



**REDBRICK**  
RESEARCH

UCL Union

Market Research  
2010

Stage 1: Focus Groups and  
Supplementary Telephone Interviews

Findings

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## 1. Executive summary

Students are generally quite clear about the distinction between the university which is responsible for all academic-related provision, and the union which broadly covers everything else. There is slightly less clarity when students are challenged about the significance of union provision of services versus private provision. In many instances group participants took up opposing initial positions on, for example, privatising food and drink provision. In the course of these discussions the real core needs in relation to these services were exposed and through that, consensus was often reached in the end.

Food and drink provision was quickly identified as one of the most important facilities students needed on and around the central university 'campus'. However, broadly speaking, students felt that as long as price, variety and quality were met, it was not fundamental that these services be provided by the union or any other specific organisation. There was, however, some doubt that these objectives could be met by a commercial organisation.

The lack of adequate, functional student spaces around campus was a significant problem. There were simply not enough tables and chairs to cater for the number of students. It came across very strongly that space was something lacking across all areas of student life, not just commercial services. Students, across all demographics, repeatedly emphasised the need for social space. They required multifunctional spaces; spaces that facilitated group discussion, laptop/PC use, downtime in between lectures and informal club/society meetings. Many students linked physical space with the concept of student identity and a sense of community – something that was missing at present. It was very important to them.

This issue of space seemed to be a fundamental barrier to the union developing its own identity. At present it is seen by many as simply a "wrapper" for a large number of disparate sub-groups and a "fall-back" for those who don't belong to any of the 'stronger' communities like medics and postgraduates.

The need for more computers and print facilities was consistently raised. These would be ideally placed in both the university and union buildings. Several students felt that computers, printers and sockets for laptops would definitely be made use of in the union for both club/society administrative paperwork and academic projects. Clubs and societies were undoubtedly considered a key need and students unanimously felt that these should be supported by the union. There was, however, a repeated complaint about union bureaucracy preventing efficiency and causing difficulties when it came to the running of these clubs and societies.

Support and advice was a need voiced by many students. This umbrella term covered welfare advice (counselling), financial advice and support, legal guidance, careers advice, housing advice, part time jobs listings, and general orientation of the university, union and London (specifically relevant to new entrants). In some cases there was a need for an actual service (such as counselling), but in others many students simply wanted direction in terms of where the support could be found. The combination of a well maintained and easily navigated website and a face to face 'support desk' was popular.

Entertainment was another important requirement. Generally speaking students felt that it should be provided by the union; they firmly believed that union events strengthened the student identity as they separated UCL students from the rest of young London. Many demographics expressed a desire for a wider variety of entertainment options. They felt that that too many events were alcohol focused. Several students expressed a need for more pleasant bars and spaces to facilitate these events.

Finally there was a need expressed by many for more engagement with the union. Many students felt that communication, publicity and marketing were fairly weak and that UCLU lacked a strong identity of its own. There were particular demographic groups that needed

more representation than the union was currently offering. Others felt disempowered by a lack of knowledge when it came to elections. They felt that their votes would be pointless as they had not been involved with the union and the students that were running for election. Campaigning was something that most students felt should be an option. However, there were also complaints about red tape and poor communication in this area.

## 2. Introduction

### 2.1. Background

Prior to the execution of the focus groups, a detailed discussion guide was produced outlining the themes for exploration and any specific prompts or questions to be used. As these focus groups were designed to be an exploratory process, participants were not held rigidly to the topic headings but were allowed to express themselves within reason on any relevant topic area they wanted.

This report seeks to accurately reflect student opinion and perception. It was not the moderator's role to correct misunderstandings but to record them. If there are any inaccuracies in statements made, then that reflects the lack of awareness amongst those who made them. In some cases these were challenged or corrected by other participants but Red Brick did not assume any position of authority on these issues.

### 2.2. Methodology

Red Brick research lead 13 one hour focus groups and 5 thirty minute telephone interviews on behalf of UCLU.

The focus group incentive was £20.00 cash and the telephone interview incentive was £10.00 in Amazon vouchers or PayPal payments.

#### 2.2.1. Focus Groups

The following table contains all of the important details about each focus group:

Focus group number	Date	Time	Demographic	Number of Attendees
1	2/2/2010	14.00	Mixed undergraduates	9
2	2/2/2010	15.45	Mixed	7
3	2/2/2010	17.30	Medics	9
4	3/2/2010	11.30	Taught postgraduates	7
5	3/2/2010	14.00	International	9
6	3/2/2010	15.45	Activists	5
7	3/2/2010	17.30	Intermediate year undergraduates	9
8	4/2/2010	11.30	1 <sup>st</sup> year undergraduates	9
9	4/2/2010	14.00	Clubs and societies	9
10	4/2/2010	15.45	Council members	9
11	4/2/2010	17.30	Mature undergraduates	9
12	5/2/2010	11.30	Research postgraduates	8
13	5/2/2010	14.00	Final year undergraduates	8

Red Brick initially adopted a *hypothetical* approach to the focus group discussions, talking over generic student needs and objectives around an imaginary new (similar) university before finally evaluating how well these needs were met by UCLU in relation to UCL. This was the initial discussion agenda:

1. Scene setting
2. Defining needs
3. Defining core objectives
4. Meeting objectives – How?
5. Mapping Back to UCLU – Evaluate
6. Examine aspects of UCLU not covered or raised by participants
7. Review

More information on the initial discussion guide is available in a separate document.

During the first couple of focus groups it became clear that many students found it extremely difficult to discuss these needs and objectives in detail without drawing on their own experiences at UCL. Some were completely ‘blocked’ or distracted by details regarding the hypothetical scenario. Rather than persist with a format which might alienate or confuse some participants we modified our approach and dropped the hypothetical scenario to focus on UCLU as it exists. The agenda taken forward was:

1. Scene setting
2. Defining needs
3. Prioritising needs
4. Responsibility for needs  
Outlining who should be responsible for each need and *why*. Using this as a platform to explore underlying motivations and priorities in the provision of these needs.
5. UCLU discussion  
Current engagement with union, positive features and changes that should be made
6. Examine aspects of UCLU not covered or raised by participants

### 2.2.2. Telephone Interviews

The telephone interviews were carried out on 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> February 2010. Five MSSL students were interviewed in total. The table below contains all the important details about each *telephone interview*:

Interview number	Date	Time	Interviewees
1	12/02/2010	13.00	1
2	12/02/2010	13.30	1
3	12/02/2010	14.00	1
4	12/02/2010	14.30	1
5	13/02/2010	13.00	1

These telephone interviews did not follow the same agenda as the focus groups. Red Brick quickly established that MSSL students were too disconnected from UCLU to make valid judgements in relation to existing central UCLU provision. Instead, Red Brick focussed the discussions around the subject of what UCLU and UCL could do to improve the experience for MSSL students.

### 3. Needs

Each focus group began with a brain-storming session on needs the students have outside of their academic lives. The second exercise of the session involved prioritising these needs. Overall, the top ten needs identified by students, in order of importance, were:

1. Food and drink provision
2. Space – social and study space
3. Clubs and societies
4. Sports and gym
5. Careers advice and support
6. Entertainment
7. Job support
8. Bars
9. Computer/printer facilities
10. Healthcare

Other needs were raised but they were not prioritised by the students, either because they were vital student services but not day to day requirements (*background needs*) or because they were only required by specific demographic groups (*variation needs*). All of these additional needs are also discussed in the report. They are listed below and marked as either background (B) or variation needs (V):

- Campaigning opportunities – V
- Advice and support – B
- Representation – B
- Cheap Freshers week – V
- Welcome and orientation – V
- Prayer facilities – V
- Alumni – V
- Improved academic facilities – V
- Cycle racks – V

The final need is of strategic importance across all aspects of UCLU service provision:

- Improved UCLU communication

The following sub-sections of the report discuss the details of each need, including motivations and any varying requirements that particular groups of students may have. The core needs are discussed in the order in which students prioritised them.

### 3.1. Food and Drink

In several of the focus groups Food and Drink was a heavily debated topic.

The majority of groups volunteered this category as one of the top student needs. However, when asked who should provide it, they were evidently uncertain. It was a decision that most groups found hard to make so we encouraged them to come at the problem from another direction:

*“Well what matters to you most when it comes to this category?”*

This line of questioning seemed more approachable to the students, although their responses and priorities were varied. The main answers are included below:

- Price
- Convenience
- Variety
- Quality

Food and drink being student/union run did not come up as a specific priority although most students believed that food and drink would probably have to be student led to ensure low prices. It was generally agreed that a commercial service would not want to be involved in anything ‘non-profit’ and would probably charge too much. Price was a primary consideration for many students. One student in the Clubs and Societies group expressed the opinion that the food and drink definitely needed to be *“a little bit less expensive”*. Similarly an intermediate year undergraduate said *“Cost is important. I don’t want to end up eating at Itzu every day!”* The council members group agreed unanimously that price was more important than variety.

One student actually felt that fair pricing was an *“equal access issue”*. They felt that low cost food was essential to students choosing to study in London.

In order to measure how important union involvement was (i.e. whether or not it was simply price related), we asked...

*“If a commercial or private company was able to achieve all of the above (price, convenience, variety and quality), would you mind if food and drink was provided by a commercial / outside / private company?”*

...the broad consensus was *“No”*, although there was scepticism that this would be at all possible. The council members were more hesitant and felt *“it would be nice if students were running it”*.

One individual from the final year undergraduate group said that food and drink is the lowest direct responsibility of the union – the rest of the group agreed with her.

There were, however, individuals that believed there to be key advantages to having student run food and drink, other than low prices.

These were:

- Student jobs
- More control over menu
- Ethical reasons – can include fair trade options

- Student identity and environment
- Variety – students have the opportunity to enjoy commercialism all over London and it's nice to have another option

When these advantages were vocalised, other students often agreed but they weren't instinctive thoughts in most cases.

The majority of students did not really discuss commercial services with anything other than food and drink in mind. A few students mentioned that the Bloomsbury shop was useful in terms of stationary and 'hoodies' but generally the feeling about it was either indifference or negativity and although the stationary was convenient, none saw any reason why hoodies couldn't be bought online.

## 3.2. Space

All students from all groups repeatedly expressed their need for space.

Not only did the majority of students share this same core need but there was also an astonishingly broad consensus when we discussed both background motivations and particular features.

### 3.2.1. Motivations for requiring Space (broad consensus)

- A physical space that allows for student interaction is fundamental – there was a very negative response to the idea of a ‘virtual’ union.
- Space is needed for social facilitation – one final year undergraduate student spoke about “*social cohesion*”
- Every student space creates a sense of unity and student identity; of ownership
- Social space facilitates personal development

### 3.2.2. Features (broad consensus)

- Social space should be provided by UCLU
- “*Common room*” was the most frequent way of describing the ideal student space
- “*Lounge*” was a word that one student used. Another used “*Hub*” whilst a third individual thought it should be “*gravitational*”
- The aesthetics of this space were generally considered important – one student from the Activists group said of the current UCLU building:

*“It is currently a building that no one wants to be in”*

He added-

*“It doesn’t really facilitate socialising which is its main job”*

- The space should be non-bookable
- Somewhere relaxed and chilled
- An individual suggested “*sofas*” and another that it should be “*light*”
- Somewhere you can chat but not as noisy as a bar – a third year undergraduate described the imagined space as “*fairly quiet but not like a library*”. Similarly a student from one of the mixed groups described it as “*not like a library – this would be too restricted*”
- Another student described it as a “*space in between lectures*”
- There was a repeated emphasis on this space having a non-commercial focus i.e. there would be the option to eat and drink but you should not feel obligated to.
- It would be multi-functional – the students were generally very keen for a space where you could eat, chat, work, discuss essays, discuss yesterday’s night out, use laptops etc.
- Sockets for laptops
- WIFI

- Workstations were mentioned several times as many students do not carry laptops around

Several society members mentioned a problem with all the bookable rooms being the same size so there was a lot of wasted space and it was difficult to find venues for different numbers of people to meet. One society leader also estimated that if suitable 'open' space were available it would reduce their requirement for room bookings by about 75%.

The Activist group spent some time talking about this issue of space. There was a broad consensus amongst this group that space was, as one student put it, "*a major thing*". One individual advocated having "*a single community space with stalls*". The individual felt that there needed to be more "*free reign*" space so that students could put their stamp on it; where "*student creativity could create a unique community feel*" and suggested the Slade School of Fine Art come and decorate the union. They linked space directly to community. One student actually claimed that, for them:

*"all other needs are fulfilled other than the community feel"*

There was a general feeling in the group that a community space would help create a UCLU identity that wasn't currently there. One student divided the ULU population into three categories:

- Medics
- Postgraduates
- The rest

They felt that the union was a fall-back for "*the rest*" i.e. nothing more than a collection of fragmented identities. They felt that the union did not have an identity of its own.

Red Brick asked the group:

*"So is UCLU just a wrapper that encompasses other sub groups?"*

The unanimous response was "yes"

The council members group were equally emphatic about the importance of space. When Red Brick suggested the concept of a union without a building there was an audible gasp and one student said "*what a shame!*". Red Brick then asked "*So a physical space is important then?*" and everyone answered "yes" very firmly. One student summarised the feeling of the room by saying "*a very passionate yes!*".

An individual in one of the mixed groups expressed a desire for "*outside space*" – something that looked "*green*" and "*oldy*" rather than having "*just steel and glass everywhere*". This desire was also shared by a few other students in other groups, though they appreciated it was a difficult need to meet.

### 3.3. *Clubs and Societies*

Clubs and societies were ranked as one of the top priorities for students. Many considered them to be a key CV building opportunity, as well as facilitating social interaction. Out of an entire international group, only two students felt that they were at university for any other reason other than improving their CV.

Across all groups, there was unanimous agreement that clubs and societies should be UCLU run.

When asked for the reason behind this choice the broad consensus was that the union should be responsible for non-academic university life. There was general feeling that the university would not offer the variety of clubs that the union would. Students also felt that they would be more in touch with the non-academic needs of other students than anyone else would.

The Activists group felt that the union did not support the clubs and societies. Generally speaking they had a problem with bureaucracy and red tape. The specific issues are listed below:

- Too many forms to complete.
- Forms e-mailed to one central e-mail address so there are suspicions of inefficiency in handling the e-mails. One individual referred to a frustrating e-mail he had received, apologising that his form had been "*lost in transit to the accounts office*".
- Inefficient finance department.
- Issue of UCLU e-mails only going to President and Treasurer as opposed to the whole committee. One student in the group referred to an incident when both the President and Treasurer were off sick and the club nearly got struck off because it had failed to meet a deadline.  
A couple of the students did acknowledge that the problem is partly due to a lack of communication within individual clubs and societies.
- However, the general consensus was that more guidance and advice needed to be offered to students in the first place, in order to avoid these communication gaps.
- There was a general agreement that the union has a problem with assumed knowledge. Often UCLU fails to recognise that students can have no experience in setting up a club or society and really need help. As one student a mixed group put it, you need a framework and "*starting point*".

### 3.4. *Sports and Gym*

The majority of students across all groups considered sports and exercise to be an important part of non-academic university life.

Sports and gym facilities were unanimously considered to be a UCLU responsibility – again because students are more in touch with students needs. One final year undergraduate said:

*“If you have done it you are better at organising it”*

Wherever possible the facilities should be provided but there was a general understanding that this is not always easy for a city university. Wherever it is not possible to provide facilities there should be information about where they can be accessed and good transport links to these locations.

There was mixed opinion over the gym. Some considered it to be too expensive whilst others recognised it to be cheaper than other alternatives and mentioned it being too busy which implies that it was popular with some students.

#### 3.4.1. *Variation - Postgraduate researchers*

A few students from the postgraduate research group spoke about how they would like to be able to play sport in a non-competitive capacity. They felt that they would like to enjoy sport in an entirely social way and did not want to participate in the competitive leagues that the undergraduates were involved in.

### 3.5. *Careers Advice*

There is a broad consensus amongst students that careers advice is the responsibility of the university, although not necessarily a departmental responsibility as many subjects do not automatically lead on to specific careers.

A few groups commented on the type of companies that the Careers Service invites to the university. Some students would like to see a wider variety of companies – not just obvious, big corporations but smaller firms from a more interesting mixture of fields. A student from the postgraduate research group said that the careers service:

*“needs to offer a broader variety of partnerships”*

#### 3.5.1. *Variation - Final year undergraduates*

There was a broad consensus amongst the final year undergraduates that they needed more help when it came to career preparation. They expressed the view that job seminars would be useful - covering CV writing tips, application timelines and interview practice.

One medic also expressed a need for more graduate advice. They emphasised that there is vital information that medics need to be aware of when they graduate, such as registering with the General Medical Council. Without doing this graduates are not able to practice medicine.

### 3.6. *Entertainment*

Entertainment is an umbrella term that covers a number of extra-curricular needs, such as night time events, music and cultural experiences.

The majority of groups agreed that entertainment provision was a vital part of UCLU. However, a couple of students did express that they would also like more social events organised by their departments.

When the students were asked what mattered when it came to entertainment, several things came up:

#### 3.6.1. *Variety*

A variety of entertainment was something that was repeatedly emphasised. Students felt that entertainment should represent the diverse student population. Individuals came up with suggestions such as comedy nights, quizzes, bands, one off dance nights and cocktail nights. One student from the final year undergraduate group said that

*“A lot more all year round could come from the union”*

They then added:

*“There is not enough going on in the evenings”*

This sentiment was shared by others in the group. They felt that entertainment tailed off as students went through the academic year. One student from the Activists group also felt that entertainment took a nose dive after Freshers Week. They suggested a *“refreshers theme”* event that could happen later on in the year. A couple of council members felt that union events were all very similar and assumed that students were all the same. They gave the example of *“club neon”*.

Interestingly, the 1st year undergraduate group felt that freshers week was too alcohol focused and that there should be a broader spectrum of activities available. One individual suggested a *“garden party”* as a possible summer event. A student in the Activists group also spoke about hoping to get the *“non-alcohol thing happening”*; that too many events were currently club or pub focused.

A number of internationals requested more *“traditional”* English events that, again, were not alcohol driven. They were given *“cream teas”* as an example and responded enthusiastically to this suggestion.

#### 3.6.2. *Price*

The price of entertainment is important for students. Students believed that having events in the UCLU building would keep the price of tickets and drinks to a minimum and thereby promote cohesion because all student could afford to participate.

#### 3.6.3. *Student identity*

Student organised entertainment really keeps the student identity strong. They need to be separate from the rest of the London night life. One student in the final year undergraduate group said:

*“If you have nights in clubs you lose that sense of place”*

### 3.6.4. Space

Several students mentioned the importance of having space to facilitate special events and live bands. Without the correct space the entertainment cannot happen. Particularly variety of entertainment cannot exist if there aren't enough rooms/spaces.

A couple of students in one of the mixed groups felt quite negatively about the club nights organised by UCLU. They felt that the advertising was “*corny*” and that they “*would rather go somewhere else*”

#### 3.6.4.1. Variation – MSSL Postgraduates

A number of the MSSL students felt ignored when it came to UCLU activities. However they were generally quite pragmatic and acknowledged that it was impractical to join in with events as they were situated so far away from the union building. In the words of one student, if you wanted to join in you would have to “*write your day off*” because of all the travel involved.

There was a general consensus that UCLU should try to organise specific events that brought remote students in. The idea of transport funding came up, so that they could join in with clubs and societies. A mini bus was suggested a number of times.

Red Brick prompted one student by referring to the Give it a Go programme. They had not heard of Give it a Go but seemed very keen that the MSSL campus should offer something similar – providing that a minimum level of participation could be met.

Students seemed generally happy with the entertainment facilities they already have at MSSL in terms of canteen, social spaces, pool, gardens etc. However, one did mention that a better “*social hut*” (the hub for the social club) would be nice. Red Brick and students are uncertain whether this social hut is a UCLU responsibility or not.

### 3.7. *Part-time work*

The broad consensus is that the union should be providing a good part-time jobs website for students. This site should be updated regularly, be as comprehensive as possible and very student specific. After the focus groups, Red Brick actually went onto the UCLU website and explored the Job Shop which appears to tick all of these boxes. Perhaps this indicates that there needs to be better communication of this site?

A few students mentioned the need for more on-site jobs whilst international students spoke about having more language/translation jobs available. Some also mentioned that part-time work could also be a university and union collaboration when it comes to subject related jobs.

### 3.8. *Bars*

There is unanimous agreement amongst students that the bars should be union controlled for the following reasons:

- They will be unique
- Jobs will be created for students
- Sense of community
- Lower price

A mature undergraduate student suggested that *“there should be Sky Sports available in the Bars”*. Students are currently going to other unions to watch matches and UCLU is missing out on revenue.

There is a general consensus that the bars need to feel cleaner and fresher. It is imperative that the environment feels pleasant to be in. Individual students described the current UCLU bars as *“sticky”* and *“dodgy”*. The neon Chris Akabussi Pleasure Lounge sign didn't win many votes either, and most students were unaware of the name, referring to it instead as *“the upstairs bar”*.

An individual in the Activists group suggested that there is not enough union branding in bars. They felt that a stronger sense of identity needs to be created as people don't even know that Huntley Street, for example, is even UCLU owned. Another student in this same group asked the question:

*“UCL bars are relatively empty considering that there are 20,000 students milling around. Why is that?”*

She answered her own question by suggesting that:

*“The student body hasn't really had a chance to personalise the union”*.

She felt that the bars lacked a sense of unique identity and community.

### 3.9. *Computer and printer facilities*

There was definitely a need by all groups for more (working) computer and printer facilities around the university.

Students repeatedly emphasised a need for computers in multi-functional spaces; spaces where you can work at tables, buy food and use toilet facilities without having to lug your possessions from one facility to another. This would relieve a lot of general inconvenience.

Students expressed a need for printers and computers in the union – for society/club administration, for academic work, and for general use, e.g. e-mail.

It was suggested by many that the “*common room*” space should have sockets for laptops, computers and printers.

### 3.10. *Healthcare (doctors and dentists)*

Students mentioned healthcare as a core need. The general consensus from students was that healthcare needs to be provided by NHS with university collaboration to ensure that it is appropriate and student focussed.

No specific feedback on existing facilities was offered.

### 3.11. Campaigning

Some students were more actively involved in campaigning than others. No-one said that it shouldn't be an option. One third year undergraduate spoke about it being important to have the "right" and "opportunity" to campaign, even if he wouldn't necessarily get involved himself. He also defended the right of other students to campaign on issues that he disagreed with, including the boycotting of specific goods or companies which might negatively affect him.

*"It is a good thing that students feel that they have a chance".*

A third year undergraduate spoke about campaigning being fundamental to building life skills.

The Activists spoke about how there was a lot of 'red tape' in the way of organising campaigns. There were far too many forms to complete and there was very little clarity over what you were and were not allowed to do. For example, one student spoke about the Conservative campaign and how the student banners had to read "Vote now" and say "Sponsored by Conservatives" in small print at the bottom rather than "Vote for the Conservatives." This student suggested that there should be a clear and concise guidelines book to assist club/society leaders and avoid a lot of wasted time and effort.

One student in the international group was surprised that there hadn't been more of a student reaction to the recent national higher education budget cuts. They felt that in France and Germany there would be more campaigning as a result of such a significant political decision. However, as a group the internationals were not that involved in campaigning, primarily because they felt they did not have the time and that it wouldn't really make a difference.

### 3.12. *Advice and support*

Throughout the focus groups many students expressed the need for advice and guidance. This advice tended to fall into the following categories:

- Welfare (counselling)
- Housing
- Financial
- Legal
- General

#### 3.12.1. *Welfare (counselling)*

The majority of students felt that counselling was a vital provision, even if they never actually used it themselves. Students may not use it daily, but when they do need it, it's important that they can access it. There was a broad consensus that “*professional*” counselling was necessary. Some students liked the idea of a student helpline answered by other students. However, others felt that they would prefer not to talk to their peers about personal problems; issues of anonymity and trust came up.

#### 3.12.2. *Housing*

Many demographic groups expressed a need for housing advice. Students entering their 2nd year were particularly emphatic about this. Several of the intermediate year undergraduates said that they had felt a strong sense of worry and panic when it came to finding accommodation for their second year. Some of them felt forced to take on more expensive properties because they did not want to ‘miss the boat’. There was unanimous agreement that a housing FAQ website and a comprehensive student landlord list would be very useful. One student even suggested a UCLU lettings agency with approved or vetted accommodation, not just a list of bad houses.

#### 3.12.3. *Financial*

Many students expressed a need for both financial guidance and actual financial support in the form of hardship loans. They felt it would be useful to know where to access all types of finance information on funding, loans and grants

#### 3.12.4. *Legal*

This was a need particularly expressed by international students. The postgraduate research group suggested a “*hierarchy*” of legal support. In their opinion the first port of call could be law students working for the union. Professional support would then be available if needed. One student in the council members group referred to an experience of getting a parking fine and was not sure how to deal with it.

#### 3.12.5. *General*

A few students commented on the fact that they needed clearer communication from the union in terms of important social dates. Many also felt that a comprehensive step-by-step guide to London and UCL was necessary. This could be part of the Welcome pack (see 3.15 *Welcome pack and welcome events*).

In one of the mixed groups there was a clear distinction between postgraduates and undergraduates. Undergraduates wanted the union to provide them with information about events that are going on in London. Postgraduates seemed more independent - one said "*Can't you just use Time Out?*"

### 3.12.6. *Variation – MSSL Postgraduates*

Red Brick feels it is important to mention that none of the students at MSSL brought up welfare or legal advice as core needs. All the students gave Red Brick the impression that MSSL was self-sufficient in these areas. One student spoke directly about there being a strong departmental support network in place where departmental staff are happy to give students advice across all areas – not just academics. Red Brick asked this student whether the staff were very "*hands on*" and the student agreed saying "*yes hands on is a very good way of putting it*". All students mentioned at some point that they were 'happy'.

MSSL students were also impressed with the safety mechanisms implemented by the university when it came to relationships with supervisors. All students also have a secondary supervisor and regular reviews including a third-party to whom they could voice concerns about the supervisors should they have any.

They felt that the hierarchy they could address should they have any academic issues was excellent and that needing to approach the union for support in this area would be highly unlikely.

One student did specifically mention the lack of information about finding housing near MSSL and suggested that perhaps they could link up with services provided by University of Surrey to help them find local approved student housing.

### 3.13. Representation

A significant number of students, both international and domestic, felt a lack of engagement with UCLU. However there was a mixed opinion over whether this engagement actually mattered or not. A number of international students felt that it did not really matter to them, whilst other students wanted to feel closer to the union. One first year expressed his feelings below:

*“I don’t really know the union – I feel I want to get to know the union but it doesn’t want to know me”.*

Along similar lines, another student felt that the union needed to *“listen to feedback”*.

When the council members were asked to categorise their relationship with the union there was mixed response. One student in the group described it as *“obstructive”* and like a *“big bully who prevents you from stuff”*. This student spoke from a committee member perspective and could vouch for the *“bullying”* as they had been a part of it. (It is important to note that the student used the word ‘bullying’ in a tongue-in-cheek way). However, others felt more engaged with the union. One said:

*“everyone loves to hate the union but actually it is fine”*

When it came to the subject of voting, Red Brick deliberately challenged the students by asking them whether democracy was important or not. Are there better ways to ensure that a student organisation stays on-track and is meeting the needs of new students? The majority of students felt that a democratic election was important. However, it was described by one student as *“the least, worst way of doing it”*. Many students from various groups seemed to reiterate this idea that there was no way of achieving 100% democracy and effective representation, and that the current system was the best.

Another recurring problem was that many students did not take advantage of the election process because they felt that their vote would simply *“dilute”* the outcome. They felt that they did not know the candidates or the system and therefore their vote was not really relevant or helpful in any way. Many felt disengaged and disconnected. Some of those only at the university for a year, such as some internationals and postgraduates, didn’t think they really had any right to interfere in the union as it was mainly for undergraduates.

#### 3.13.1. Variation - Postgraduate researchers

Initially the Postgraduate Research students failed to see what the union could ever do for them. Once we got onto the subject of representation some of them began to express issues they had. There was a broad consensus that some departmental problems that arise at this level can be both serious and confidential. On reflection, a union support system with representation options was definitely needed! One student referred to how a fellow student had experienced a very strained relationship with their supervisor and felt completely unhappy without anyone to talk to – the student being interviewed was naturally concerned that they would experience the same issue.

One specific issue raised was that some felt the system whereby supervisors are automatically notified about courses being taken by the researchers was a breach of confidentiality. This notification could cause problems if, for example, the courses being taken were to reveal that the researcher was having problems in certain academic areas. The problems was clearly widely known - one of the other participants actually gave a few tips on how to manipulate the system to make sure a supervisor didn’t get notified!

There was a general consensus that the main union “*isn't mature enough*” for postgraduate needs and the postgraduate centre is disorganised. There was a general lack of faith in the service.

Significantly, these students believed that co-locating postgraduate support with a postgraduate-only social/study space in the union would significantly increase the likelihood of them being aware of support services and would foster a greater engagement with UCLU.

### 3.13.2. *Variation – MSSL Postgraduates*

There was a general consensus amongst MSSL students that they wanted recognition from UCLU; as one student put it “*acknowledgement that we are actually here*”.

Another student commented on how UCLU is very focused on London and doesn't really think beyond that. This recognition does not simply relate to activities but general administration issues. This particular student spoke about how they had been given the wrong time to register at the university and they were told to go away and come back another time. He felt that the union staff had no concept of how far they had come. He said:

*“Recognition is important. We are not in the same boat as other students. We can't just be told to come back one day”*

They all felt that having more of a representative presence in UCLU would be beneficial, though they had very few actual complaints about their current situation.

### 3.14. *Cheaper Freshers Week*

This was not a core need expressed by every group

#### 3.14.1. *Variation – First year undergraduates*

There was unanimous agreement that the Freshers fair was generally far too expensive – particularly the entry tickets.

A few of the students felt that the system was unfair in that you had to buy your tickets quite early otherwise you would miss the opportunity, which they did. Considering that the focus of Freshers week is forming friendships and meeting other students, the students that missed out felt ostracised. They were asked...

*“Was it a bit like missing the prom?”*

They agreed that it felt like this, although some admitted that it didn't feel so bad when they realised so many others were in the same boat.

One student mentioned that the graduation ceremony was also very expensive. They had heard through a friend that there were no free tickets allocated to each student so poorer families were prevented from going to watch their child graduate, which seemed wrong considering how much money their education had cost them.

### **3.15. *Welcome pack and welcome events***

This was not a core need expressed by every group

#### **3.15.1. *Variation – New students***

The majority of new students, both international and domestic, agreed that a welcome pack, seminars, and even a union welcome desk were needed to help introduce students to London, UCL and the union. International students needed guidance on anything from English culture and etiquette to how to post a letter. All new students felt that parking, transport information, maps and discount information would be really useful.

#### **3.15.2. *Variation – MSSL Postgraduates***

One student at MSSL felt that students should be made more aware of the “*What you need to know about MSSL*” web page when they first arrive, or preferably even before arrival.

### 3.16. *Prayer facilities*

This was not a core need expressed by every group

#### 3.16.1. *Variation – Religious students*

Two students in a particular group felt that prayer facilities were very important for all religions. They both felt it was important that to be consulted on the design of these facilities.

### 3.17. *Alumni*

This was not a core need expressed by every group

#### 3.17.1. *Variation - Final year and postgraduate students*

Final year students, masters students and postgraduate research students all expressed a need for a better Alumni. They were really keen for more support and guidance when it came to life after university, especially as the advice they would be looking for might be quite specialised.

### **3.18. *Improved academic facilities***

Many students expressed a need for more academic space, or at least easier access to existing study and seminar rooms.

#### **3.18.1. *Variation – Postgraduate research students***

There was a general consensus amongst the postgraduate research students that, considering their academic level and the amount of work they were required to do, they should be allowed to access labs, computers and libraries 24 hours a day. A couple of students suggested that a fob or key system would be successful. A number of them felt time restricted when it came to carrying out particular experiments as departmental rooms and computer facilities closed early.

They also felt that their accommodation should be fitted with computer rooms so that they could work from home.

Approximately half of the group also complained about not having their own desks. They felt that this facility was fundamental at this stage in their academic career as they had so many research resources, reference books and equipment that they needed to use.

#### **3.18.2. *Variation – MSSL postgraduates***

There was a broad consensus amongst MSSL students that extra-curricular courses offering points towards their PHD were very difficult to attend due to the travel distance. A couple of students suggested that particularly popular courses could be held at MSSL. Alternatively more of them should be available as intense 1 or 2 day courses in London so that they did not have to travel in and out of London several times. One student argued that there was a small “pot” of money used to fund travel so several trips to London instead of one could jeopardise students’ ability to go to more important conferences.

#### **3.18.3. *Variation – International students***

In one of the mixed groups there was a clear difference in priorities between the international students and the domestic. Whilst the domestic students spoke first about food and shops before any other need, some of the international students began the session with a list of more academic needs such as books, computer labs and wireless.

### 3.19. *Cycle racks*

This was not a core need expressed by every group

#### 3.19.1. *Variation - Cyclists*

Several cyclists from a number of different groups complained about not having enough racks to park their bikes in. They felt that the university should be supporting environmentally friendly travel. They also considered it to be the university's responsibility to ensure bike security.

### 3.20. *Volunteering*

Volunteering was only really considered important by those directly involved. However, not many people seemed that aware of the volunteering options at UCL / UCLU.

### 3.21. *Improved communication*

Several students from various groups felt that they needed more publicity and marketing from the union. They suspected that maybe some of their 'needs' were actually being catered for but they simply did not know about it. One individual spoke about how few students turned up to Freshers week this year, in their opinion because it was not publicised well. One student from the Activist group articulated this point about poor communication very clearly:

*“Advertising, just awareness and visibility of the union; of what the union is and what the union offers and the fact that it is there, ‘cause we’re in central London and it’s very hard. You could spend your entire undergraduate degree going to lectures and never setting foot inside the union, never knowing what they do, never seeing them. So the onus has to be on the union the put themselves out there and say this is what we are, we exist, this is what we can offer”*

The same student also made it clear that this communication needed to be reciprocal. They talked about a “*feedback loop*”; where students can express what they actually want in focus groups and surveys and then the union must be receptive to this feedback.

According to one student the union has been asking itself the same question for a while:

*“Is it a marketing problem or is it that students just don’t care?”*

## 4. Other Ideas or Suggestions

Over the course of the week there were a number of specific issues that came up which were hard to categorise for reporting purposes. They are listed below (the ones in bold came up repeatedly):

- **Cash points that do not charge**
- **Water fountains**
- Toilet signs
- Environmental/ethical changes such as saving lighting and heating in rooms, using recycling bins
- The deadline for scholarships is too early
- Unfriendly open days for international students (this was particularly frustrating for them considering that international fees are so high)
- Housing posters in halls-one of the intermediate 2nd years referred to posters that another university put up in 1st year halls reassuring students about finding accommodation for their 2nd year. The posters read:

“Don't worry until April”

Other students in the group felt that this would be a really good idea.

- Make it easier for students to book rooms
- University e-mail system to allow more than plain text to come through. Currently the images on union e-mails are being filtered which makes the e-mails very dull and uninteresting.
- **More Tables and chairs in refectory and other eating spaces**
- Clubs and society forms should be web forms rather than paper forms that are e-mailed.
- **Lobby the university to keep refectory space open for studying even when outlets close – most students are just looking for desks and chairs and it's wasted space at the moment.**