

Issue 742

Spring 2026

Pi Magazine

UCL TURNS 200



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A LOOK INSIDE UCL200

An interview with President & Provost and Pro-Provost Bicentennial

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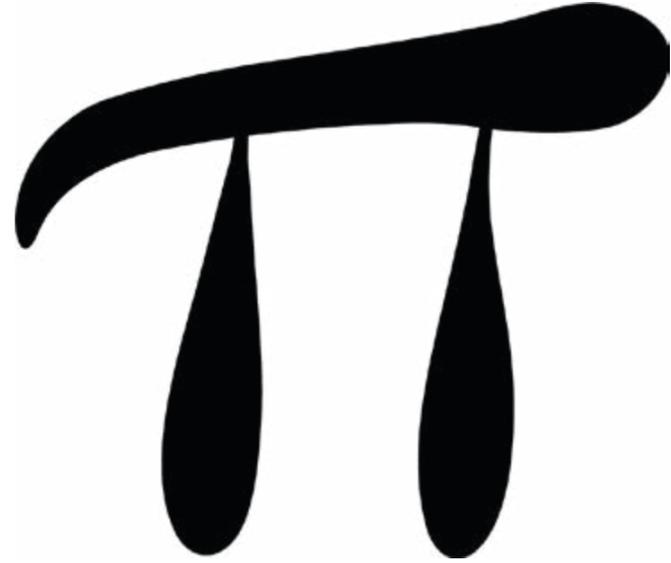
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An interview with the Students' Union President, Anam Choudhary

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BLOOMSBURY IN COLOUR

What does it mean to be a student in the heart of London?



CELEBRATING 80 YEARS OF PI

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PI MEDIA...

Founded in 1946, Pi Media is the oldest student journalism society at UCL. We've been creating current, insightful and award-winning content on campus for 80 years. Initially launched as a newspaper and named after former Provost David Pye, the role of Pi shifted in the 1960s under the leadership of its then Editor-In-Chief, the future broadcaster Jonathan Dimbleby, from focussing on college news to wider, global issues.

We now publish on across three platforms: Pi Online, Pi Magazine and PiTV. Pi Media is a student-led society, one of 450 supported by Students' Union UCL, its role to provide opportunities for students to write, edit, and publish journalistic content for the UCL student community.

Any student can join Pi, at any time of the year. Begin your journey into journalism through Pi, or one of many other student media publications at UCL.



1954 edition of Pi Newspaper



1978 edition of Pi Newspaper



2019 edition of Pi Magazine



The first issue of Pi Newspaper (1946)



A NOTE FROM PI MEDIA....

Since its founding in 1826, UCL has cemented its role as a global institution at the forefront of progressive education. This ethos is deeply reflected in this UCL200 souvenir issue of Pi Magazine, which seeks to reflect the community our institution was founded to support and uplift. From being the first university in England to open its doors to students of all religions, to its then-radical stance on gender inclusion, we wanted to celebrate this diversity by representing as many voices as possible across the university in this special edition.

As we celebrate UCL's 200th anniversary – and Pi's 80th – we would like to express our gratitude to everyone who helped bring this issue to life.

Thank you so much to everyone who took the time to write and submit pieces: from student experiences to days-in-the-life, your insights and stories were truly inspiring and form the heart of this issue. We are also incredibly grateful to our team of editors, whose care and attention ensured each piece was in its best possible shape. Thank you to our president, Hermione, for being the best helping hand we could ever need and for working alongside us throughout this project. Thank you to Ella for designing and formatting the issue and giving it a distinctive character, and to Freya and her design team for working so hard on the illustrations. Your efforts and creativity were invaluable in bringing this project to life.

We would also like to extend our thanks to the Students' Union, particularly Fran and Guy, for their invaluable guidance throughout this project. Your support, through weekly meetings and countless Teams calls, was instrumental in keeping everything on track and has not gone unnoticed!

We have loved exploring UCL's rich history, present achievements, and exciting future while putting this issue together. We sincerely hope that you can share this experience with us through reading this issue.

UCL200 is not just a celebration – it marks a step in a new direction.

Thank you all for making this possible!

Carys Davies, Reo Lane
Pi Magazine Co-Editors-in-Chief

Illustrations by Freya Lyne

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INSIDE UCL200

A CONVERSATION WITH PRESIDENT & PROVOST AND PRO-PROVOST BICENTENNIAL

By Carys Davies & Reo Lane, Co-Editors-in-Chief

If you're looking for UCL's Provost and Pro-Provost, you'll find them occupying the prime real estate that is the upper floors of Torrington Place. Pi Magazine got the special opportunity to sit down with UCL President and Provost, **Michael Spence**, and Pro-Provost (Bicentennial), Professor **Dame Hazel Genn**, to talk all things UCL200. After a brief handshake and the offer of tea, which we're informed the office runs on, the conversation began.

“We've involved students in every aspect of what we're doing”

UCL200 promises a refreshed student experience, but will we really be turning over a new leaf as we enter our third century? The Provost and Dame Hazel certainly seem to think so. Commenting on the rebrand process, the Provost informed us that “UCL was really quite distinctive... most universities either say ‘we're great!’, or else they say ‘we save the world.’” What set UCL apart, he explained, was that staff and students didn't reach for flashy claims or rankings - instead, “they tended to talk about the things that our staff and students had done and were doing. The university was less the point, and more... a platform for people to do things, and to give people opportunity.” Resultantly, “we wanted to be able to tell that story, particularly in our two hundredth year, because it's so faithful to the founding story.” UCL was the first university in England to be entirely secular, a viewpoint which in 1826 was aligned with the views

of philosopher Jeremy Bentham - a figure somehow still in attendance today (albeit heavily embalmed in the Student Centre).

Building on this element of our “founding story”, Dame Hazel surmised, “it's about what we facilitate; we provide the opportunity, the conditions in which people can do their best work and do exciting work.” She stressed that students themselves are central to the project: “We've involved students in every aspect of what we're doing... their input is taken seriously and valued.”

Also important to UCL's founding principle, the Provost noted that “accessibility in particular” motivated the rebrand - so naturally, we asked what this commitment will look like in practice as UCL enters its next century. Careful not to shy away from UCL's current shortcomings, he noted that “we've got a long way to go in making the university as accessible as we'd like it to be”, emphasising UCL's focus on ensuring education is available “to the widest possible range of people”. This includes building on initiatives such as UCL's Inclusive Environments Action Plan and improving the physical spaces through ongoing renovations.

For Dame Hazel, accessibility is as much about daily experience as it is about policy. She pointed to the ongoing building works in the quad, a source of much student frustration, to explain their purpose. “In terms of the narrow sense of accessibility — can you get around the mess in the quad? - a lot of the mess in the quad is about making that real, so that people who have any kind of mobility



issues, any difficulties, can get around so much more easily.” Acknowledging the long-standing constraints of UCL's architecture, she added: “we have struggled, being a series of nineteenth-century buildings, struggled with providing the appropriate kind of level of accessibility to people who need additional assistance.” However, the eventual aim is a “much more welcoming experience for people who have had difficulties,” she said - and one that won't stop with the Wilkins building renovation. “We will continue to do [this work] in other buildings as well.”

On that theme, the Provost is looking forward to “starting a big fundraising campaign, one of the key planks of which will be student scholarships, because we think it's really important to be true to our founding values about creating opportunity - it's increasingly hard for students to come to university.”

‘[UCL200] is a joint enterprise between all parts of the community’

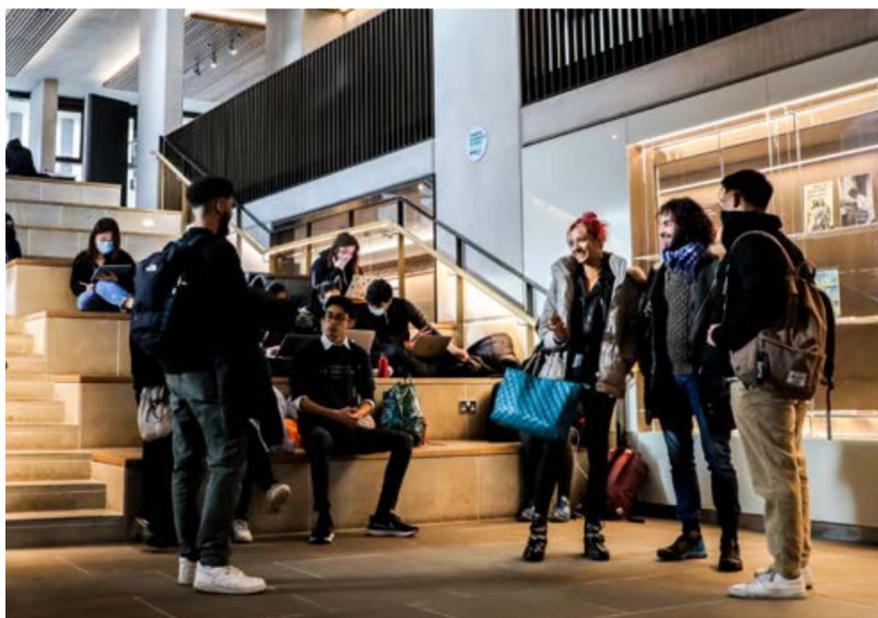
Central to UCL’s work improving the student experience is the Student Life Strategy, which was launched in 2023. Designed to bring greater coherence to the student experience while strengthening the relationship between UCL and the Students’ Union, it is putting renewed emphasis on how students experience the university. The strategy retains student leadership as a key pillar of the student community, and formally recognises the breadth of student activity across campus. Reflecting on how things used to work, the Provost mused on how UCL simply “gave the Students’ Union a chunk of money and said ‘go enjoy London!’”, a model that he acknowledged “created all sorts of student leaders”, but also came with limitations.

“The disadvantage is twofold,” he explained. Firstly, “some kinds of activities, music for example, benefit from having continuity... with

student-led activity, you don’t always get a huge amount of continuity, because it depends upon the bunch of students who are around at a given time. Second, it makes it less easy to integrate what goes on inside the classroom and what goes on outside the classroom.” A seemingly untenable problem, the Provost thinks there is a solution. “Increasingly, employers and students are looking for a more integrated experience where they get to practice some of the things that they learn,” he said. The Student Life Strategy means “there’s not just more that you can put on your CV, but the opportunity to build integrated skills. We’re also thinking about how we could document and recognise activity of different kinds.” Speculating a new award system for extracurriculars, as well as a developed relationship with the Union, the Provost seemed keen to demonstrate that UCL200 will spotlight the closer relationships between the university and its student population, with Dame Hazel proud that “we’ve involved students in every aspect of what we’re doing” in UCL200 preparations, noting that “their input is taken seriously and valued”. Relatedly, the contributions of one

history student during their internship with UCL stood out amongst all the student-led preparation for UCL200: they helped produce a Time Telephone, through which can be heard alumni audio recordings, offering a unique spin on student voices. A new grant pot is also available now for all societies to apply for to run their own UCL200—related initiatives.

With changes coming that impact life inside the classroom and much of what is outside of it, the conversation then turned to the other academic challenges faced by UCL. The Provost suggests that AI would likely characterise the next twenty-five years of developing university education, stating that “we’re going to experience AI as a whole series of products, essentially. What I think you need is both teachers and students alive to what’s being developed and constantly asking the question, ‘Is this useful in my classroom?’ And there’ll be some classrooms where it won’t be that useful”. The Provost is keen to promote an “AI confident” UCL, which does not compromise its academic integrity with this new technology.



For the students of today, Dame Hazel thinks the graduates of 2026 “will probably have a special feeling” about what UCL is achieving and will go on to achieve. The Provost has a slightly more pessimistic view of present times, though, noting the challenges faced by UCL in its recent past, such as experiences of student unrest. “I think we’re moving into a time, historically, when the push to make everybody think the same thing, whatever the same thing might be, is increasingly strong: greater polarisation doesn’t value difference,” he said, further commenting, “I think UCL needs to affirm its heritage as a place where you can have a wide variety of opinions on even really challenging questions and nevertheless engage with other people.”

Furthermore, the Provost has tried to carve out a space for productive discussion in UCL’s Disagreeing Well campaign. “We’ve seen a huge hunger in the public to have that conversation about how you live together well with people who see the world fundamentally differently,” he said. He noted how there is still work to be done, though: “The question is, how do people engage when they are passionate and personally affected? Not necessarily where everybody holds hands and sings a fireside song, but in a way that means that they’re not just shouting at one another but doing a bit of listening as well.” He envisions Disagreeing Well as “a way that helps our community not to demonise the other, but to enable them to understand... it’s not incompatible with having protests and demonstrations. It is incompatible with people harassing one another. Sometimes, that’s a fine line.” Treading this delicate line has defined many students’ experiences of UCL in recent times, and will not be resolved by UCL200 – however, there may be hope for a less turbulent future.

Looking ahead to UCL’s bicentenary, the Provost and Dame Hazel framed

UCL200 as a milestone defined by student participation. Viewing UCL200 as a “joint enterprise between all parts of the community”, they were keen to get students involved at every stage, from regular programme meetings to decision-making processes. This partnership will soon become visible across campus: nineteen students from The Bartlett have been involved with the redesign of the cloisters and main quad, Students’ Union officers sit on all the UCL committees, and a dedicated pot of funding has been set aside to deliver student-specific activity, such as the ArtsUCL Fringe Festival in the summer. Dame Hazel stressed the need for a partnership so that students feel more connected to the institution, claiming it is vital to honour the roles students have played in some of UCL’s greatest innovations by creating a “bi-directional relationship between the academics and the students, where they both benefit from working together”. From tutors to tutees, there’s a lot to learn from everyone.

The student-led ethos extends to the celebrations themselves. A new UCL200 exhibition, which is now open, had student interns working behind the scenes in order to include student perspectives at every stage. In June, the Students’ Union will run a huge four-day Summer Festival, developed with a student advisory board. “Students... are at the heart of what’s going on”, Dame Hazel insisted. 2026 will also mark the debut of UCL: The Musical, which is currently being written and produced by students. The musical will feature an original script, brand-new music and handcrafted sets put together by the UCL student body. “For the bicentenary, there should be something that really tells a story about who we are and what it is that we do”, and together, these projects appear to do just that; reflect UCL’s past, present and future identity.

‘We’re human beings! We’re social animals!’

UCL200 isn’t just a celebration though, with the main focus being a commemoration of 200 years of extraordinary activity at UCL. 2026 will see the introduction of a range of in-person academic and extra-curricular events at UCL, designed to encourage student engagement beyond their own discipline. A face-to-face “holistic education... is going to be even more important than it is at the moment”, the Provost declared, stressing the benefits of in-person teaching. “It encourages you, it enthuses you, it’s important,” Dame Hazel added. “We’re human beings! We’re social animals!”

As UCL steps into its third century, the Provost argued that the university’s founding characteristics must reach beyond widening access alone. “UCL needs to affirm its heritage as a place where you can have a wide variety of opinions on even really challenging questions, and nevertheless [be able to] engage with other people.” A key part of this, he said, is creating spaces where different parts of the UCL community – people who may not typically cross paths – can come together and build a stronger sense of belonging. He hopes that the full programme of UCL200 events will help catalyse this ambition. “Being here during 2026 will be a fascinating opportunity to not only learn about your own discipline, but to learn more about the institution,” he said.

For students, staff, alumni and visitors alike, 2026 isn’t just a milestone year – it’s an invitation to rediscover UCL, together.

IN CONVERSATION WITH...

ANAM CHOUDHARY



We sat down with the President of the Students' Union as she revealed the Union's plans for UCL's 200th-anniversary celebrations. She highlights the Summer Festival, which will include a fringe festival, varsity events and a musical about UCL.

By Heidi Kwan

This November, the Bloomsbury Theatre will present a brand new musical written, produced and performed by UCL students and alumni. The two-week fringe festival in June will showcase comedy, dance, drama and music.

"The main quad is going to be turned into a lively theatre... I think there's something for everyone. Even students who are interested in careers, they have something... Choudhary went on to explain that the purpose of these events is to foster a sense of belonging among students.

"For UCL200, I want the celebrations to be meaningful, not just ceremonial. Most of the events that we have created are student-led. They are to students, by students and for students. [I hope students] come together, build a community, talk to people, embrace their sense of belonging... students should be excited, and should feel a moment of pride."

Strengthening students' sense of community seems to be a central mission of Anam's presidency. While pursuing her MSc in Management, Anam spent most of her time on the UCL School of Management Campus at Canary Wharf. Driven by her personal experiences, she is making sure the Union works towards bridging the gap between Bloomsbury and other campuses this year.

"When I was campaigning for leadership, I studied in Canary Wharf. I never was in Bloomsbury... This was a whole new change for me. I'd never had any friends here, but because I wanted to win, I had to campaign. I did not have any friends, or a group of people... It was never like that. So it was quite humbling, because you become lonely and then you question yourself. Like, is this even worth it? Will people believe me? Will people support me? But here I am." Nominations for this year's Leadership Race are open now.

Student awareness of extracurricular activities was extremely low on the Canary Wharf campus. As President, Anam identifies boosting student engagement and visibility as a major challenge.

"I genuinely believe there are lots who feel disconnected... UCL is enormous, feeling isolated becomes normal." Anam says, addressing the common problem of loneliness among students. "But if you get involved from the first day, if you join even one of the societies or a volunteering programme, you will find one person. You'll find one genuine friend and they'll last forever. One person is more than enough. If you share the same wavelength, if you share the same [sense of] fun, I think that is important." For students who are looking to get involved, Anam recommends low-pressure, low-commitment programmes like Project Active and peer support schemes.

Anam considers building a more unified student community to be the most prominent change she can bring about as President:

"By the end of the year, I want every student to know where they can get support from, where they can find a community, and how they can influence decisions that affect them tangibly"

That means a more integrated student community and Students' Union, and clearer communication from the university."

"So if there's anything happening at a higher level in UCL, students should know, and it is my responsibility to tell them."

In response to student loneliness, Anam plans to launch a student hub, which she refers to as a "24/7 accessible community-powered living room on campus." It is a social space designed specifically for society activities, volunteering opportunities, or simply a place where students can "just sit and do nothing."

For Anam, leadership is rooted in active listening. During the leadership race, which she described as "energising and humbling", talking to students provided her with fresh perspectives. These dialogues allowed her to pinpoint what students really need, serving as a blueprint for her manifesto.

"It was a steep learning curve, but it confirmed exactly what I wanted to do. Students needed someone who could listen first and then lead."

"What surprised me most was how open and honest students were... Those conversations have actually shaped my platform more than anything I planned beforehand, because this is something that you might get or you might not... But when I talk to students, I thought, oh my god, I have to do something... We do consider students' concerns seriously and act on them quickly."

Anam is also committed to achieving zero food waste this academic year. After implementing evening half-price discounts in Union cafes, she is currently working towards setting up a community fridge. The fridge will be stocked with leftover food from Union cafes, offered to students free of charge.

Anam knows exactly the unique challenges international students encounter while studying abroad – she was one of them just last year. This

year, she is ensuring the Union offers comprehensive guidance and support for visa issues, as well as expanding housing advisory services to reduce students' vulnerability to financial exploitation. Recognising the burden of financial pressure on students, Anam aims to recruit more student staff, increase campus job opportunities, and lobby for more hardship funds. The Union is also lobbying for the inclusion of period-related issues as valid grounds for SORAs and DAPs.

"The aim [of these policies] is to make students feel less out of place. You should not feel that you don't fit in."

Anam encourages students to engage with the Union and to hold it accountable.

"They should ask us questions, because we are here for that. I want students to voice their opinions and talk to us. In term two, I'll just go out and [students] can come ask me questions, catch me off guard."

In March a new batch of hopeful students will put themselves forward to lead the Students' Union. If you want to take on a varied and challenging role, check out the Leadership Race page on the Students' Union website.



FROM PI MEDIA TO THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

IN CONVERSATION WITH LOUISA NAKS

By **Hermione Chan, President**

Louisa Naks returned to UCL in October to speak to a packed room of career-minded students, as part of our (Pi)oneers series, reflecting on her career in journalism and the realities of a rapidly changing industry. For this UCL200 issue, she also shared written reflections on confidence, uncertainty, and the formative role of student media.

A Pi Media alumna herself, Louisa now works as a video journalist at *The Wall Street Journal*. Before that, she spent several years at Reuters, where she learned the rhythms of international reporting in an equally globally-renowned newsroom. Her career path—from student publication to major international outlets - is a familiar one in outline, but less straightforward in its details.

Looking back, the most enduring lesson she took from UCL was confidence (rather than technical skill).

“You have to be willing to push some boundaries and to ask bold questions”



she says, “otherwise you’re not going to get to the heart of a story.” Studying languages compelled her to speak publicly, albeit imperfectly, an experience that eventually shaped her approach to journalism. After all, “being more confident in [your]self ... is essential if you’re a journalist.”

At Pi Media, uncertainty was part of the job. Louisa is quick to point out that student journalism is often treated as extracurricular, when - in reality - it is many people’s first experience in a newsroom setting. Pitching ideas, seeing work edited and rewritten, and learning how to respond to criticism

are formative experiences, particularly when they happen among peers.

“It’s a great experience for student journalists to understand how the process works in terms of pitching and having your work edited,” she explains, “Learning that on the job in an environment that is more fast-paced can be humbling.” She recalls how her first scripts at Reuters were “absolutely torn apart by editors.”

Indeed, Louisas’ early exposure proved valuable, because even as visible as mistakes appeared in student media, they were also survivable. The Pi Media circle became her rehearsal space. “The fact that Pi allows budding journalists to have those experiences from their peers (who hopefully aren’t judging them as harshly) helps you,” notes Louisa, “and ... you learn from mistakes and build your confidence.”

Now working in digital video at *The Wall Street Journal*, Louisa occupies a role that reflects the industry’s shifting priorities. The job demands fluency across formats, including writing, filming, and editing, as well as an instinct for how stories are consumed online. “In today’s world, the ability to jump between mediums is key,” she emphasises. “There is so much information everywhere that you need to find a way to get people to pay attention to your work—if it’s not well presented, even the best stories can get lost.”

Adaptability, to her, is the defining skill for young journalists. Formats change quickly, and attachment to any single mode of storytelling can become a constraint. She encourages students to embrace tools they may not immediately enjoy. “You don’t have to love every format,” Louisa remarks, “but you do need to understand how people engage with news now.”

For this UCL200 issue, Louisa also reflected on the ethical pressures of contemporary journalism. Careful not to claim neutrality since “everyone, even if you won’t admit it, has a bias,” Louisa instead insists on editorial restraint. The advice that has stayed with her the most is simple: if a story provokes a strong emotional reaction, interrogate why. “You have to be prepared to question your own opinions and then put them aside.” As she puts it, “No one needs to know your opinions—the facts are what tell the story.”

That discipline matters more than ever in a polarised media environment, where trust in journalism is fragile. The responsibility of reporting at major international outlets is not to perform opinions, but to produce reporting that can withstand scrutiny.

Students often ask her how early they should have a clear career plan. Her answer remains deliberately unspecific. With hindsight, she attributes her own trajectory to uncertainty and a willingness to experiment. She once imagined becoming a news anchor, then considered radio, before finding her way into digital video. Saying yes to unexpected opportunities, including moving abroad for her first newsroom role, gave her what she describes as “a huge leg up” in progressing her career.

“If you want to be a journalist and don’t know what kind of journalist you want to be, try everything.”

Another piece of advice she offers? Student media, she mentions once again, offers rare permission to do exactly that—to write, film, edit, and pitch without long-term consequence, while building both skill and confidence.

If a UCL student were to read this piece decades from now, Louisa hopes they would recognise both how much has changed and how much has not. Newsrooms may be leaner, formats more fluid, and technology more intrusive, but the foundations of good journalism remain. “Stick[ing] to the facts” is imperative, alongside “build[ing] a network of great and reputable sources.” In her words, the task is to “keep digging deeper.”

For those who heard her speak in October, and for those encountering her story through this UCL200 issue, the message is the same: the work of becoming a journalist rarely begins with certainty. It begins with showing up, learning to be edited, and, most importantly, being willing to try.

HOLDING THE PACE

IN CONVERSATION WITH MATHURA KATHIRGAMANATHAN

By **Hermione Chan, President**

As part of this UCL200 special issue, we feature students whose work and commitments reflect the character of the university today. *Mathura Kathirgamanathan* will represent the Students' Union at the London Marathon alongside her medical studies.

For *Mathura Kathirgamanathan*, university life has rarely been about doing one thing at a time. Studying medicine, leading a student sports club, and training for a marathon all demand intense discipline and focus—yet she has found that it is often the accumulation of commitments, rather than their absence, that gives her days their shape.

In her time at UCL, she feels the university has come to represent a period of intense growth, both personal and practical. “Honestly, I don’t want it to end,” she admits. Through trying new things and stepping well beyond her comfort zone, Mathura has learned how to manage uncertainty. This is aided, in part, by a diverse community that somehow still feels closely connected, and she credits UCL with offering not just opportunity, but the confidence to take it.

That sense of momentum has been sustained by a deliberately busy life.

Balancing an academically demanding medical degree with leadership responsibilities and sport has shaped how she approaches her time. Paradoxically, she has found that the more she commits to, the more focused she becomes. Training sessions, meetings, and socials impose structure, forcing her to work efficiently when she sits down to study. Completely free days, by contrast, can feel disorienting. She thrives on routine, even if it occasionally gives way to what she describes as “controlled chaos.”

Running has become a particularly important outlet. Although she only began running regularly in the past couple of years, it has quickly grown into something more than exercise. Signing up for the London Marathon gave her a clear goal, a fixed point to work towards. Mathura explains that “without structure, I struggle to motivate myself,” and how training has strengthened her resilience, while also offering rare time away from screens and crowded environments. Being outside, alone with her thoughts, has become one of the most valued parts of her routine... once she manages to get out of bed.

This year, that commitment has taken on an added significance. Mathura has been selected to represent the Students' Union at the London Marathon, a role she sees less as a personal accolade than as a responsibility. Training



now sits alongside her studies and leadership work, demanding careful time management and a willingness to keep going even when motivation dips. The experience has sharpened the same skills that medicine requires: the ability to trust the process.

Leadership has been another defining part of her time at UCL. As President of RUMS Boat Club, she has found the role both deeply rewarding and quietly challenging. From learning to row to qualifying for Henley Royal Regatta, one of the sport’s most prestigious competitions, the club has shaped some of her most formative university experiences and friendships. At the same time, leading a student community has meant learning to accept limits. Financial constraints

and practical realities mean not every ambition can be realised immediately. For Mathura, leadership has come to mean laying foundations and creating frameworks that future committees can build on, even if visible results take time.

Balancing those responsibilities with medicine has not always been straightforward. She admits to putting significant pressure on herself, and to evenings where planned study sessions dissolve into hours of administration and emails. Still, she would not change the experience. Protecting space beyond her degree has mattered precisely because medicine can be all-consuming. Having commitments outside her studies has helped her focus more effectively and reminded her that identity does not have to be defined by a single path.

As Mathura looks ahead, the transition from student to doctor feels both exciting and daunting. Recent clinical placements have offered a glimpse of what lies beyond university, with increasing responsibility and independence. She is particularly looking forward to her elective year, which will take her abroad to experience healthcare in a different system altogether. The end of university feels close now, and with it the beginning of something less anchored, although no less demanding!

If there is one lesson she returns to time and time again, it is patience. She is quick to reassure new students who feel pressured to do everything at once. Her own path was not immediate or

perfectly planned; rowing came later, after other experiments that did not quite fit. There is time, she insists, to find what works. Progress does not have to be rushed to be meaningful.

Holding the pace, in Mathura’s words, has never been about speed. It is about

showing up consistently and accepting imperfection. With time, it becomes learning when to push and when to pause, all of which eventually evolve into skills that will matter long after the finish line.



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SECTION 1

THE SPIRIT OF INNOVATION AT UCL:

CELEBRATING 200 YEARS OF IDEAS THAT CHANGE THE WORLD

By **Hermione Chan, President**

Entrepreneurship is not a word that appears in UCL's founding documents. The impulse undercurrent behind it, however, does. Because when the university first opened in 1826, it did so in deliberate opposition to established models of education: welcoming to those excluded elsewhere and sceptical of tradition for its own sake. Two centuries on, that same disposition — towards disruptive thinking, as consistently referenced by the institution itself and by Provost Michael Spence, alongside experimentation — continues to shape how students here build things, even when what they are building now takes the form of startups rather than syllabi.

Yet, long before “entrepreneurship” became an institutional category, UCL produced figures whose work embodied its underlying logic in the application of ideas beyond the academy. Mahatma Gandhi, who studied law at UCL in

the late nineteenth century, would later translate legal training into new forms of political organisation and mass mobilisation, becoming one of the most prominent freedom fighters of all time. In the sciences, clinicians such as Sydney Ringer developed Ringer's solution (still used globally in medical practice) while physiologists William Bayliss and Ernest Starling identified hormones as chemical messengers, reshaping modern medicine. These were not startups in any contemporary sense, but they reflect a consistent institutional pattern, showing that ideas developed at UCL have long been tested in the world and are not merely confined to theory.

What further distinguishes entrepreneurship at UCL is a formal pipeline that allows unfinished ideas to develop under real conditions. In the past five years alone, over 400 student startups have launched throughout



UCL, collectively raising more than £355 million in investment and creating nearly 2,000 jobs worldwide.

That process is scaffolded through a structured sequence of programmes organised by the Innovation & Enterprise team: a six-week Explore course introducing idea testing and stakeholder mapping; the selective Venture Builder, which supports teams in developing prototypes and go-to-market strategies; and, for a smaller cohort, the Hatchery, which is a two-year, equity-free incubator based at BaseKX, offering a workspace, mentorship, and investor access at no cost to UCL students and alumni.

At the individual level, this momentum is visible in ventures that have moved beyond campus. UCL-affiliated founders have built companies such as Genie AI, an AI-powered legal drafting platform, and Unibuddy, both of which passed through the Hatchery before scaling internationally. Others have gained recognition beyond venture metrics, as UCL alumni regularly appear on Forbes' 30 Under 30 Europe list, across sectors including healthcare, climate technology, AI, and education.

That ecosystem remains very much in motion. One such example is ModPill, a health-tech startup founded by now final year Chemical Engineering student Casey Abrahams, alongside William Hockley (Brunel University of London) and Lachlan Lai, a current UCL Computer Science student (class of '27). Designed to support medication adherence among elderly care-home residents, ModPill reflects a growing strand of UCL-linked ventures focused on applied healthcare innovation. Casey progressed through UCL's full startup pipeline, from the Explore programme to Venture Builder, and into the Hatchery, where he is now part of the Spring 2025 cohort. In an interview for this UCL200 issue, he describes navigating the demands of a chemical engineering degree alongside product development and pitching competitions.

“Trying to build ModPill alongside a chemical engineering degree was intense, but UCL made it feel possible rather than reckless,” Casey explains. “There was never an expectation that I had to choose between being a student and being a founder, and if anything, the two sharpened each other.”

ModPill's trajectory is a clear indicator of UCL's mission, which has always seen an emphasis on ideas that

move outward. From nineteenth-century scientific breakthroughs to contemporary student-led startups, the university has consistently prioritised application over abstraction. As UCL marks its bicentenary, its most enduring contribution, aside from the number of companies founded and funds raised, is the habit of equipping students to test ideas in public and to continue pioneering across every possible field.

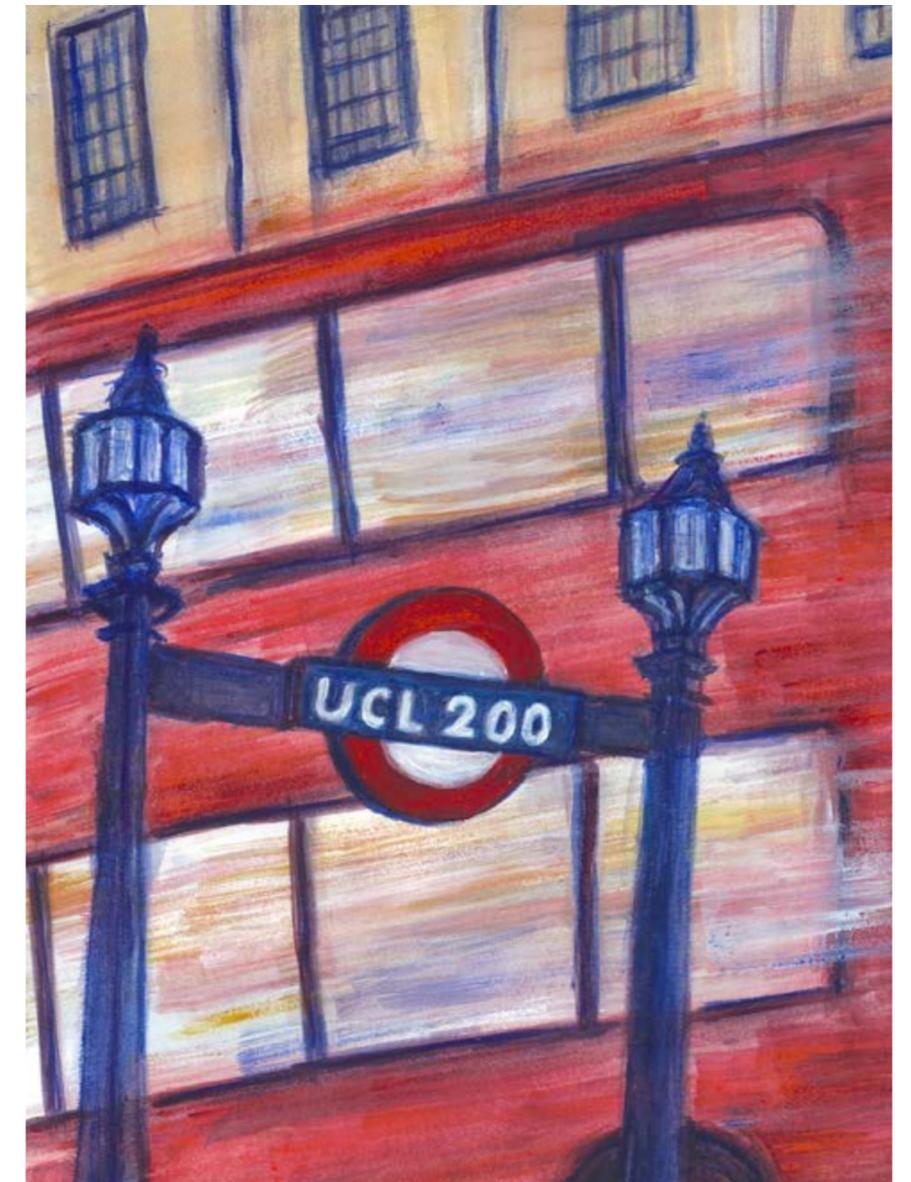


Illustration by Freya Lyne

FROM THE FIRST PHOTOGRAPH TO THE AGE OF AI

UCL HAS SEEN IT ALL

By Harriet Willars

It's question twelve of twenty-five at a North London pub quiz: "What year was the first photograph taken?" Pens are tapped on tables, pints sipped as we ponder. My team hedges its bets on option four, somewhere between the years 1800 and 1830. Silence. The quizmaster plays on our anticipation, before finally confirming with theatrical gusto that it was indeed taken in either 1826 or 1827, courtesy of Joseph Nicéphore Niépce. I turn the year over in my mind. That's the same year that UCL was founded. The correct answer wins us the quiz and the next round of drinks.

I come home and indulge my curiosity. I start digging. It turns out the first photograph - a kaleidoscopic "drawing with light" - depicted a quiet courtyard in Burgundy, France. This avenue of research soon turns my thoughts towards lenses.

Lenses are mechanisms through which we perceive the world. Despite constantly evolving, their purpose remains constant: to filter reality into something legible, to help us make sense of its endless meanings, tangible or abstract. A lens can be physical, a camera capturing a moment, for instance, or entirely internal (values are a lens that guide us toward particular ideals). In every form, lenses have always been intertwined with understanding and knowledge. From polished glass to digital sensors, they have steadily expanded not only our sight, but also our senses.



View from the Window at Le Gras (1826-1827)

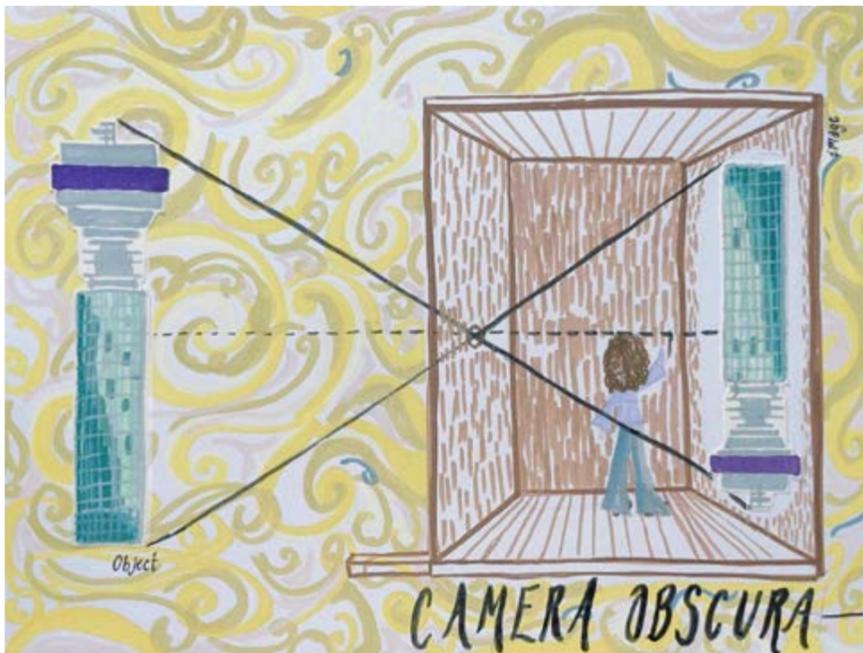


Illustration by Sarah Jilani

This brings us to the present. Today, the concern isn't so much about lenses themselves, but how easily they can be manipulated. Almost everything we interpret in the media today, in the age of "deepfakes" and uncomfortably convincing AI, has been captured through a photographic lens. It's a curious symmetry, then, that the founding of my university coincides with one of history's great optical revolutions. In 1826, the camera began reshaping how we see the world; two centuries on, algorithms are reshaping our faith in it.

Visual media has long shaped how we record truth, build knowledge, and form opinions. Amid the noise, it's somewhat reassuring to know that UCL, an ecosystem of free-thinking and academic integrity, has been able to stand firm in an age when truth can be remixed, retouched, and invented faster than we can fact-check.

The first photograph, taken by the aforementioned Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, miraculously captured both the sky and glimpses of civilization. I think there's something oddly poetic in its simplicity. The sky calls to mind possibility; the traces of civilization suggest potential. Two words that, perhaps unsurprisingly, also apply to UCL.

Founded as a secular alternative to its competitors, Oxford and Cambridge, UCL has its very roots in radical innovation - to quote our slogan, "disruptive thinking since 1826". It would seem UCL's ethos mirrors the first photograph neatly, capturing both a sense of possibility and potential, a quiet optimism for what might emerge next.

UCL's steadfastness, much like the quiet stillness captured in Niépce's first photograph, is certainly something to admire. The "London University," as it was originally known, has seen it all: from the displacement of its students during the Second World War to the unprecedented disruption of campus life brought on by the pandemic. Today, as it looks towards the future with a refreshed rebrand, it stands witness to a new challenge, potentially the most profound yet: Artificial Intelligence.

The rise of Artificial Intelligence may feel unprecedented, dangerous, and perhaps too macro a topic to tackle fully here, but UCL's history reminds

us that every great leap in knowledge brings both promise and uncertainty. The future will depend on how effectively we can be both critical and welcoming of this creation. We can learn from UCL itself: for nearly two centuries, it has stood firm, navigating change while holding onto its principles. Take a look at the Portico today. Beyond the scaffolding, we can more or less see what Niépce saw: sky, a courtyard, the very structures that facilitate possibility. If we learn to frame our view carefully, to choose our lens deliberately, perhaps we can glimpse truth even in a world of uncertainty.



University College London - Portico (2024)

A VOICE, A MARTYR AND A SYMBOL

200 YEARS OF UCL ALUMNI

By Aaron Ankrah

The idea of a UCL alumnus is one of incongruity. We are a supple mix of artists, scientists and poets, often inconspicuously spearheading public discourse and shaping public consciousness. Nevertheless, it is easy to forget that we share the same spaces in which such acumen was first cultivated.

We doomscroll to procrastinate in the Main Library, forgetting that Alexander Graham Bell once fought for a seat there during exam season. We belt Charli XCX on Ministry Tuesday, neglecting that she too danced there until sunrise.

While our impact remains sundry, this bicentenary reminds us that some parts of the UCL experience are ubiquitous. So, as we drift through the lives of three alumni, we must remember our institution's motto has remained a tenet, reverberating through the centuries:

“Let all come who by merit deserve the most reward”

We begin with a poet, Rabindranath Tagore. The second non-European to win a Nobel Prize, the Bengali polymath entered UCL in 1878 to pursue law, but instead of spending hours in the library, he wandered the city. A social reformer, a playwright and a composer, Tagore's lyricism absorbed the voices of Wordsworth and Keats, which coalesced with Bengali literary traditions and regional folk song. The result was a body of work resonant enough to become the national anthems of both India and Bangladesh.

Despite receiving the Nobel Prize in 1913, Tagore's work was not complete. Though a man of immense talent, he was also one of privilege: his 'merit deserve[d] the most reward', and so he entered UCL. But he was not naïve to the violence of colonial influence. Through literature, he fought for equality, imagining that as 'the ages

bloomed', education might become holistic and open to all.

Where Tagore pursued liberation through literature, a fellow law student, Benedicto Kiwanuka, did so through political resolve. After qualifying as a barrister in London, Kiwanuka returned to Uganda as one of its earliest legal professionals. A formidable lawyer, he soon entered politics and became the nation's first Prime Minister.

His tenure, however, was marred by failed coalitions, insurrection and eventual imprisonment. Following Idi Amin's coup in 1971, Kiwanuka was released and appointed Chief Justice of Uganda. His refusal to acquiesce to the regime's demands meant continued challenges to illegal detention and extrajudicial killings. For this defiance, he was brutally murdered.

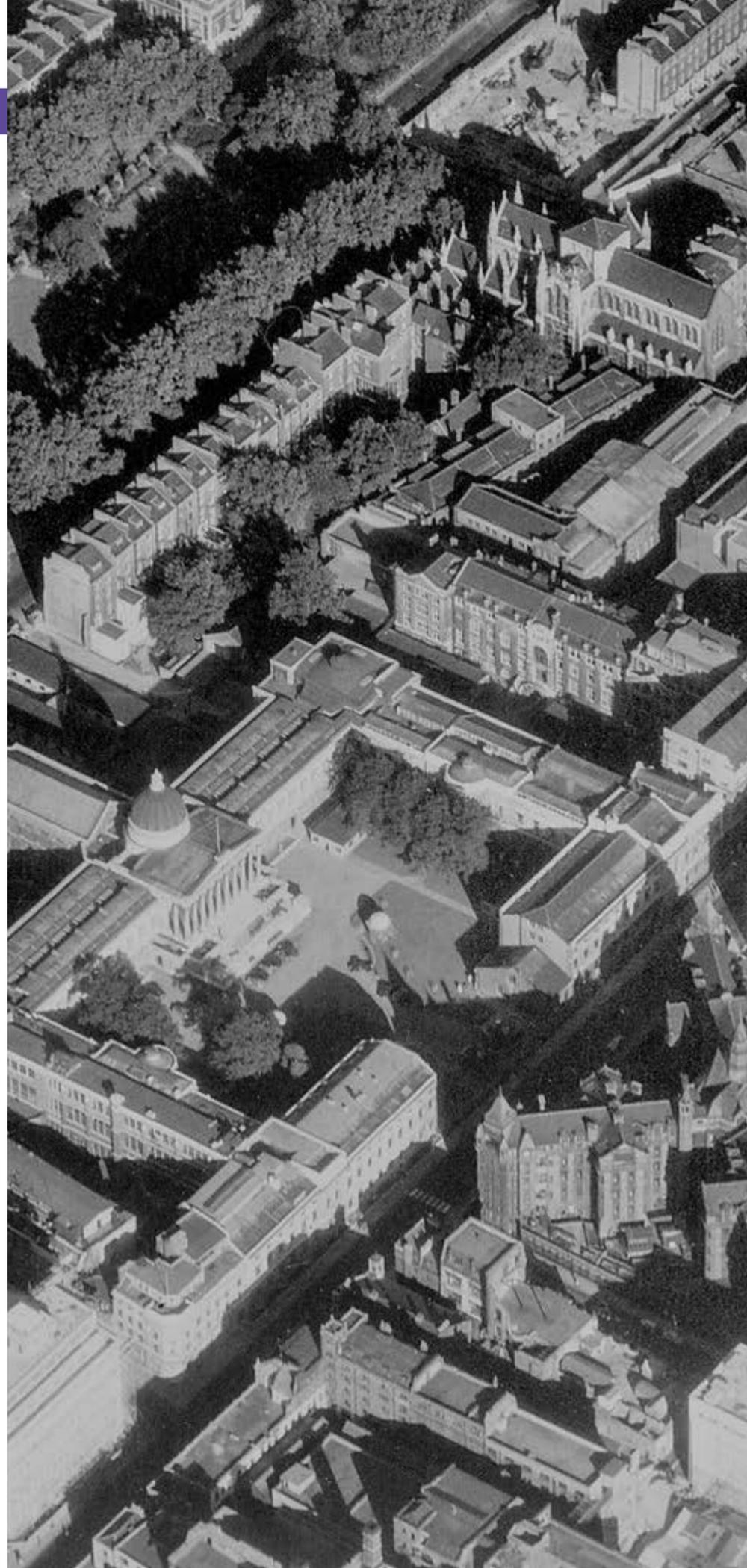
It can be argued that Kiwanuka's conviction was shaped during his time at UCL. Entering the university in 1950, he arrived as Britain itself began to confront its imperial legacy. UCL, then untangling its own fraught relationship with eugenics, presented a paradox: a site that had once fostered hierarchy, yet also taught a legal tradition of impartiality robust enough to travel the globe. In this contradiction, Kiwanuka learned that justice could be both inherited and resisted.

If Tagore was a voice and Kiwanuka a martyr, then our final alumnus is a symbol: Lara Croft. At first glance, she may appear an odd choice. Among Nobel laureates and Pulitzer winners,

selecting a fictional archaeologist risks seeming trivial. But Croft represents a fantasy that reshaped reality.

Lara Croft spent her days exploring the archaeology department, particularly the Petrie Museum, home to over 80,000 Egyptian and Sudanese objects. The collection was donated because UCL was the first British university to admit women into higher education alongside men. Within this context, Croft brings a subversive femininity in which scholar and adventurer coexist. In video games long dominated by masculine archetypes, she disrupts the assumption that women must occupy the role of the damsel in distress.

Upon reflection, my own path runs parallel to these alumni. Like Tagore, I often skip class, spending hours listlessly wandering through campus; like Kiwanuka, I dream of home; like Croft, I crave adventure. And yet, as I pass the small blue plaques on austere Georgian houses and the seemingly insignificant buildings protruding in the crevices between departments, I am reminded that within this small square of London—where a university was founded on a dream of meritocracy—two centuries of dreamers were fed, with their lofty, audacious ideas now woven into the fabric of my everyday existence.



MAKING SPACE FOR THE NEXT 200 YEARS

HOW STUDENTS SHAPED THE NEW MAIN QUAD

By **Hermione Chan, President**



As UCL marks its bicentenary, questions of legacy have moved from abstraction to a construction site. Nowhere is this more visible than in the redevelopment of the university's central spaces, where the challenge is not simply to preserve history, but also to ensure that it remains liveable and resilient for centuries to come.

For Rowena Shivam, a second-year student at the Bartlett School of Environment, Energy and Resources, that challenge became tangible through her role as a sustainability intern on the redevelopment of UCL's Main Quad. Embedded directly within the construction process, she worked alongside contractors and estates teams to help ensure that sustainability considerations were taken seriously.

The project was shaped by a deceptively simple idea: 'It has already lasted 200 years — our job is to make it last another 200.' That ethos framed every choice, from the reuse and preservation of historic materials to the careful balancing of heritage constraints with modern performance standards. The redevelopment became a live case study in what sustainable use of institutional spaces can look like when long-term thinking is prioritised over immediate convenience.



Crucially, the project mandated that a current student be employed within the delivery team to embed student perspectives directly into the redevelopment. Rowena felt that this model represented a meaningful departure from the tokenistic engagement that often characterises student involvement in large institutional projects. Being present in day-to-day discussions also revealed the difficulties behind sustainable negotiation.

That experience reflects Rowena's broader understanding of sustainability as a systems-level challenge. Too often, she argues, sustainability is reduced to environmental metrics alone. In reality, durable change depends on integrating environmental responsibility with social equity, economic viability, and policy frameworks, particularly in the built environment, where decisions shape how people move through space for generations.

Her academic interests, which include sustainable urban research and the environmental impacts of infrastructure such as data centres, feed directly into this applied outlook. Earlier this term, she presented research at the House of Commons, illustrating how university-led work can inform public

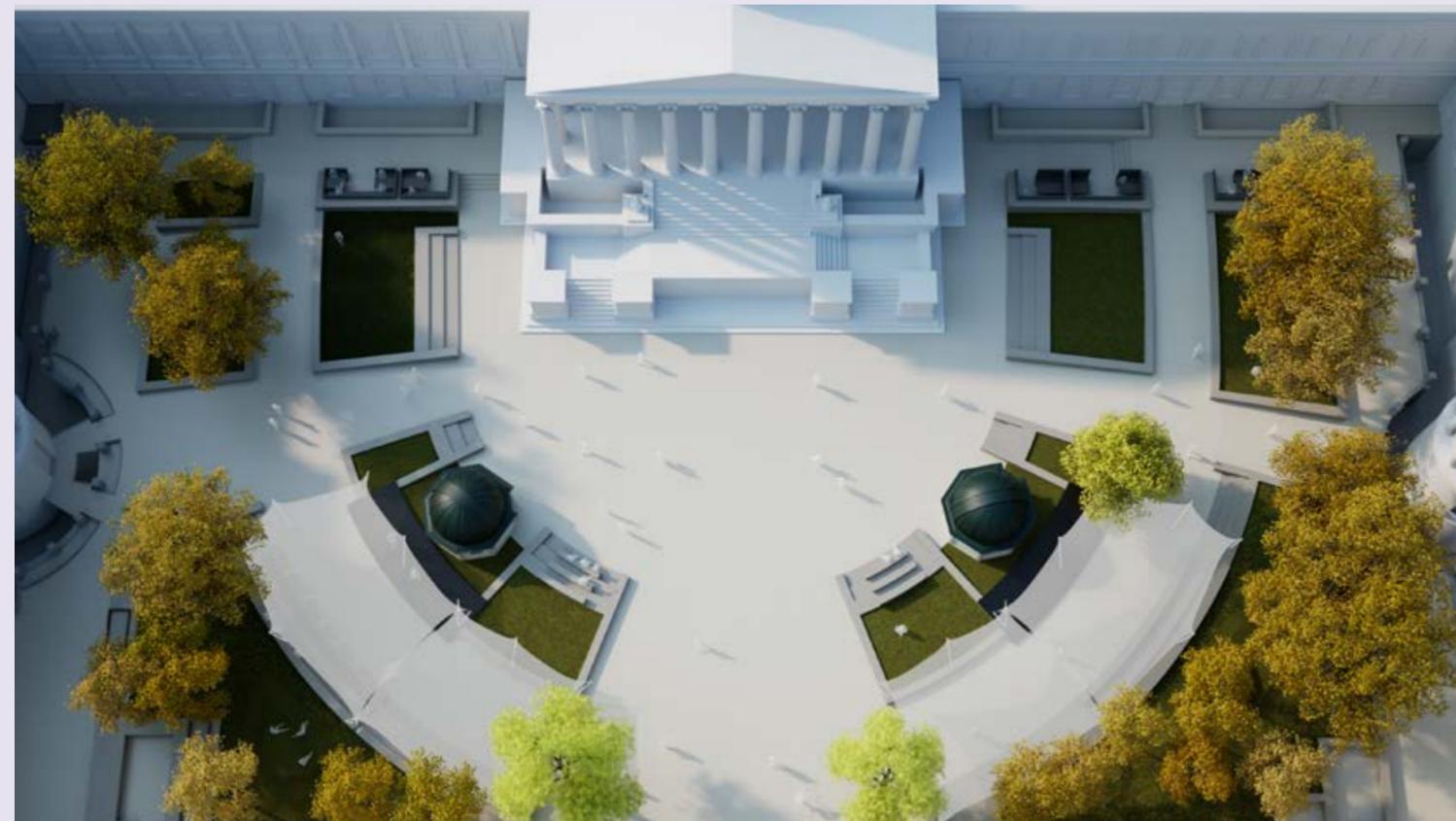
and political discourse. It is the Quad redevelopment, however, that most clearly demonstrates how theory becomes material.

That same commitment to workability underpins BNGsmart, a digital platform Rowena developed from an Extended Project Qualification on Biodiversity Net Gain. Designed to help ecologists and landowners navigate England's biodiversity net gain planning requirements, the tool automates complex calculations and streamlines compliance documentation. Supported through UCL programmes, including UCL

Innovation & Enterprise's Hatchery incubator, the project mirrors the principles she saw in the Quad redevelopment.

As UCL enters its third century, the question is no longer whether its spaces can endure, but rather whether they can continue to serve the generations that move through them. Longevity is not achieved through preservation alone. Students like Rowena carry the hope that young scholars decades from now will understand that the spaces they inhabit have lasted because they were reimagined with the future firmly in mind.

"IT HAS ALREADY LASTED 200 YEARS – OUR JOB IS TO MAKE IT LAST ANOTHER 200"



IDENTITY, INTERNATIONALITY & ACCESS

SECTION 2

BECOMING A STUDENT AGAIN

FROM CONSTRUCTION SITES TO CLASSROOMS

By Ilyas Taltakov

When I boarded a flight from Astana to London last September, I experienced a kind of nervousness I had not experienced in nearly a decade. Not when negotiating construction contracts, not when relocating internationally for work, and not even when initiating large-scale developments. It was something simple: the challenge of becoming a student again.

UCL is one of the most global and forward-looking universities, yet one perspective remains less visible within student life – that of mature students returning to academia after a decade-long career. My own journey goes through nearly ten years in international construction and real estate across Central Asia, the Middle East and the US, and today I find myself experiencing university life through a completely different lens.

As a Bolashak Scholar joining UCL in its 200th anniversary year, I see that my academic journey means something beyond personal development. The Bartlett School of Sustainable Construction has shaped global leaders in the built environment for generations, and becoming part of it during the UCL200 feels especially important. Studying Construction Economics and Management at such a historic moment reinforces a sense of purpose: to bring global ideas into the classroom, to challenge approaches to urban development, and to translate this knowledge into practical impact.

Returning to university after years in industry forces you to confront habits you did not know you had. In professional life, expertise becomes a kind of armour – you are expected to know, decide and lead. In academia, that armour becomes unexpectedly

heavy. During my first weeks at The Bartlett School of Sustainable Construction, I had to relearn how to approach knowledge: to question frameworks I once applied instinctively, to read critically rather than operationally, and to accept uncertainty not as a weakness but as a concept.

One of the unexpected discoveries of my UCL experience has been the quiet but powerful role mature and internationally experienced students play in academic life. We bring not just professional stories, but a living understanding of how theory behaves under real-world pressure.

When we discuss developer business models, I think of negotiations

with city planners in Miami or the complexities of financing mixed-use developments in Central Asia. When we debate contract strategies, I recall moments when risk materialised not as a concept but as a phone call at midnight. These examples do not replace theory – they animate it, while younger classmates offer something equally valuable: intellectual agility, boldness and a willingness to explore ideas that professional environments sometimes discourage.

This exchange is where UCL feels most alive. It reflects what the university has been celebrating throughout the UCL200 year: the evolving shape of its student community and the expanding understanding of what “being a UCL

student” can mean today. Being a UCL student at this stage of my life has taught me something simple – learning feels different when you choose it intentionally. As a part of UCL society, I now understand that modern student life is not about age or background – it is about the willingness to rethink yourself.

Therefore, my journey is one small example of the broader story UCL200 is telling: that UCL’s future will be shaped by the diversity of paths that bring students here – and by the courage required to take on new challenges.



Illustration
by Makayla Marsh

FINDING MY

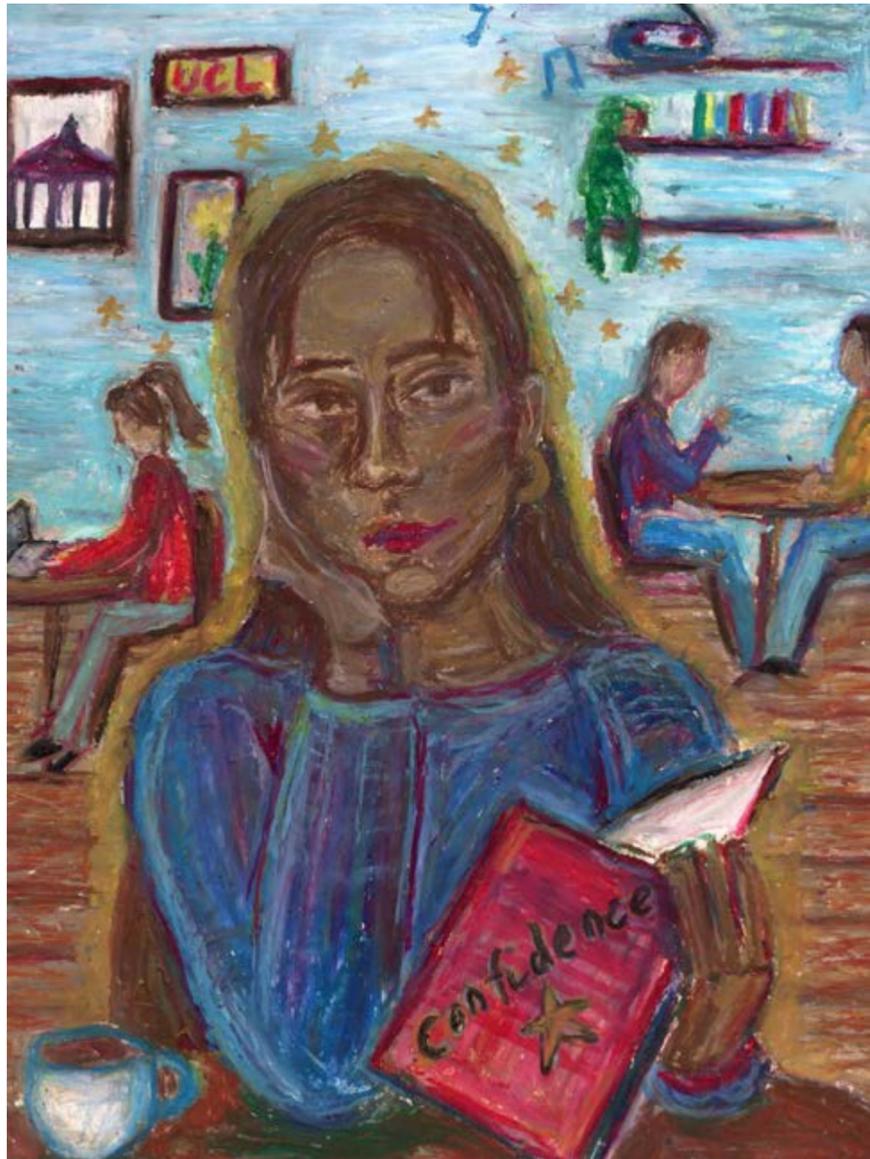


Illustration by Freya Lyne

WAY TWICE TWICE

By Nurulhuda Riswandi

A few years ago, if I was told that I would find myself studying at UCL, I probably would not have believed it. The first time I went to university I spent most of my time pretending, and trying to look like I knew what I was doing. I did not have a family blueprint for higher education and I certainly did not know that academic life largely depended on an invisible curriculum: a set of unwritten rules that students seemed to inherit long before they arrived at university.

Since joining UCL, I have noticed a stark contrast between my first degree and my time here; I am now aware of these unwritten rules. As an undergraduate, I watched my peers navigate the academic world with ease. They seemed to instinctively know which opportunities were worth pursuing, how to phrase an email to a lecturer, and what it meant to “network”. But this time, university has felt different, partly because I am different. Coming to UCL later in my academic journey has given me the chance to revisit this experience with a different perspective - not as a newcomer, but still not quite someone who grew up knowing what any of this meant. In many ways, I feel better equipped: I understand how office hours work, what academic feedback really means and how to ask for help without feeling like I am exposing a flaw. I am more comfortable being proactive, I schedule office hours without hesitation, and I seek out opportunities rather than waiting for an invitation. I have learnt that universities are full of systems that only work if you actually use them. Yet there are still moments when I am reminded

that being part of the first-generation is not something you can “grow out of”: it is something you learn to carry differently.

What makes UCL such an interesting place to return to education is its sheer scale. The campus feels like a world of its own: the quiet corners of the Student Centre, the crowds spilling out of the Main Quad before classes, the bustle of the IOE library, the overheard discussion in cafés about coursework and final projects. It is inspiring, but it can also feel overwhelming when you are trying to work out where you fit. I still feel a quiet echo of that early undergraduate uncertainty but the difference now is that the feeling does not stop me. If anything, it motivates me to claim my space more intentionally.

I have realised that belonging at UCL is not knowing every unwritten rule. It is often about small moments: finding your favourite study spot, seeing the same friendly faces in seminars or just simply remembering that you are a first-generation student

walking through the cloisters without feeling like you are intruding on a tradition that predates you. Though part of me still occasionally feels like a visitor, I have started to realise that universities (especially ones as large and historic as UCL) are not built for one type of student. They are made up of thousands of small journeys, each shaped by different starting points. Being first-gen at UCL has not erased the challenges that came with my first degree, but it has transformed how I have met them. It has taught me that confidence does not come from knowing everything; it comes from trusting that you can learn. And if anything defines the first-generation experience here, it is the quiet, but constant work of figuring things out — sometimes awkwardly, sometimes proudly, always persistently.

Studying at UCL has meant finding my footing twice. And somehow, the second time feels more like home. Thank you UCL for taking me in, and showing me that I belong in places like these!

**CONFIDENCE DOES NOT COME
FROM KNOWING EVERYTHING;
IT COMES FROM TRUSTING
THAT YOU CAN LEARN.**

FROM OUAGADOUGOU TO LONDON:

A CHEVENING SCHOLAR AT UCL

By Safiatou Nana

There is an African proverb that says: “When you educate a woman, you educate a nation.” For me, these words describe my journey from Ouagadougou to London. I am the first in my family to study at a global top university, the first woman from Burkina Faso to receive the prestigious Chevening Scholarship, through the Transforming Energy Access (TEA) Program and the only scholar from my country at UCL this year. These milestones are not mine alone—they belong to my family, my community, and every African girl who dares to believe her dreams can go global.



I was born and raised in Burkina Faso, where I completed my Bachelor’s degree in Electrical Engineering. For more than seven years, I worked across Africa as a project manager and climate change advocate, supporting energy access projects and climate justice campaigns. Over time, I felt a growing need to deepen my understanding of evidence-based policymaking and how it can shape better outcomes for communities. In 2025, I made a deliberate decision to take a career break and return to university, with the goal of upskilling in energy and climate policy while laying the foundations for my own non-governmental organisation—the African Centre for Climate, Energy and Sustainable Development (AFRICED).

When I received admission offers from four highly ranked UK universities, I chose UCL without hesitation. The MSc in Economics and Policy of Energy and the Environment (EPEE) programme stood out for its academic rigour, the quality of research produced by the UCL Energy Institute, its world-class infrastructure, and its location in London—one of the most dynamic cities in the world for climate, energy, and policy debates. I arrived in London in mid-September 2025, excited and ready for a new chapter. The first weeks were intense: settling in, navigating the city, and building new friendships. I began my

classes and was appointed Academic Representative for my cohort—a leadership role that allows me to support and represent my classmates.

My daily life at UCL has developed a rhythm I now cherish. Every morning, I stop at my favourite café for a hot chocolate or matcha before my 20-minute walk to campus—a quiet time to think and enjoy the city. By 10 a.m., I’m in class, learning about climate and energy policy or environmental economics. After lunch at the Graduate Hub, I attend tutorials and usually finish around 4 p.m. Later, I sometimes explore Tottenham Court Road or Oxford Street, shop a little, or meet friends at a café or pub. Other times, I attend professional networking events in London. By 8 p.m., I’m home, reviewing notes, unwinding, and preparing for the next day. On weekends, I go for a run with a few friends at Regent’s Park, read, and reset for the week ahead. Adapting to a new academic culture was a learning experience—different teaching styles, engaging exchanges, and voices from all over the world. Belonging, for me, means adding new layers to who I am. Every challenge here is an opportunity to learn and connect.

In Burkina Faso, higher education is deeply respected, but opportunities are often limited by resources. My parents never had the chance to go to school, most of my friends studied locally,

and driven by inclusive policies. From supporting decision-makers to advancing energy access, climate resilience, and inclusive development, AFRICED aims to turn knowledge into action where it matters most.

As we celebrate UCL’s bicentenary, I am excited for what the next 200 years will bring. I imagine a university that continues to open its doors to international students from the Global South, recognising that lived

experience is as valuable as academic excellence—a place where diverse voices shape solutions for a shared world. Because here, diverse views drive us forward.

My journey from Ouagadougou to London is more than a personal story. It is proof that when a woman is given the opportunity to learn and grow, her education becomes an investment in many futures.



ACADEMIC CULTURE, CURRICULUM & THE FUTURE OF LEARNING

SECTION 3

LONELY IN A CROWD

THE GROWING SENSE OF STUDENT MARGINALISATION

By Edison Drake

There is a widespread perception that student life is one of the most freeing experiences people can have. For many, this is true. Yet the minority of students who feel isolated and alone at university is growing. This year's Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) reported striking comments on loneliness, difficulty forming friendships and an increasing number of people who feel that university was not the right choice.

For a city university such as UCL, this problem is felt particularly acutely. The lack of a centralised campus already makes socialising an effortful process, while the pressure to make friends can feel like an uphill battle. This is compounded for those who do not enjoy British drinking culture, which can feel like the only way to meet new people on a regular basis.

UCL's scale also exacerbates the issue. The sheer number of students can make it impossible to see familiar faces, and after first year, these opportunities to form connections become scarcer and scarcer as groups crystallise. Student surveys reflect this unfulfilled desire for connection, with some respondents claiming that they just 'don't feel that sense of belonging' or that there is 'no sense of community'. Life at university is often touted as some of the best years of your life. Why then do a generation of students feel lonelier and more isolated than ever?

Most people who have taken Psychology at UCL will remember a very specific first-year module: Evidence and Enquiry in Psychology. From magic demonstrations to exposing common scams, every

week was a new trip into a different mechanism of human behaviour. One lecture focused on personality testing, specifically the OCEAN (Big Five) model. Assessed using a questionnaire, the test aims to characterise personality around five factors: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism. The lecture demonstrated how these traits have shifted since COVID-19, with extraversion plummeting and neuroticism rising.

For many, the pandemic feels like a fever dream that has long since passed—months indoors, punctuated only by the occasional shopping trip to leave the house. That all feels so long ago now that you might think COVID's effects have run their course. And yet, we humans are social

creatures; the sudden removal of social interaction during formative years may have had long-lasting consequences. Psychological findings are rarely taken at face value, but evidence across society seems to be pointing to similar conclusions. Gen Z have become notorious throughout the graduate world for being exceptionally poor at in-person interviews. A study done by Sutin et al. (2022) found the same results as the Evidence and Enquiry module: young people post-pandemic have become more introverted and less trusting of the wider world.

It is therefore fair to say that the impact of COVID is still ongoing, even years after the lockdown was lifted. A generation whose decisive years were stolen from them has been left with the challenge of reintegrating

into a society that appears to have moved on. While social media has undoubtedly worsened this effect by mediating relationships, institutional changes to student life also play a role. Recorded lectures and online resources lead to increasingly optional attendance. Many students simply do not attend in person anymore, continuing the worrying trend of missing social interactions.

Ultimately, student life is entering a new age and must adapt accordingly. For a generation that drinks less and feels less comfortable being around people, the staples of the traditional student experience are shifting. Unfortunately, there seem to be more questions than answers as to where this will go.



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THE COST OF BECOMING A DOCTOR

By Altay Shaw, Welfare Officer

The irony of being a medical student living with multiple conditions is not lost on me. There exists an underlying expectation that I should instinctively understand the needs and struggles of my patients at all times, as if I were preparing to run my own clinic at UCLH.

I started my course at UCL in 2019, straight after receiving my A-Level results. Trying to get my academic adjustments in place was just one item on my to-do list. I even visited UCL before receiving an offer, fully prepared with every document in hand, including my medical records, past needs assessments, and additional reports required by the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA).

However, nothing could prepare me for the first round of exams I would sit. I spent weeks communicating my requirements, only to be told that they would not be able to get my adjustments in place, leading to difficulties during my first year. At times, when I asked for support, I felt dismissed or mocked by peers, especially when I struggled to read the tiny print of results on a page.

As a result, the pandemic offered tremendous relief. Studying remotely meant that I had space to focus on my work and to utilise the tools that the DSA had provisioned. I began to enjoy learning, although admittedly it was behind closed doors. I inhabited a space where I felt ready to become a doctor, an experience which was shared by many of my friends in my cohort

since the pressure was removed from learning.

This release would be short-lived. As teaching and assessment structures shifted, it became mandatory for medical students to study an intercalated degree. Whilst we were in the process of selecting our intercalation programmes, we were informed that changes by the UKFP would render them worthless when it came to selecting our foundation programmes. This created uncertainty about what would actually count towards our future as medical students, especially for those managing health conditions who must constantly balance their workload with fluctuating symptoms and energy levels.

Now in my final year, the toll that the situation has taken on my wellbeing is much clearer. Many of the symptoms I experience are linked to stress, intensified by long commutes to placement sites, early morning starts, late-night studying, and the anxiety that accompanies reaching out for support. As I prepare for my finals, completing placements on the ward, without a proper period to collect myself or revise, I sometimes find myself questioning whether the journey was truly worth the cost. But when I look back at everything I have endured, I remind myself that I owe it to my former self – who kept going despite every barrier – to see it through and succeed.



Illustration by Freya Lyne

Whats on your mind today?

AI and Academia: What does UCL Think?



By Amelia Krone



Our university is turning 200, but is, as ever, in a perpetual state of change. The principal factor driving the evolution of today's UCL is the widespread use of AI within academia, specifically Open AI's language model, ChatGPT. Its uptake has triggered an undeniable shift. Students now have the power to synthesize hundreds of pages of text, scan the entire web for relevant material, and produce crafted prose on a specific prompt, all in a matter of seconds. As UCL's 200th birthday draws near, I found myself wondering how its academic community views the AI-fuelled shake-up of the way we study. I embarked on a quest to go and speak to the students and professors who make up our (now ancient)

establishment, keen to find out how they view AI, and to determine whether the new kid on the block is a friend or foe.

My first stop was Malet Place to speak to the Language Coordinator for French, Marie Fournier. It was a tactical choice; having taught at UCL since 1994, if anyone could give me some perspective on change here, it's Marie. Her judgement of the situation set a measured tone to the start of my quest. AI is here to stay, she told me, trying to ban it won't achieve anything. The technology provides us with clear disadvantages, but it also carries real benefits.

“OUR CHALLENGE TODAY IS FIGURING OUT HOW TO USE IT IN A WAY THAT ENHANCES, RATHER THAN HINDERS, LEARNING.”

I left Marie's office and headed for the welcome warmth of our beloved Student Centre. Here I spoke with Darcy Lan, Postgrad Sabbatical Officer, studying for her masters in Primary Education at the IOE, who conveniently provided me with examples of how she uses AI to enrich her studies. Darcy obtained her undergrad in pre-ChatGPT years, and she has found the availability of it during her masters a valued addition. With English as her second language, Darcy explained that ChatGPT is excellent for illustrating the meaning of unfamiliar words in specific contexts and demonstrating how she can use them herself in the future. She also uses ChatGPT, like many others I spoke to, to find online resources relating to a specific research question. The technology acts as an enormous time-saver; in fractioning the hours



spent sifting through multiple, irrelevant texts, it can provide her with a selection of applicable readings to which she can then dedicate more time studying.

An encouragingly positive start, it must be said. But what of these disadvantages Marie spoke of? I went next to Torrington Place to speak with a figure at UCL who is well versed on ChatGPT's less appreciated contributions to academic life. What concerns professor of Global Politics, Brian Klaas, most is what a dependence on AI is robbing from students – the development of critical thinking. This vitally important skill is essential for navigating today's unstable world;

“A GENERATION OF STUDENTS ENTERING THE WORKFORCE WITHOUT [CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS] POSES SERIOUS DANGERS TO OUR SOCIETY...”

Further, students who use AI as a crutch during their university career will never be able to develop the very skills we are paying to be taught – reading, writing and research skills.

Characteristic of interactions with Brian, I left the conversation wholeheartedly convinced by his effortlessly articulated, thoroughly

developed rationale. The pathetic fallacy was on cue as I made my way, head down in London's drizzle, to Lily Karbassi's university accommodation. As a first-year student of Comparative Literature with Italian, Lily could offer me the unique perspective of someone who was still at school when AI entered onto the scene. Her stories of A-Level students using ChatGPT to write essays, conduct research, and even draft university applications watered the seeds of concern already planted by Brian.

I retired to the Waterstone's cafe to ponder what I had learned. ChatGPT is revolutionising academia, the amplitude of information we have immediate access to is unprecedented. Employed intelligently and with discipline, this new technology can sky-rocket education, we can take our studies further than ever previously possible. However, an apathetic reliance on ChatGPT to read, generate ideas and write for us inhibits cognitive development, and renders our studying here pointless.

An education from UCL is an enormous privilege, and we are the latest in a 200-year-long line of students. Out of respect for our position, professors, institution, and for our own minds, it is important that we don't lose sight of why we are here – to learn. We are incredibly lucky to be students at UCL, it's up to us whether we use ChatGPT to enrich or undermine the opportunity before us.

I'll end with a self-reflective, delightfully meaningless quote from the program of the moment: “I'm woven into classrooms and conversations now, but the meaning of that presence is something only the people here can decide.”

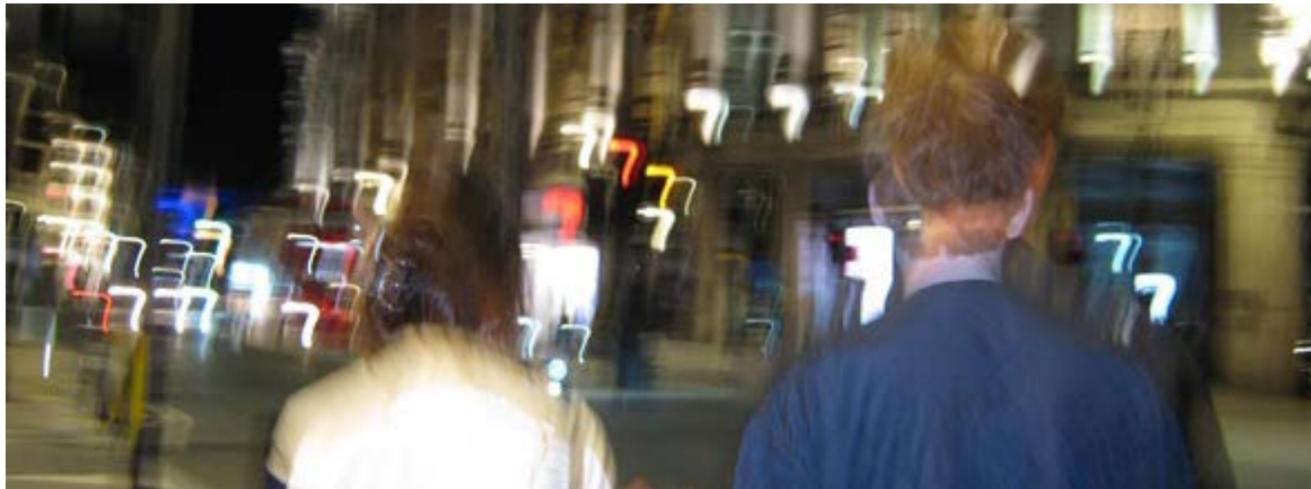
PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION & STUDENT LIFE

SECTION 4

INVISIBLE STRINGS

HOW THE PEOPLE WE MEET AT UNIVERSITY QUIETLY SHAPE US

By Jamie King, Treasurer



More and more, I find myself drifting back to my first day of university. Rainy. Wet. Grey. I relive those feelings of vertigo, that anxious anticipation paired with a yawning fear that everything might go terribly wrong. Nightmarish scenarios of unbearable flatmates, impossible workloads, and social pariahhood ran through my mind on repeat. Thankfully, none of those catastrophes were borne out. The recently returned gap year

student who walked into his halls on that day was about to have one of the best years of his life - his flatmates would become some of his closest friends, his course would stretch and reshape his intellect, and, by summer, he'd have formed connections that scaffolded a year otherwise at risk of collapse. These invisible strings, to borrow from Brontë, would become lifelines.

Of course, my first year had its fault lines. Reading piled up. Friends drifted in and out of my periphery. Cords were cut. But fundamentally, my time at UCL was (and is) overwhelmingly positive; peerlessly metamorphic. I don't trust myself to self-examine accurately, and despite my tutor's protestations that 'nobody knows the body better than the anatomist', my hand doesn't seem to know what it's doing when holding the figurative



scalpel. It frustrates me that I can't really measure how far I've come — most of the changes have been gradual, almost imperceptible. The only real sense I have of my arc over the past sixteen months comes from imagined conversations between my past and present selves: between the second-year student writing this article and the version of myself who walked into that first lecture last year. When I picture those two people in a room together, the chasm between them seems vast. The former is self-possessed, brasher, and more like himself, while the latter is tentative, unset, and still becoming. I'm not a finished product - nowhere close. Yet I feel far closer to who I want to be now than I did a year ago, and I owe that almost entirely to the people I've met.

To measure that chasm between past and present, then, I turn to these invisible strings, starting with my flatmates. I know that many, if not most, bond with the people they live with in their first year; still, it feels

startling that some of my closest friends happened to be thrown together in the same building, most of us on the same corridor. So, much of my year was spent with them, and to be honest, they're probably more responsible than anyone else for chiselling away those ill-fitting parts of myself I'd carried with me from adolescence. Stains that seemed indelible were washed away by late-night conversations and a season of sunsets. They've changed, too, of course, and bearing witness to that brings its own sort of introspective clarity. I really couldn't have asked for better people to lean on - and I still live with them now.

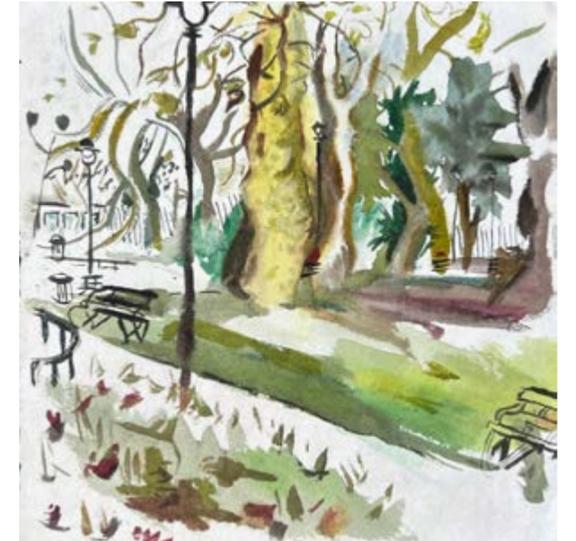
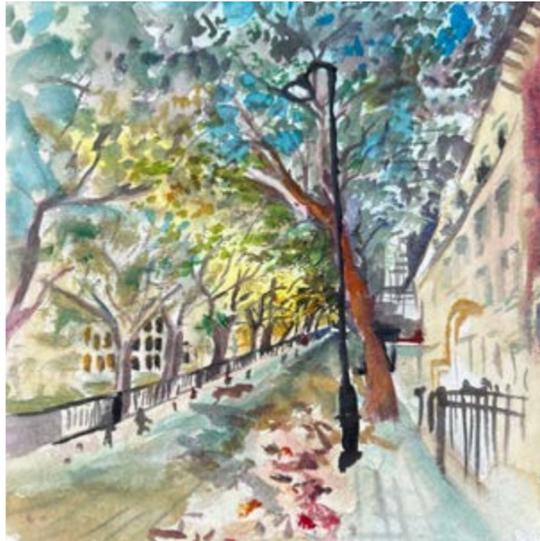
As autumn turned to winter and winter turned to spring, my social circle began to branch out. That dread I felt when I first walked into the English Common Room, worried that I wouldn't see a familiar face, dissipated. I formed an entirely separate friend group with my coursemates, a gradual coalescence that took almost the entire year, and now they're some of my favourite people.

We're all told to join societies during freshers, and for whatever reason, I decided to take up rowing again and join the UCL Boat Club. Although I didn't actually do much rowing (it turns out it's not really my sport), it introduced me to a whole new cast of characters. I still see my rowing 'sister' for coffee almost every week, and anticipate the parties I know the rest of the rowers will be attending with particular impatience.

And finally, Pi. When I impulsively decided to throw my hat in the ring for Treasurer, I simply saw it as a way to grow my journalistic and organisational skills and add another line to my CV. I couldn't have anticipated meeting more of 'my people', but working alongside the Pi committee introduced me to some of the most trusted friends I've made in my second year.

UCL is overflowing with opportunity — academic, extracurricular, and communal. Throughout my time here, I've met dozens of people I can rely on — friends who have served as inflection points, and mirrors of my own internal growth. While my degree matters immensely, the time I've spent stitching together these invisible strings has been arguably more important. I wouldn't be who I am today without them.





BLOOMSBURY IN COLOUR

By Lia Misselwitz

What does it mean to be in Bloomsbury? It is not just a question of how we individually engage with the area, but also how we construct it within our minds.

I often think about the writer Virginia Woolf and her sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, both of whom resided in Bloomsbury on and off from 1904 to 1940. Just as Virginia's characters often roamed the streets of Bloomsbury, several of Vanessa's paintings depict their friends, known as the 'Bloomsbury Group', engaging in intense, stimulating conversation. Some members of the group were even connected to UCL, such as Roger Fry and Duncan Grant. Those who were not, including E.M. Foster and John Maynard Keynes, were likely still sources of both outrage and fascination for UCL students at the time.

What particularly intrigues me about Virginia, Vanessa, and their inner circle is not just their liberal ideas and unconventional lifestyles, but the influence they had on one another. You have probably encountered Virginia's

narrative form, known as her 'stream of consciousness', even if indirectly. She describes her characters' internal lives through a succession of their thoughts, observations, and fleeting emotions, an approach that appears to echo Vanessa's painting style.

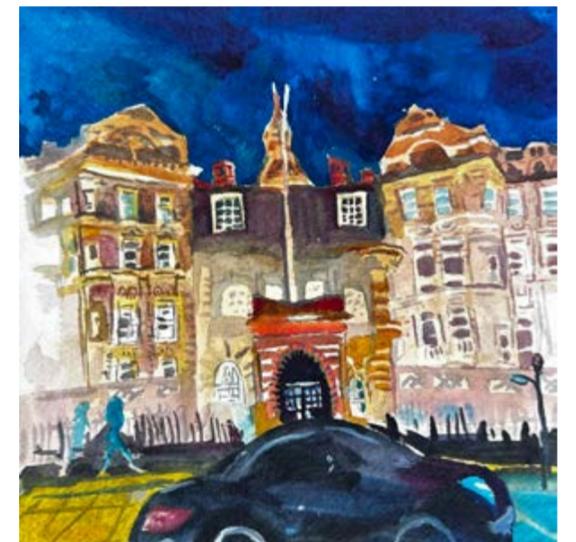
As is characteristic of London, perhaps we simply pass through Bloomsbury on the way to other things. While creating my illustrations, I could not help but marvel not at the architecture or the overbearing ornamental feel of the streets, but at the sheer number of individuals I saw rushing through them. Many of the buildings are protected by conservation laws, making it difficult for the urban landscape to change. As a result of this careful curation, even a passing visitor may recognise the distinct character of Bloomsbury.

Yet, we now live in a world where time is constructed virtually, in a third, digital space. Physical boundaries are perceived differently now that we have access to seemingly infinite digital archives and information about those

who once resided here. People and the spaces they inhabit are portrayed not only through novels and paintings, but in Instagram reels, TikToks, and end-of-term photo dumps. If the latter are also forms of streams of consciousness, what makes them any different from literature or art?

The fleetingness of time – the urgency to remember, to change, and to become – are sensations we can all relate to. Through the meditative process of painting, I wanted to capture student life today while simultaneously reflecting on what student life may have been like when the university was first founded. All of this takes time and careful consideration – something many of us may not feel like we can spare.

Though we may have come to identify a preferred coffee shop, module, or pub during our time at UCL, nothing is ever really ours to keep. Perhaps it is simpler to step back and take a moment, instead.



Illustrations by Lia Misselwitz

LIVING WHEN NO-ONE IS WATCHING

A MOSTLY LOVE LETTER TO UCL AND THE CITY THAT MADE ME

By Saniya Udeshi, Online Co-Editor-in-Chief

I've been at UCL for just over two years now. As a starry-eyed child, I had visited London in 2013 and fallen in love with the bustling city while weaving through crowds far taller and cooler than me. I vividly remember making a silent promise to myself that this was where I would build my life once I completed sixth form.

Hailing from Dubai, I was possibly the world's most sheltered girl тм. But in the words of Donny from Baby Reindeer, "that's the thing about London. It red-carpets for no one." Moving here detonated a series of major changes in my life. For the first time, I didn't have a curfew, my parents' never-ending kindness to drive me places, or a running chain of where—are-you-now texts. What I had instead wasn't my misconceived notion of liberation so much as vertigo. 'Freedom' became a responsibility I had no idea how to hold.

But it's easy to spiral in a city like London when you aren't being held accountable by anyone. It's a lonely place – one where you pass thousands of people at Euston station every day and study amongst hundreds in the library – yet eat your meals alone. Making friends is harder somehow, possibly because the sheer number of people you can pick from means

infinite choice and zero guarantees. I remember scrolling through my contacts one evening, realising I technically knew dozens of people, yet couldn't think of a single person to text. Independence and isolation began to blur into each other as I tried to get things done before the metropolis swallowed me whole.

Academically, the transition didn't offer much cushioning either. At school, I had been a success story: predicted four A*s, every teacher's favourite, and the dependable one classmates turned to before exams. University dismantled that identity with impressive efficiency. Studying at UCL felt less like an intellectual ascent and more like a systematic undoing of certainty. I arrived bright-eyed, idealistic, maybe even thinking I'd complete all my readings. By second term, I was calculating how many seminars I could skip without tanking my grades, and by second year, I had accepted that my degree was less about accumulating knowledge and more about cultivating resilience.

On another note, my accommodation also didn't help my delusions. I spent first year at the infamous Ramsay Hall in the era of the 'phantom defecators' (if you know, you know), but it was prime location; catered, and

oddly reassuring with its prison-like turnstiles. In second year, it only got worse. I moved into International Hall, with better food, dangerously close to the Brunswick, and only a 4-minute(!) walk away from the Linguistics department. This year, I live off campus. I cook for myself. I take the tube to lectures. And I actually have to make plans to see my friends, not just go to the common room. London's convenience is a myth. The city forces you to grow up by steadily withdrawing its scaffolding. Each year has stripped away another buffer, until all that's left is me, my sticky notes, and an alarming number of takeout boxes.

Amidst the storm that is handling my dissertation, attending lectures, and running Pi Online with my fantastic Co-Editor-in-Chief and team, I've come to savour the quiet and reflective minutes of my commute. London grants you tiny pockets of stillness only after it has completely exhausted you. Those twenty-odd minutes often feel like the only time I'm allowed to

breathe. They may be unremarkable, but they are mine.

And yet, somewhere between agonising over my reading list and befriending a fox behind Ramsay Hall, I learned to live. Survival in London isn't glamorous. It's not the cinematic montage I imagined aged 8. It's held together by overpriced matcha, 'do it for the plot' bad decisions, and the quiet, stubborn belief that the chaos is shaping you into someone you might eventually be proud of.

Over two years in, I'm still not sure I've mastered the city. But I've stopped expecting it to welcome me with open arms. London doesn't love you back. But if you're lucky, and patient (and a little bit unhinged), it teaches you how to love yourself. And that's the angle I didn't realise I'd been writing all along.

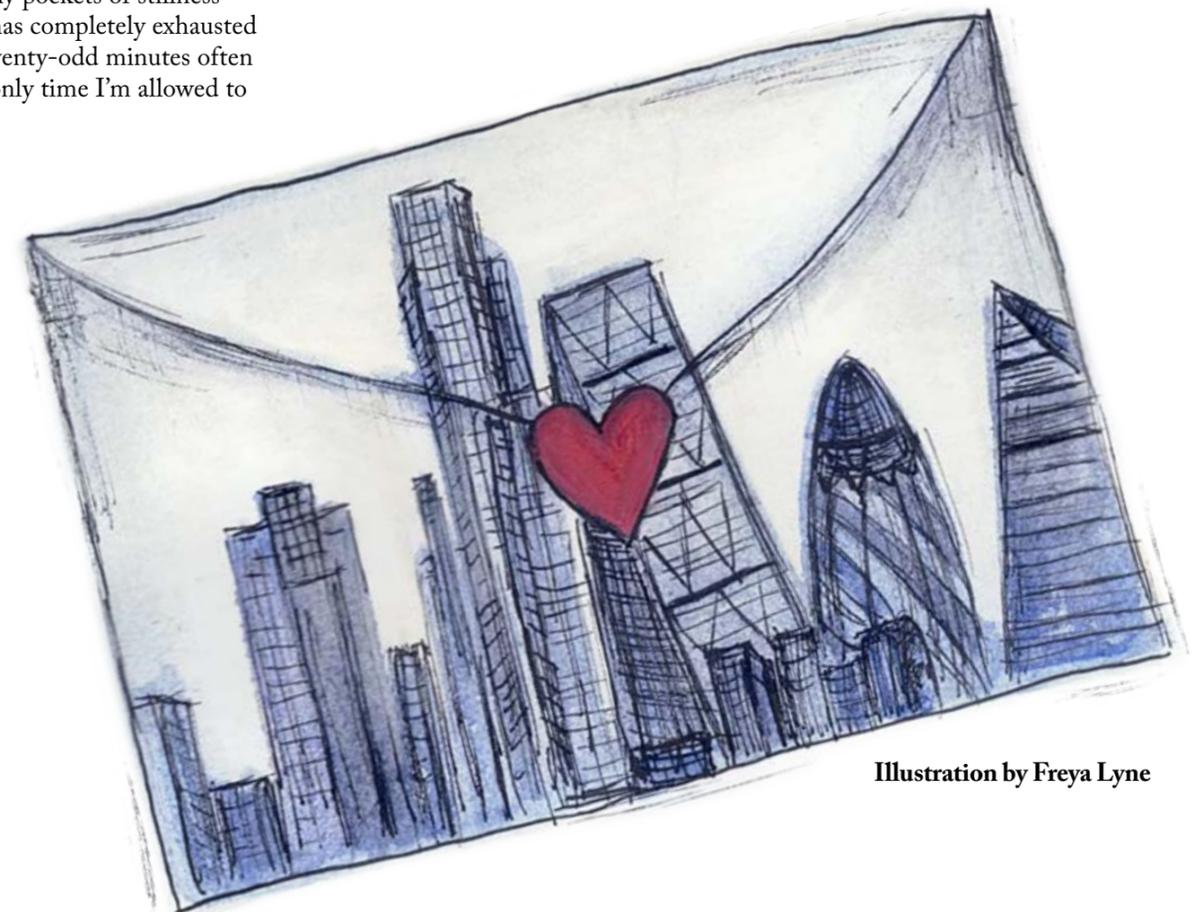


Illustration by Freya Lyne

HAS LIVING IN LONDON MADE US CRUEL?

By Jemima Corcoran

We've all heard the stereotypes: you can't trust anyone in London. Keep your rucksack on your front, zip up your pockets, avoid eye contact at all costs. When you announced you were heading off to live and study in the capital, your family probably gave you that unmistakable look of politely stifled panic. But does living in London really make us crueller, colder, and more suspicious?

Make no mistake: it's wise to be vigilant. Still, I can't help feeling that some Londoners are unnecessarily rude. In my first week at UCL, I made the rookie error of leaving the house with an uncharged phone. By the end of my welcome lecture, it was well and truly dead. Being hopelessly directionally challenged, I had no idea how to get back to halls without my trusty companion, Citymapper. I wandered off in a direction that felt vaguely familiar until I spotted a recognisable chain coffee shop (which shall remain nameless). Inside, their interactive 'order here' tablets were plugged into chargers – exactly the charger I needed.

I sighed with relief. But my contentment was premature, as I soon found that no amount of politeness could convince the barista to let me plug my phone in, just for a moment. Even when I was on the verge of tears, oversharing my entire life story with the poor bloke, he still wouldn't give in. More than a year later, the memory of

that moment still lives rent-free in my head. I've worked in hospitality, and I honestly can't imagine denying help to a scared 19-year-old girl lost in the big city. Yet I'd be lying if I said London hasn't made me more cynical, at least in some ways. I shake my head with frustration at tourists who stop in the middle of the pavement for photos; at people who reach the Underground barriers without their Oyster card ready in hand; at slow walkers I find myself stuck behind when I'm already late for a lecture on the other side of campus. I've resisted many impulses of rudeness: flipping off catcalling lads, muttering at Lime bike cyclists who treat red lights as suggestions. Frankly, I never leave the house without putting on my best attempt at an RBF, secretly hoping that I'll look intimidating enough to be left alone.

It isn't exactly heart-warming to realise you've become the cynical, rude, self-interested Londoner you once rolled your eyes at. But kindness is, unfortunately, sometimes a sacrifice you have to make for your own safety.

Nevertheless, I've come to understand that we London-dwellers have our own subtle, unspoken ways of showing humanity beneath the sea of cold, vacant stares: small acts of connection and kindness which might pass unnoticed unless you are looking out for them. It's the surreptitious signals of giving up our seats on the tube, greeting strangers' dogs, silently handing a tissue to someone crying,

and always saying 'thank you, driver' when we get off the bus – even (in fact, especially) when we're the only ones who do so.

In my pensive moments of meditation (à la Hugh Grant in *Love Actually*), I find myself thinking about the kind strangers I've met in London. The woman who walked with me when she noticed someone following me home late at night. The off-licence shop assistant who slipped free sweets into my bag of rosé and crisps. And, of course, the customer at the unnamed coffee shop who overheard my meltdown and offered me his portable charger.

London isn't a city of happy-clappy grand gestures, unexplained and spontaneous moments of philanthropy, or soppy declarations of love. Instead, it offers something quieter, steadier, and perhaps more meaningful. It's a place where, when it truly matters, we put aside our differences – our religions, ethnicities, sexualities, genders, and politics – to recognise one another as fellow humans navigating the same chaotic, beautiful sprawl.

Maybe that's the real secret of this city: not that it hardens us, but that it teaches us to care in small, stubborn ways. In a place that demands resilience, the kindness that survives is all the more genuine for having endured.



IN BETWEEN LECTURES: THE REAL STUDENT LIFE

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A UCL STUDENT, TOLD AS CHAOTICALLY AS IT UNFOLDS.

By Anna Ying

08:02

Alarm. Snooze. Snooze again. Bargaining with reality. I promise myself I'll make up the lost minutes somehow.

08:56

Speed-walking across Bloomsbury, nearly colliding with three other students doing the same panicked zigzag. We share the universal "we're fine, everything's fine" eye contact. Coffee is tempting — I can barely keep my eyes open — but I realise I'm already running late.

09:04

I manage to arrive only slightly behind schedule. I slide into a lecture seat. The lecturer begins; my brain boots up approximately seven minutes later.

10:42

A friend suggests we pop into Print Room Café for a coffee and a well-deserved sweet treat. Naturally, it evolves into a full debrief of our academic, emotional, and existential states. Any plans to be productive politely excuse themselves.

12:02

Lunch: a meal deal and half-serious discussions about the internships we will absolutely apply for by next week.

13:01

Seminar time. Someone references the reading. I nod along with the confidence of a person who most definitely skimmed something adjacent to it.



14:10

Student Centre. Securing a seat requires luck, strategy, and a small miracle. I do three laps around Level 3 before spotting someone packing up with suspicious slowness. I hover politely (but desperately) until they leave. Victory! I sit down, open my laptop, and create the document for my essay. While Google Scholar loads, ...I feel last night's lack of sleep drag at my eyelids...

17:32

WAKE UP! Society committee meeting. Someone brings in welfare snacks. The gummy bears boost my morale.

18:20

Quick trip home for dinner. The fridge offers an expired pack of chicken, half an avocado, and a carton of milk — an uninspiring trio. I take the hint, order delivery, and make a mental note to myself to head to Lidl tomorrow.

19:12

Back to Bloomsbury Theatre — Sister Act tonight. I tell myself I'm too tired to focus, but the second the lights dim, I'm wide awake. The music, the dancing, the contagious joy of it all... it's the most energised I've felt all day.

21:04

The show ends and, without much discussion, my friends and I are suddenly on a late-night Maccies run. We walk around eating our fries and talk about everything and nothing at once. It feels like the kind of spontaneous pause the day forgets to schedule.



23:19

Finally home. Essay attempt #2. The words saunter in. As the research papers begin to overwhelm my brain, I admit defeat and tell myself I'll lock in tomorrow — a promise I make a little too often.

01:39

Laptop closed. The day finally exhales. As I wind down, the day plays back in fragments — not exactly matching the plan I started with, yet somehow the day feels whole. The rushing, the detours, the unplanned conversations, the stolen minutes of rest.

There's a strange comfort in that uneven rhythm: in the way the day moves faster than I do, in how the best moments arrive sideways, unnoticed until they're already memories. And maybe that's what life at UCL really is — not just the plans we make, but all the moments that unexpectedly fall between them.

GOING ON A DIG

WITH UCL ARCHAEOLOGY STUDENTS

By Kenny Xie

Blankets of fog descended over Welsh crags, coating Atlantic gales and rain one peak at a time, the way it arrives every summer since time began. And with it, silent boulder heaps continued their standing slumber, one that lasted for millennia. Yet a small team, awaiting the rain to pause in a little hillside cottage, prepared their trowels for a mission.

They were to arouse these giants of time from their rest.

Three hundred miles to the east in Sussex, another team stood under a cloudless sky, baked porcelain blue by the sun. Across a moat loomed the stony walls of Bodiam Castle, whose past, hidden under the parched soil, they were to unveil.

Both were none other than UCL's archaeology students, on their quests to reveal history's secrets.

Digging, though, is no easy task. Geophysical surveys provide clues on where to open trenches, as well as which to re-open from sites previously excavated. The work then begins with a digger tearing away the topsoil. Next, with mattocks and trowels, the soil is

slowly sifted through, layer by layer, eventually forming a stepped trench. Different trenches on the same site access different layers from various time periods: one could extend to a Bronze Age village, while another may encounter a Medieval graveyard.

Bodiam is no different. From previous excavations, a Roman road was known to stretch across the site, but few artefacts from that era were found, and little was known about the spot. Yet, according to Nikolina, a field team member at Bodiam, everything changed when the UCL archaeologists opened a new trench.

With her colleagues, she found not a villa. Not a cemetery. Nor an army camp.

But a rubbish heap.

One filled to the brim with pottery shards and bricks, along with roof and bath tiles. A rubbish heap may not sound like much, but the abundance of building material and pottery provided important clues about the types of goods that may have been transported on the road, as well as how the land nearby was used. One tile

was quite extraordinary: it contained a complete Classis Britannica stamp, the insignia of the Roman navy. While it is known that a Roman fleet patrolled the English Strait and North Sea, the tile, found inland on its own, provokes countless new questions about how the Roman Navy functioned in England.

While digging took up most of the day, it was not all that happened. Post—excavation work—scrubbing artefacts with a toothbrush and stick—took place on the sidelines, with occasional visitors dropping in. Nights were filled with the blaze of a campfire surrounded by tents, beers in hand, dinner simmering on a portable gas stove, frisbees flying through the night air... and a make-shift bucket shower.

On the other side of Britain, the crags and dales of Wales lay home to another past. There, the team wandered their way across the mountains from site to site, hiking rough tracks with trowels on their back. Some days were spent around Stone Age burial chambers, others digging up Neolithic henges. Divided up into sections dubbed “features”, they dug through the mud together, everyone helping finish one another's work till the day was done,

with kettles of tea and biscuits by their side. “They'd always have my back at work, and I would have theirs,” Illia, one of the trainee archaeologists in Wales, told me.

And this extended after the day's work was over, when a few decided to hike back to base camp. In the midst of a downpour, they helped each other scale ravines, cross cliffside trails and dodge an angry bull—all with trowels in tow.

As day slowly slipped into night and the rain ceased, the team gathered around a bonfire. And bit by bit, the flame rose, illuminating not only a huddled ring of faces, but also memories.

Memories of trekking together towards a sun descending from a rose-tinted Neolithic enclosure. Memories of waiting for one another to finish—whether that be taking photos or heaving artefacts out of a waterlogged hole. Memories of tea and biscuits while hiding from a downpour in an abandoned kiln. And of all those, memories from Wales, Bodiam or even further afield, to take home on a train—with artefacts and field reports, alongside colleagues.

ON A JOURNEY



TO MAKE FRIENDS

By Tilak Goswami

UCL is a large university, perhaps intimidatingly large. I think this now, but not when I started as a Fresher some months ago. Bright-eyed and bushy tailed, I bought into the dream that I would instantly meet people, make friends and create memories.

Then Welcome Week started. I felt immediately alone; alone in a way I never knew I could feel. Mere hours in and groups had already formed, gossiping and bantering as if they had known each other for a lifetime. I thought about inserting myself into their groups, yet to no avail. I didn't know what to say, and by the time I derived a statistically optimal statement which would be (hopefully) mildly humorous or interesting, the conversation had moved on. I would overthink about my delivery, accidentally offending someone, coming off as too aggressive or loud. What is wrong with me? Why is everyone making friends, and I'm not? Am I the only person in this massive university that feels alone? Why me?

So, I researched. I watched countless YouTube videos on how to be more social, how to approach people, the right thing to say. "Ask questions. Actively listen to their answers. Remember past conversations and bring up those topics". All good in theory, but in practice I felt nervous, uncomfortable, and awkward at the thought of just walking up to someone and talking to them, or approaching someone I remembered speaking to

previously, because now they're in a group, and groups are intimidating, terrifying even. Perhaps they'd think me ugly, or awkward, unlikable, or the grand slam of all three. These intrusive thoughts led to inaction, and inaction led to watching the same old videos, which just led to further inaction: a perpetual cycle of misery.

I talked to my sixth form friends. "Go to socials! You'll find people with similar interests! That's how I met my mates", they would say. Except I was going to socials. I did see people with similar interests. But that was the problem: I only saw them. I heard them, or more precisely overheard them. They were having interesting conversations, about things I knew about, bands I loved, experiences that resonated with me. But I couldn't bring myself to talk to them and contribute in their discussions. "Oh, they probably know each other, they're second years, or third years, or postgrads, and if I talk to them, that's just weird", I'd think to myself. And that perpetual cycle of inaction would spin again.

I'd like to say there was a lightbulb moment, where I met the perfect friend for me, but I'd be lying. I messaged many people that I knew and didn't know, but just one person messaged back properly, and this built my confidence to talk to more people in person and online.

How has my journey been going? I've made some friends, I don't know if we're a friend group, but we are a group

of friends. I'd recommend joining a society - just one or two will do. Participate in discussions on the group chats, seek out people who seem interesting, and DM them; people are more open to making new connections than you might think. Apply to join the committee when elections open (shout out to my emos and metalheads!).

Why am I writing this piece? Because I know what it feels like, when you're walking on the streets around campus, and everyone you pass is talking, laughing, enjoying the company of others - you blame yourself. I wouldn't wish that feeling on my worst enemy. No one deserves to feel alone. No one deserves to watch the world go by, giving in to the thought that you will be stuck like this - alone, isolated, solo - for the next 3 years.

So, dear reader, I issue a call to action. Go to your lectures, seminars, tutorials, and scan the room. If you see someone sitting on their own looking glum and withdrawn, walk up to them and introduce yourself. We introverts, we socially awkward humans, we struggle to make the first move. So, please take the initiative. Help us feel seen, heard and spoken to, and I guarantee we will pay it back tenfold, hundredfold in loyalty, understanding and good vibes.

LONDON IN LAYERS

MY UCL STORY

By Lillie-Rose Lenga-Kroma

18-year-old me arrived in Bloomsbury as the kind of girl who whispered more than she spoke. Someone who felt on the verge of becoming something — but didn't actually know what. The post-lecture crowds swallowed me up and I let them. In the rushing tide of people, I felt both lost and found, as if London were beginning to wrap itself around me in ways I didn't yet understand.

I thought I was there simply to earn my degree, tick off deadlines, and go. What I couldn't have known was that UCL would become a kind of mirror, reflecting back endless versions of myself that I'd never dared to imagine. I didn't know that the anxious girl gripping her Welcome tote bag would grow into someone steadier, surer, and fuller.

Some of my happiest moments at UCL happened in the corners of the campus. Mid-mornings at Tamini or Fortitude clutching a gooey cinnamon bun or date-pistachio pastry became little rituals of comfort. All-nighters at the Student Centre and mind-numbing hours at Senate House Library taught

me joy in the shared struggle of uni students. As time went on, I found the little spaces and communities that became my sanctuaries.

The Yoga Society was my first discovery. Most days, it felt like the only quiet corner on a campus that never stopped moving. Lying on a mat in the middle of the studio, I could let go of everything - the endless tutorial essays, the hum of campus life, the nagging feeling that I wasn't doing enough. It was about learning to breathe again, and finding calm within the chaos.

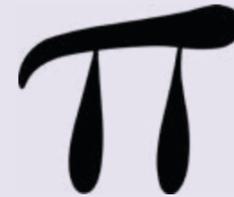
Pi Media, on the other hand, was a loud kind of sanctuary. It was where I found a voice I didn't know I had. Whether it was the thrill of recording a last-minute interview, or dashing through the rain in Soho snapping our promo pictures, I felt I'd been handed the microphone I'd spent my whole life waiting for. I felt capable of expressing myself and sharing the stories I wanted to tell.

Then there was Rare FM, which felt entirely different again. Sat in the

studio with my voice echoing through the microphone, I realised I could create something that was entirely mine. There's something thrilling about sharing your soul with a live audience. It makes you confront just how awkward and imperfect you actually are, and it's strangely freeing.

I think that's the most extraordinary part. University shouldn't just be about earning grades and surviving until reading week. It's about discovering who you are when the familiar and safe is gone. London, and UCL, have given me that. Now, with two years behind me, I can step forward into the next chapter with a little more courage and a lot more gratitude.

I've learned to treasure the small moments that stitch together my student life. These fragments, seemingly mundane, are what has made my uni experience unforgettable. They've taught me to savour life as it comes. As I walk around campus now, I do so differently than I did on my first day. I belong in a way that's hard to explain and rather impossible to ignore.



Pi Magazine

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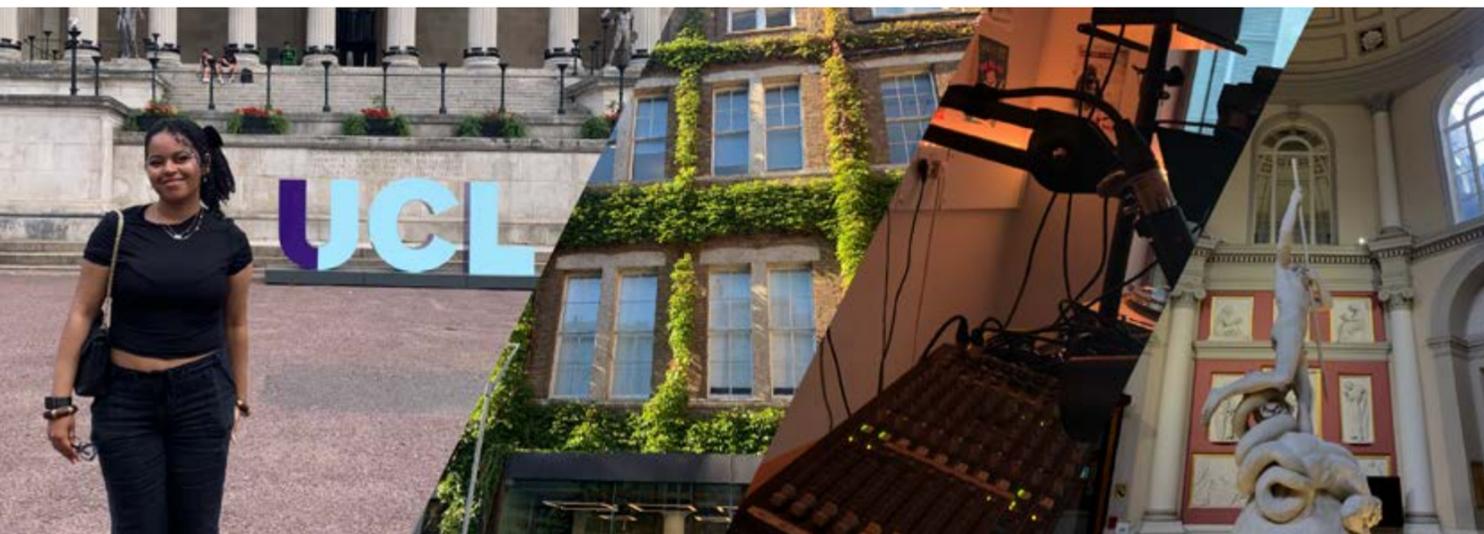
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