# **UCL’s Strategic Plan:**

# **What does this mean for the future of working in partnership with communities and the organisations who work on their behalf?**

## **Background**

## UCL is a large university which carries out research right across sciences, medicine, the arts and social sciences (a multi-disciplinary university). It also teaches students across all these subjects. Beginning in October 2021 and finishing at the end of April 2022, UCL senior management is publishing a series of consultation papers on its whole-university priorities for the next five years and is asking people inside and outside UCL for their views.

UCL Engagement, whose work focuses on enabling brighter ideas through deeper connections with communities outside UCL, is keen to make it easier for our external partners and the communities we work with to engage with the process and give their feedback – particularly in relation to how partnership working will be developed and supported. We will then do our best to represent all the feedback we receive as part of the formal response we submit with [Co-Production Collective](https://www.coproductioncollective.co.uk/).

Co-Production Collective, based at UCL within UCL Engagement, is a co-production community where everyone is welcome. Together we learn, connect and champion co-production for lasting change. Co-Production Collective exists to support co-production across research, policy and practice, bringing together a diverse community of over 1800 co-producers with lived and learnt experience from these sectors and beyond. want to extend the invitation, to you and your partners, to share your thoughts and feedback about the potential role of communities, co-production and collaboration. One of Co-Production Collective’s four ambitions for 2020-2022, as laid out in [our co-created strategy](https://assets.website-files.com/5ffee76a01a63b6b7213780c/60c9d68a843cb7319f92aa9a_CoProCollective_OurDirection2020-22_single.pdf), is to ‘Lead Culture Change’ to influence individuals, organisations and systems to put co-production at the heart of everything they do. This strategy consultation is a brilliant opportunity to do just that and we’d love to extend the invitation to you to take part too.

## Big Picture

Let’s start with the big picture so you have an idea of UCL’s proposed overall vision and mission.

**Vision**: UCL’s distinctive approach to research, education and innovation will further inspire our community of staff, students and partners to transform how the world is understood, how knowledge is created and shared, and the way that global problems are solved.

**Mission**: London’s Global University: a diverse intellectual community, engaged with the wider world and committed to changing it for the better.

UCL has also set out three themes to underpin the activity to achieve this vision. These themes relate to how UCL works as an institution.

* Partnership for change
* Change for the better
* Being fit to bring about change

…. along with a set of 4 values to inform the work of the whole UCL community (staff and students) including how they work with external partners and communities.

* Integrity and mutual accountability;   
  *“a strong sense of collective and personal responsibility and accountability to everyone, and to the communities we serve”.*
* Openness and inclusion;   
  *“We must be a community in which our partners, too, have a sense of inclusion.*“  
  *“It is taken for granted that we can learn from others, and that if we do, our work will have more impact in bringing change for the better.“*
* Care and respect;   
  “*Move to a proactive ethos of care*” and *“ability to disagree well”*.
* Rigour and innovation;  
  This one mostly relates to internal activity.

## **Grand Challenges**

Next, let’s look at the paper on Grand Challenges. UCL is proposing that four of the biggest challenges facing the world right now should become a focus for cross-disciplinary (academics from different parts of the university) and partnership working (with external partners and communities). In 2008, UCL was one of the first universities to adopt Grand Challenges as a way of encouraging academics from different areas (disciplines) to work together to find novel solutions to societal issues which affect people at local, national and global scale. Up until now, this work has been structured around six fairly broad themes – UCL Engagement and Co-Production Collective work closely with this team and has partnered on some specific projects with them. You can read more about the current Grand Challenges set-up [on their website](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/grand-challenges/), alongside information about their [existing partnership work](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/grand-challenges/partnerships).

UCL now wants to redefine the Grand Challenges programme so that it:

* Reduces the number of Grand Challenge areas from six to four, reflecting overlap between UCL research expertise across all disciplines and some of the most serious threats and crises facing the world.
* Specifies an initial 5 year timeline for each Grand Challenge.
* Turns the lens of each Grand Challenge not just on the outside world, but also on how UCL itself is run and the impact on the UCL community. For example, if research is undertaken on the Climate Crisis, the emerging ideas should be put into practice inside UCL, as well as outside, where possible and relevant.
* Raises the level of funding substantially to power a programme of collaborative research across disciplines, and with partners, at a level more likely to achieve significant impact. The new proposal would fund new academic roles, networking and research activity. Presumably it would also have to support partnership working, though this is not stated explicitly.
* Encourages collaboration across the four Grand Challenges to maximise the potential to address multiple challenges with the same activity

## **What are the four proposed Grand Challenges?**

The criteria used to select the four themes include one of direct relevance to UCL Engagement and Co-Production Collective: “*Require working with communities and stakeholders beyond the university, and taking account of our location in one of the world’s great cities.*“

We have included below what the paper says about its aspirations for partnership working for each of the Grand Challenges. We’ve included some direct quotes where they seem to us to be relevant to areas where UCL Engagement and/or Co-Production Collective is already active, and/or where there might be potential to contribute in the future. 

### **Inequalities**

The paper’s main argument is that UCL’s range of research expertise equips it really well to tackle the complex and overlapping issues which give rise to inequalities in London, nationally, and across the globe. If better aligned, these research areas could be more effective in helping to reduce inequalities in areas such as education and health. The activity could also help drive the systemic change needed to address inequalities within major institutions and organisations, including within UCL itself.

**Relevance to the future of partnership working with communities:**  
This theme identifies many areas relevant to our work, including *“inequality between people and places*” and the impact on *“life chances and education, health, employment and other outcomes*”. It underlines that some vulnerable groups are very heavily at risk of reduced life chances including those experiencing homelessness, addiction or imprisonment, migration, and sex workers.

The paper says UCL’s work on inequalities “*should fully embrace the concept of ‘partnership for change’*”. It highlights the fact that UCL is building a [new campus in East London](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-east/) and is already working with key London local authorities that have the most extreme health inequalities including Tower Hamlets and Newham and Camden. It flags the opportunity to further develop “*participatory approaches in our research*” and develop strategic partnerships which need to be “*responsive to the needs of local community and stakeholders, rather than solely reflecting the academic goals of our university*”.

Importantly, it also acknowledges the need to examine and address areas in which UCL itself might create or contribute to inequality – this is part of the culture change Co-Production Collective is working towards.

### **Living well and mental well-being**

The paper argues that bringing together UCL’s many different areas of research expertise will maximise the chances of dealing with the causes of mental illness, as well as identifying the best ways to support and care for people suffering from mental illness, and the factors which increase mental well-being.

**Relevance to the future of partnership working with communities:**  
The paper highlights the negative impact of the pandemic on particular populations’ mental health (younger people, women and poorer people) while noting that the issues are relevant for all, including UCL staff and students. It says that we need to draw on insights from the arts, history, social sciences and human behaviour, as well traditional scientific approaches, to help identify relief from common mental disorders. And even when solutions and treatments are found, the paper argues that they can only be applied for the benefit of all if the systems that provide them are adapted to tackle inequality in access.

“*At the centre of this work is the need to address known disproportionality and vulnerable populations; to focus on the development of preventative efforts that promote well-being; and to prioritise principles of inclusivity, stigma reduction and human rights*.”  

### **Data-empowered societies**

This Grand Challenge has been proposed with the aim of shifting from a data-driven society to a data-empowered society.

**Relevance to the future of partnership working with communities:**  
The paper acknowledges that new technologies, AI (artificial intelligence), data and social media affects every aspect of society and that achieving a “*data-empowered society will require a more collaborative, democratic and inclusive approach to the way that choices are made, as well as a much more “‘data – savvy’ population*”. It also wants to ensure that improvement of the human condition is embedded in decision-making around the use of data and calls for the development of “*collaborations which can ask new questions that others may be unwilling or unable to ask*”. 

### **Climate Crisis**

There is not a lot said about working with communities in this area, as the paper focuses more on the potential to empower UCL students as agents of change, the need to apply climate crisis research to UCL’s own operations as well as in the external world, and to bring together fragmented research into a greater whole. It does however note the potential for a greater role for UCL in delivering Climate Change Education and research-informed teacher development.

**Relevance to the future of partnership working with communities:**  
How would you and the communities you are part of like to be involved?

## **What evaluation criteria is UCL suggesting for this work?**

There are no current plans to assess partners’ contribution or the extent to which the Grand Challenges effectively respond to community need directly, but two of the seven proposed evaluation criteria align with our work:

* New partnerships and evidenced influence on policymakers
* Alignment with our shared values

## **Is that everything?**

No! There is a lot more detail in the papers that we have inevitably left out. But we’ve tried to include those details (and quotes) which seems most relevant to the work of UCL Engagement and Co-Production Collective. Please feel free to [get in touch](https://www.coproductioncollective.co.uk/get-in-touch) if you would like to discuss this further or [browse the UCL website](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/strategic-plan-2022-27) to find out more.  
 **OK, how can I respond?**

We have three key questions we’d like you to consider in response to this information (although, of course, you’re more than welcome to share additional thoughts and ideas as well):

1. What do you see as the potential for external communities and the organisations which work on their behalf to contribute to UCL’s future plans within the proposals?
2. Do you feel that the proposed UCL Grand Challenges research areas are reflective of the issues that affect your life, your research, or your teaching?
3. Are there important questions which for you remain unanswered that you would like UCL to think about as it develops its proposals for embedding partnership working with communities?

You can share your thoughts via [an online form](https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=_oivH5ipW0yTySEKEdmlwn5lqzl4G05PnXuvFMr-wSNUNTBWUTkzS1ZJNFhIVlpDMU9NQVIxQk9FUi4u) or email ([coproduction@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:coproduction@ucl.ac.uk)) by **Monday 7 March**.

Thank you!