# Considerations on expenditure of the Quality Agreement Funds

## More and diverse summer and winter courses

UCU offers students a lot of flexibility in designing their own curriculum. In practice, this flexibility is constrained by the short time that students are at UCU, combined with the number of graduation requirements that have to be met. This flexibility would be enhanced by enlarging our course and short module offerings during the summer term and winter break.

This would also potentially support ideas that have been raised for increased flexibility in curriculum structuring, by allowing students to adjust their workload to particular circumstances and would foster more diverse and in-depth learning. For instance, in a system where 60 ECTS per year would be required (in contrast to current 30 ECTS per semester), a student could take 4 courses in fall, 3 in spring and make up for the missing course with an equally valuable course one in summer term.

## Expansion of Student Wellbeing Provisions

Academic wellbeing issues are pervasive at our Honours college like they are at other faculties, which is affecting the performance and limiting the LAS experience of our students. We suggest to further improve the quality of UCU’s academic wellbeing provisions in order to help relieve stress, anxiety and/or depression among students. This could be done for instance by hiring a second Student Life Officer (SLO) or possibly a psychologist to work in tandem with the existing SLO. This would allow for faster and more frequent contacts and expansion of wellbeing activities on campus. Furthermore, hiring a second female SLO may make things easier for students who may refrain from seeking help due to feeling uncomfortable discussing a sensitive personal issue with someone of the opposite gender.

## Scholarships

One of UCU’s unique features is the interaction between students from diverse backgrounds in a small-scale setting. The success of this educational philosophy is relying heavily on the political, sociological, economic, religious and cultural diversity of the student population. Although UCU comprises a vast and heterogeneous mixture of nationalities, our student population remains largely affluent. The quality of our education would therefore greatly benefit from a more socio-economically diverse student population, and increasing our financial aid budget for scholarships should be a top priority.

## Improve educational and social environment on campus

UCU is blessed with a beautiful campus which is central to our LAS philosophy. However, it was never build with the intention of creating a stimulating educational environment. As a result, much potential for improving our education and the LAS experience on our international campus remains unfulfilled. Outside large-scale changes to the monumental buildings, there are plenty of opportunities for improving the educational and social environment on our campus. Some suggestions for further consideration where quality of life would be improved hand-in-hand with educational quality:

* ***More green in academic buildings.*** Nature afﬁliation and exposure to elements of the natural environment improves not only overall well-being and perception of life, but also has positive effects on cognitive functioning, creativity and problem solving. Introducing flowers and plants to academic buildings would make teaching more effective, creative and enjoyable, while possibly even improving air quality in classrooms.
* ***More floral variety outside academic buildings***; different plants, bushes and (fruit) trees or even a small pond would attract students and staff out of their rooms and academic buildings, promoting social interaction, and more pleasant space to read, study, have lunch or simply downtime in between classes. In addition, they may serve as sources of educational inspiration, particularly for courses dealing with natural sciences.
* ***Create more attractive (outdoor) spaces for study and social interaction;*** introduce large picnic tables (similar to the one outside College Hall) to promote social interaction, study and group discussions; create a small amphitheater for outside teaching and social activities, and exhibit art in- and outside academic buildings, which could go hand-in-hand with certain courses.
* ***Communal projects*** to promote social connectedness, responsibility and learning among students and staff; for example, creating a communal garden, a green house or allotments where people come together to work or relax, and which could also support course content.
* ***Set up a small laboratory*** for basic teaching to support courses in the natural sciences on top of the ongoing in silico lab package that is being developed. Lack of laboratory space is a serious limitation to our student’s development, and although we appreciate that there are stringent regulations attached to labs in urban areas, there is a lot that can be done with simple, safe and non-hazardous materials.
* ***Bring other life to UCU*** to enhance mental health and quality of life. For instance, look into the possibility of allowing pets on campus, installing a large aquarium in one of the buildings (educational tool as well), or even have a small animal farm on campus which could attract normal citizens onto our campus.

Projects such as the ones mentioned could also be facilitated by setting up a fund for projects that are led by a collaborative effort of students and staff.

## Improving Working Conditions

At UCU, like elsewhere at Utrecht University, work pressure is perceived as (much) too high and requires serious attention. Elements that are worth considering are:

* ***Allocate appropriate funds/time for courses.*** Every teacher receives a standard amount of hours for teaching a course, but not all courses require the same amount of preparation. This is particularly an issue in cases of new courses, teachers who are new to UCU, or courses that simply require an upgrade after a few semesters. This prevents teachers from taking the necessary measures to ensure their courses are in optimal shape, unless they do this in their own time. How to tackle this? We could envisage every department head receiving e.g. 200 hours to be allocated every semester at their discretion to teachers on top of the standard 200 course hours for new course designs, upgrades or supporting teachers who are new to UCU.
* ***Allocate hours for professional development.*** We appreciate that a lot of things are happening behind the scenes to promote the professional development of our faculty and staff, such as scholarship time, facilitating international exchanges and sabbaticals. But also at another level, teachers are generally very interested in attending courses or symposia that will help their professional development. But with the UCU calendar being so packed and every hour needs to be accounted for, it is important to free up time for teachers (and staff) to invest in e.g. blended learning, educateIT, honours teaching etc.
* ***Purchase (or develop) a good, flexible and reliable software package*** for course management, registration and communication.
* ***Investigate options to reduce the peak-loads throughout the semester.*** Faculty and staff experience the academic year as a period of peaks and troughs. This particularly applies to tutors during periods of course registration and the tutor meetings after the midterm break. Although this does not necessarily lead to huge problems in those periods, it does affect the quality of work during those hectic periods.