



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

Discussion Paper Six  
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# Enabling our academic mission

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# 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 survey<sup>1</sup> 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 of ce' 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 proo ng' 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**<sup>2</sup>, 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.



## 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

Services and eight other platforms supporting life and biomedical science research<sup>4</sup>. 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



sometimes timetabled into unsuitable rooms with

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 system<sup>7</sup> 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

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<sup>7</sup> <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.

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 core financial

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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'

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 cash flow 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 similar to the investment decision. It will also apply the investment decision-making process to the investment decision-making process.

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



# 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.

