Impact, of Translation and Enterprise, of Equipment, Infrastructure and Estates, and of Staff and Development. By linking these “sub-boards” (many of which exist in different guises already) through to the main Board, we would create a coherent oversight of all elements of the delivery of research support with UCL as a whole
- We could refine and communicate the responsibilities and accountabilities for all teams involved in research support, including alignment of research portfolio expertise for central pre-, post-award and contracts teams to the local structures so that faculties will have named specialists to contact throughout the process. In addition it would be helpful to map the roles and responsibilities for allied areas such as the SLMS Translational Research Office, the Joint Research Office, and other functions provided to support innovation and enterprise activity.

2. Create delivery pathways for research support and establish holistic planning:

- We could document and simplify processes to create research support pathways – based on a defined set of research programme ‘types’
- We could ensure that funding proposal applications consider the full range of operational implications – such as HR and Estates, and that this information is harvested and transmitted to Estates, HR, etc. for their future planning processes
- We could develop simple systems to help users follow the appropriate pathway – effectively triaging the support pathways and with end to end integration of IT systems to allow for appropriate monitoring, reporting and accurate data analytics, such as for REF purposes (Impact, Outputs, and Open Access etc.)
- We could review the delivery of Research Infrastructure to manage shared facilities and platforms.

3. Address challenges in operational contract and funder relationship interactions:

- We could increase resourcing for research contracts management to match volume and complexity, and align overall research support with Innovation Lifecycle Service and Legal Services
- We could increase resourcing for post-award management to reflect the increase in volume and complexity of the research portfolio, providing assurance to funders of robust financial management.
- We could align post-award relationship management for key funders into Schools, Faculties and Departments where appropriate.
- We could create risk assessments based on the research delivery pathways to manage legal risks proportionately and to manage and prioritise the pipeline of research contracts support
- We could introduce a Quality and Assurance function to ensure compliance with guidelines, standards and procedures (regulatory and funder).

4. Create connected paths for staff specialisation and progression:

- We could build on the successful aspects of local support and research facilitation to deliver research support management and introduce a job family for Research Support Management at faculty/departmental level
- Creating this job family (line managed locally but overseen centrally) could lead to clearer career pathways for research support staff and the establishment of a community of practice for research support staff
- We could build on the successful aspects of central professional service support, building appropriate job families that led to clearer career pathways and the establishment of a community of practice for research support staff
- We could supply comprehensive training and guidelines for new and existing staff.

In addition, there could be a review of the detailed future design and the research pathways of UCL Research Support together with the support needed for Innovation and Enterprise activity, to deliver a seamless support service to academics and funders.

4. What would not change?

There are a number of areas which are not covered by the emerging ideas and would not change. Although not exhaustive, these include:

- Local research support will continue to be delivered locally with support provided from the central professional service
 - Central professional services will continue to provide the infrastructure (systems, policies, processes) and deliver core institutional research services in support of UCL and Funder requirements.
 - Academics will retain access (where it currently exists) to local support who understand their local research context
 - Worktribe will be retained, with greater investment in the systems.
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5. The potential benefits and investment we could make

The following table details the benefits we are aiming to achieve within the Research Support service, as well as the investments we would need to make in order to realise these benefits:

Benefits	Costs
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increased satisfaction with the service from academic colleagues and the funding community• Improved satisfaction in staff roles and a reduction in staff churn in key roles• A streamlined service that can better support UCL's portfolio of research and meet the increasing complexity of funders' and partners' requirements• Greater value for money from the service enabling staff to focus their activities on higher risk and more complex research support activity• Reduced risk of underspending and overspending on research grants (and therefore having to either fund from departmental or faculty budgets or return funds).• Improved compliance rates and a lower cost of compliance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creation of potential additional roles to support areas where there is a current gap in organisational capacity, for example to define and manage the institutional and departmental/faculty research strategy, and to address external contracts• IT investment• Investment in training and induction for research support staff• Investment in the process reform project, conducted in parallel with the Innovation lifecycle activity to reflect the overlap for these services from the perspective of academics and departments.

6. What are the outstanding questions we would welcome feedback on?

- How can we best engage with the academic and research support community during the definition of the future research pathways?
 - Should we be more radical in the options we are considering?– they currently represent only relatively minor structural change albeit with substantial effort in process, systems and information provision to address current process difficulties?
 - How can we get better research financial information?
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Disclaimer:

These documents contain emerging ideas for how UCL professional services could be delivered in a more effective way in the future. At present, no formal change proposals are being put forward by UCL and so engagement remains at an informal stage. Where a preferred option is mentioned, this pertains to PA Consulting recommendations and does not constitute a formal proposal for change by UCL.