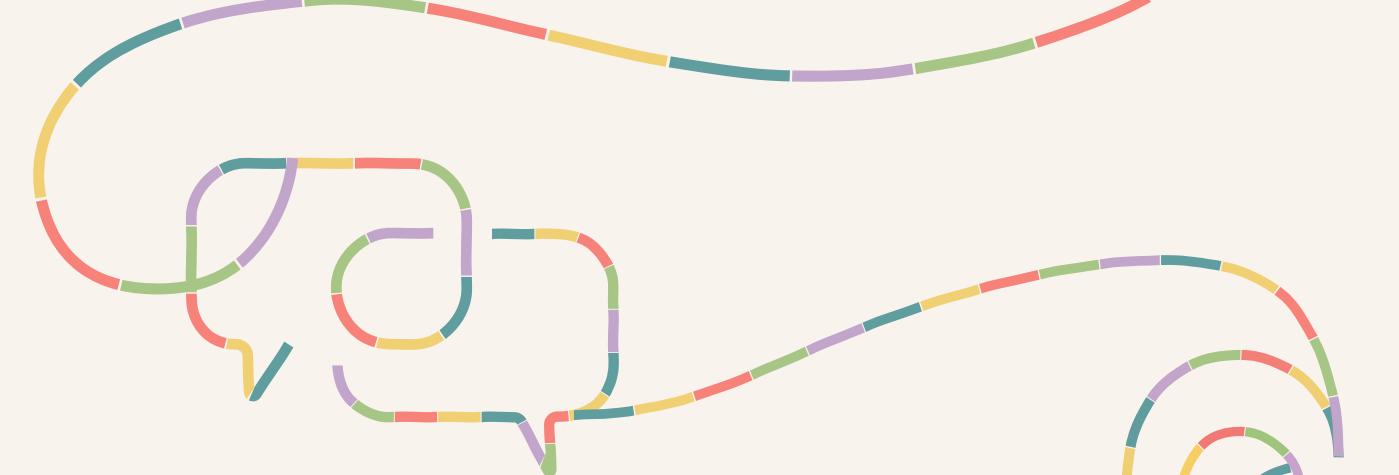


# Making Connections

Staff Voice in Decision-Making  
and Governance at  
University of the Arts London



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# Contents

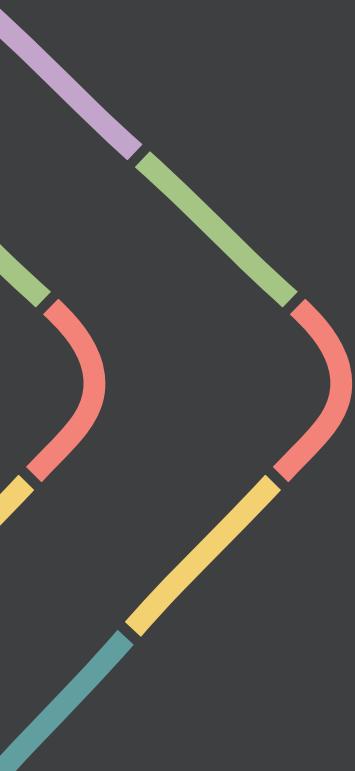
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<b>Foreword</b>	04	<b>Design</b>	94
<b>Authorship &amp; Acknowledgements</b>	06	Methodology in Design Phase (Co-Design, Testing, Prototyping)	96
<b>Executive Summary</b>	10	Prototyping	126
<b>Introduction</b>	16	Insights from Design	134
What is Staff Voice	18		
Guiding Principles	24		
Overall Methodology	26		
Methods by Phase	32		
<b>Discovery</b>	34	<b>Conclusion</b>	136
Literature Review	36	Limitations	138
Desk Research	46	Next Steps and Implementation	140
Primary Research	76	Reflection	143
<b>Biographies</b>	148		
<b>Bibliography &amp; References</b>	150		

# Foreword

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**Nigel Ball | Karen Gooday**



The *Making Connections* project stands out for its carefully planned engagement, constant reflectiveness, and continuous openness in terms of both participation and outputs. Everyone at UAL should be proud of this project, which is an examination of our own practices by our own academics.

The trust, relationships, and structures built through this research provide a foundation for piloting and implementing improved staff voice mechanisms in the next academic year. With continued partnership across colleges and central teams, we have the chance to embed staff voice more deeply into UAL's governance and culture.

We believe this research has laid important foundations for understanding how staff voice can be better supported at UAL. These findings represent not just valuable insights, but also an opportunity to be more ambitious about changes that can be pursued together. The proposed concepts in this report are therefore best seen as a starting point for a longer journey—one that will continue into the next academic year and beyond, in partnership with teams and departments across UAL.

The evidence is clear that improving staff voice increases employee engagement, wellbeing, productivity and retention. These are the foundation stones of everything we aim to achieve as a university. Involving each other in decision making is something that all of us who work in the university must make a strong commitment to.

That being said, it is clear that the onus should be on managers and leaders to listen, not just on staff to speak up. As this project clearly demonstrates, many of our staff already strive to get their voice heard. Many more would if the right opportunities were presented. The *Making Connections* project takes UAL a big step forward on this journey.

We would like to thank Silvia Grimaldi, Veron Lai and Jeffrey Doruff at the Service Futures Lab in London College of Communication, and Loretta Mao in the Social Purpose Lab, for their incredibly thorough work which has led to such a rich and well-evidenced set of outputs. We greatly look forward to working across UAL to enact these ideas in the coming months and years.

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**Karen Gooday**  
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## Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the dedication, openness, and generosity of many individuals across University of the Arts London.

We are especially grateful to our sponsors and leadership champions, as well as colleagues whose support and trust helped move this work forward:

### **Polly Mackenzie**

Former Chief Social Purpose Officer

### **Karen Gooday**

Chief People Officer

### **Trevor Keeble**

Pro Vice Chancellor, Research Knowledge Exchange and Enterprise

### **Nigel Ball**

Director, Social Purpose Lab

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### **Leonie Saywell**

Associate Director of HR Culture

Thank you to all colleagues who took part in co-design workshops, interviews, testing sessions, and feedback activities.

Your candour, critical reflections, and willingness to engage helped shape a richer, more grounded picture of staff voice at UAL.

Special thanks to those who attended sessions at LCC and CSM, and to everyone who participated asynchronously across the university.

We also extend appreciation to the Champions and local organiser for Champion Forums who helped facilitate participation and ensure the project was inclusive and representative.

### **LGBTQ+ CHAMPIONS**

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**To the many staff who contributed valuable ideas, critiques, and stories but preferred to remain unnamed, we hear you and hold your contributions with care.**

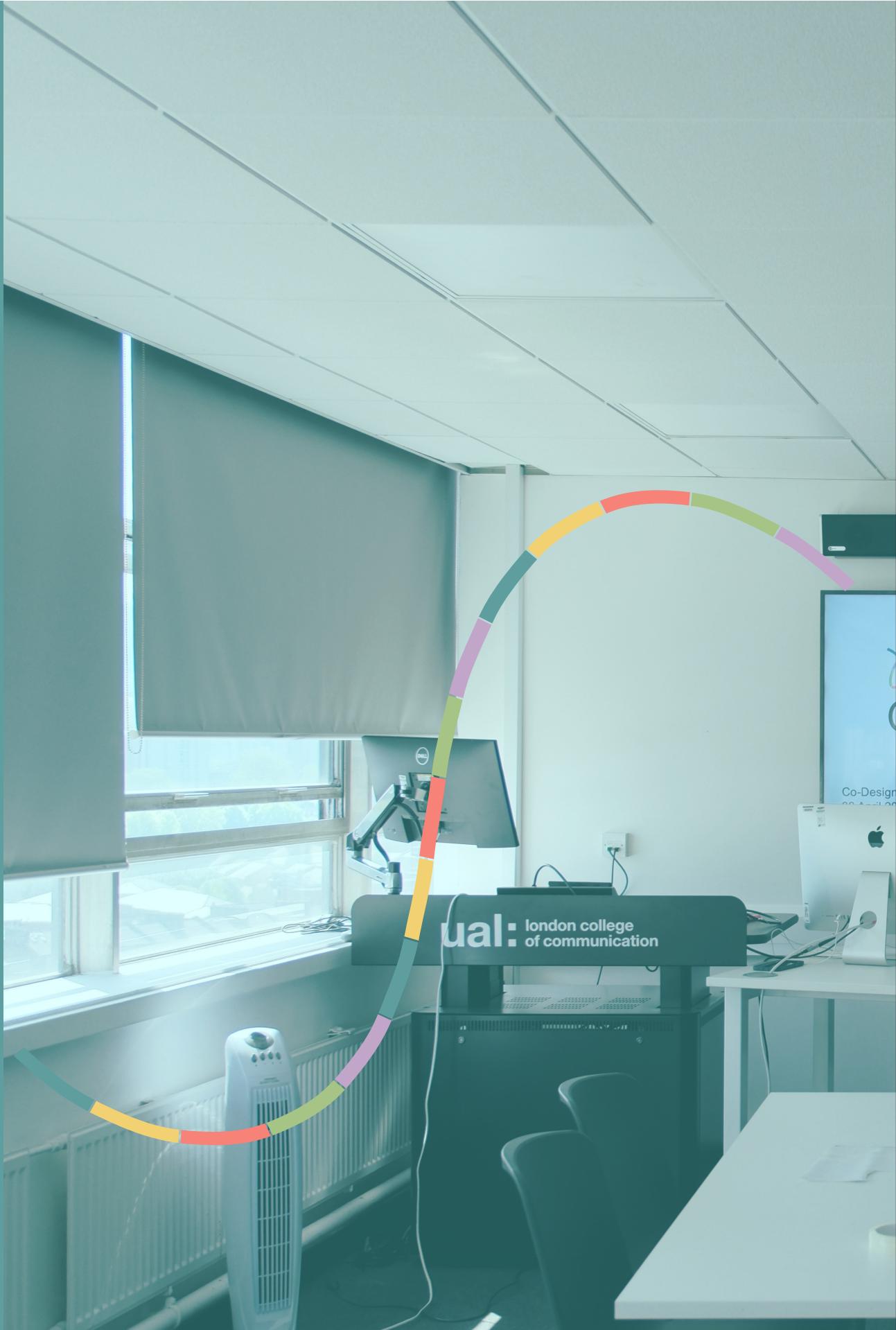
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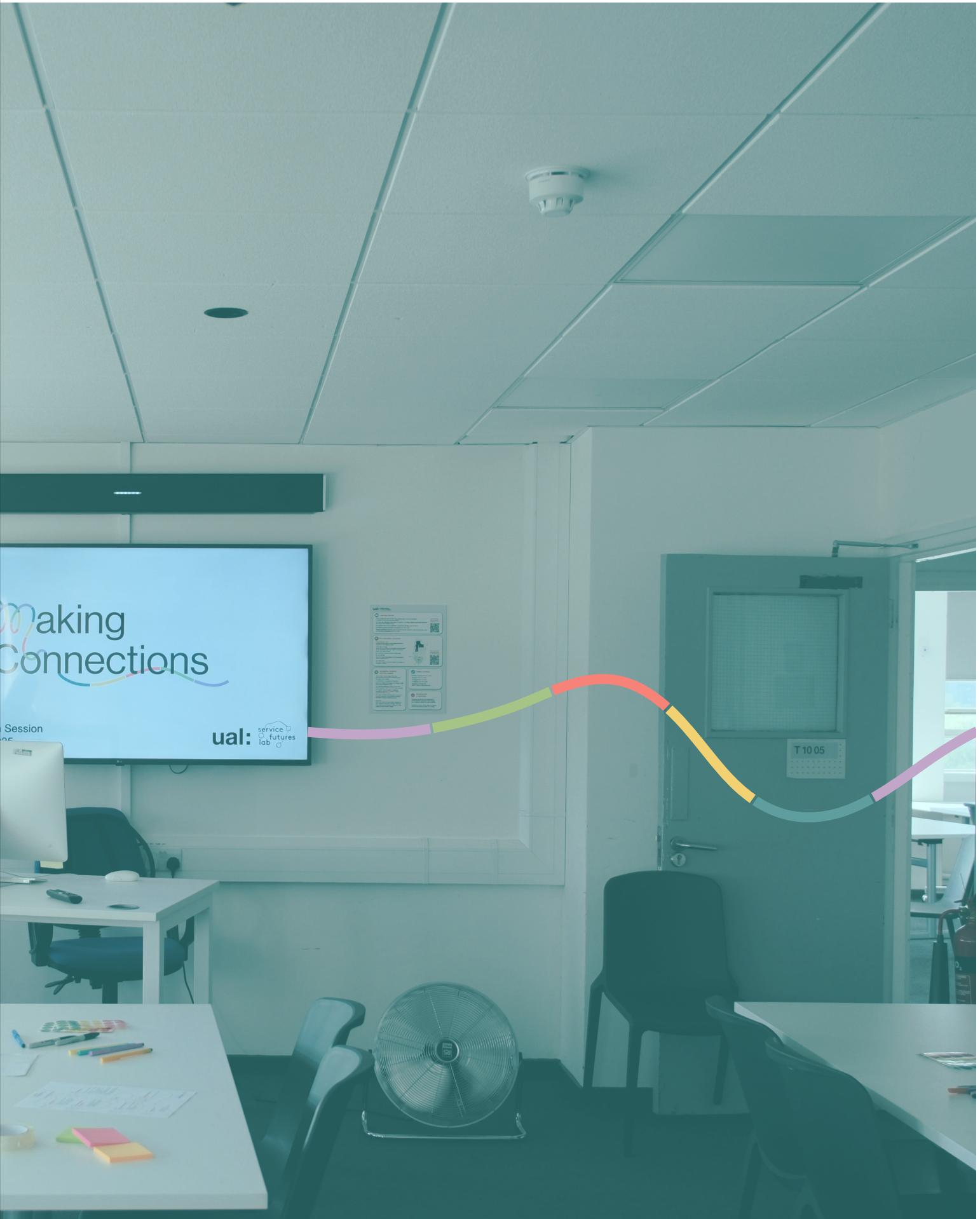
This report is a collective effort. Its insights and proposals belong not just to a project team, but to the wider UAL community committed to making meaningful connections between staff voice and institutional change.



03

# Executive Summary





## Context and Brief

UAL's Social Purpose Lab, in collaboration with the People and Culture Group, commissioned a service design review of the infrastructure, processes, and systems for informal staff voice to the Service Futures Lab. The goal was to strengthen connections between the grassroots energy, ambition, and imagination of UAL's staff community and the University's decision-making processes. This project aimed to accelerate UAL's ability to achieve its social purpose goals, particularly in areas of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), and was expected to define a methodology to replicate the same process towards Social and Environmental Sustainability.

## Project Background

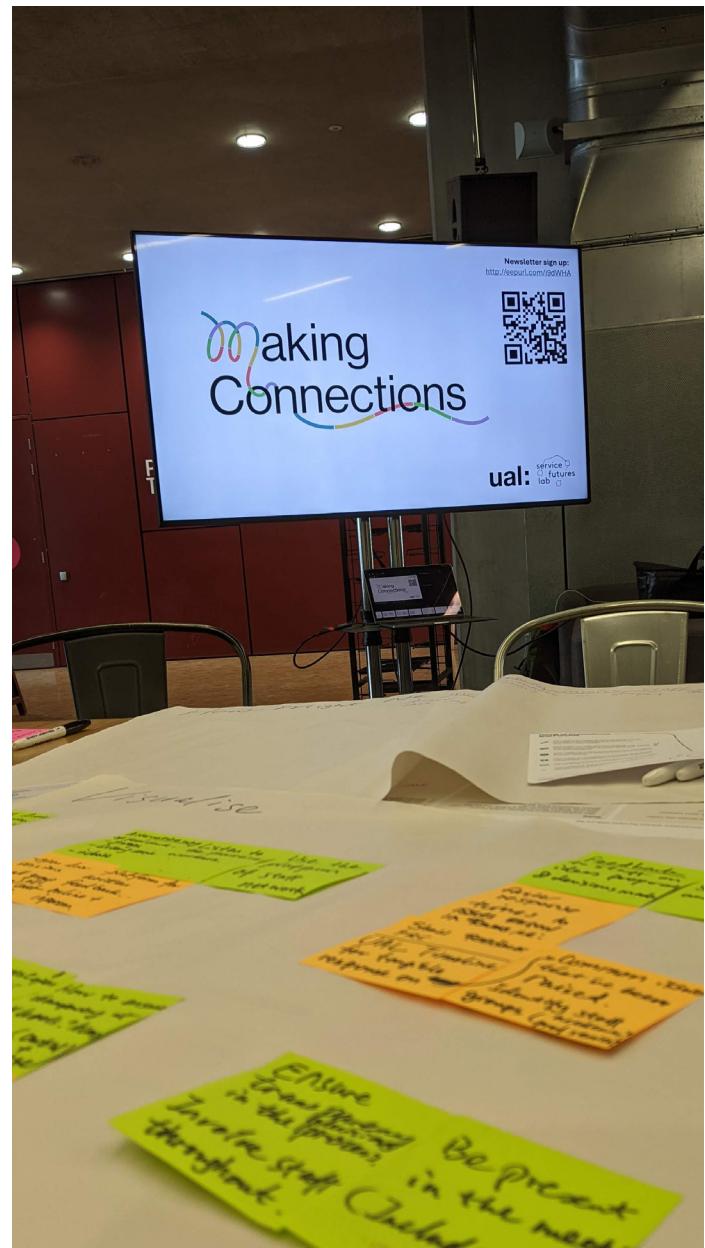
UAL is deeply committed to advancing its social purpose goals, particularly in the areas of EDI and sustainability. A key element in achieving these goals is ensuring a robust and effective infrastructure for "staff voice," enabling staff to contribute insights, expertise, and experiences that shape UAL's policies, culture, and actions.

Currently, UAL utilises staff networks, forums, and executive board Champions to gather and channel staff input into governance and strategic decision-making. However, these systems require enhancement to improve inclusivity, effectiveness, staff agency, and alignment with UAL's strategic priorities.

This project seeks to evaluate and redesign these structures, drawing on our internal knowledge to create a meaningful and impactful connection between staff voice and formal decision-making processes.

## Out of Scope

Systems related to formal Trade Union representation are excluded, as they adhere to established regulatory frameworks and agreements.



## Objectives of This Research



### Evaluate Current Infrastructure

Assess UAL's existing mechanisms (e.g., staff networks, forums, executive board Champions) to identify strengths, gaps, and opportunities for improvement.

Benchmark against best practices from within UAL and comparable institutions.



### Create a Sustainable Engagement Model

Establish mechanisms to ensure ongoing participation and inclusivity, amplifying diverse staff voices.

Align staff voice channels with UAL's social purpose goals, fostering collaboration and continuous improvement.



### Design Enhanced Structures & Processes

Develop design principles to guide a new mechanism that effectively integrates staff voice into governance and decision-making.

Propose a cohesive framework for improved engagement and impact in areas such as EDI and sustainability.



### Articulate the Value of Staff Voice

Secure buy-in from key stakeholders to ensure the adoption and implementation of proposed changes.

Identify enablers that empower staff to drive meaningful action and change.

## Main Findings

Our research has shown that staff voice at UAL is expressed through a fragmented mix of formal and informal mechanisms. While staff members across different levels are deeply committed to contributing their perspectives, these voices are often dispersed and disconnected from formal decision-making. Key barriers include unclear committee remits, weak feedback loops, and a lack of clarity in governance structure and visibility.

These gaps create perceptions of tokenism and limit trust in institutional processes. At the same time, examples of good practice such as grassroots initiatives, staff networks, and cross-college collaborations show that when engagement is genuine, transparent, and embedded, staff voice becomes a powerful driver of inclusion, belonging, and

institutional change.  
Five themes emerged as priorities for action



### Clarifying the Remit of Committees & Forums



### Strengthening Trust, Transparency & Communication



### Improving Decision-Making Processes & Closing Feedback Loops



### Ensuring Resources & Time for Social Purpose Work



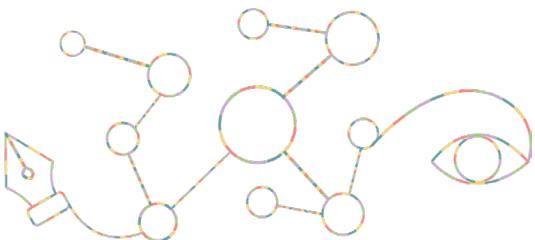
### Empowering

### Local Action

Across all of these, staff called for clarity, reciprocity, and recognition of their contributions.

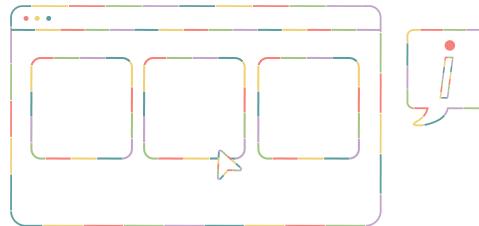
## Outputs of the Project

Through co-design, the project generated 12 concepts to make staff voice more visible, valued, and impactful. These ranged from tools to visualise decision-making pathways and improve consultation practice, to mechanisms for recognition, representation, and feedback. Following staff testing and leadership engagement, four proposals were prioritised for further development:



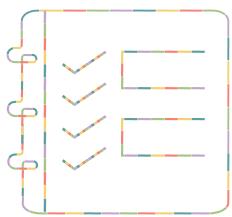
### Network Governance

A clear framework for roles, responsibilities, and accountability in forums and committees.



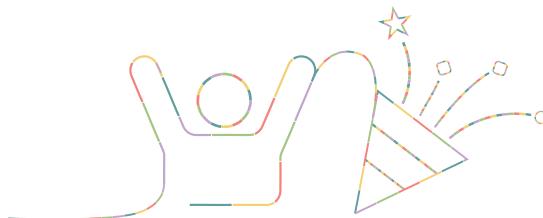
### Engagement Toolkit & Leadership Symposium

Practical guidance and training to embed inclusive consultation.



### Making Meetings Meaningful

Templates and communication protocols to strengthen transparency.



### Quick Wins for Recognition & Visibility

Extending awards and platforms for staff contributions.

These outputs provide both immediate opportunities and longer-term directions. With leadership commitment to carry forward this work, they represent a foundation for embedding staff voice as a core part of UAL's governance and culture.

# Introduction





## STUDIO THEATRE



## What is 'staff voice'?

**'Staff voice' refers to the ways in which employees express their opinions, concerns, ideas, and experiences about their work, workplace culture, and organisational decisions.**

It includes both formal mechanisms like staff surveys, meetings, and structured feedback systems, and informal ways of speaking up, such as day-to-day conversations, suggestions, or raising issues with peers or managers.

**Staff voice is about enabling people at all levels of an organisation to contribute to improvement & decision-making.**

This concept is closely linked to ideas of agency, empowerment, and inclusion in the organisation

According to *Liang, Farh and Farh (2012)*, academic research often distinguishes between two types of staff voice:

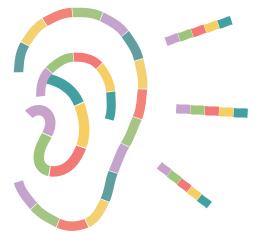
- **Promotive voice:** suggesting new ideas or improvements.
- **Prohibitive voice:** raising concerns or identifying problems that may harm the organisation.

Staff voice is not only about speaking, **it also depends on how leaders listen and respond.**

Effective staff voice systems **rely on psychological safety**, where staff feel safe to speak without fear of negative consequences. And on follow-through, where contributions are acknowledged and lead to meaningful change.

The presence of strong staff voice is consistently associated with improved organisational culture, higher employee engagement, and greater perceptions of trust and fairness (Morrison, 2011; Liang, Farh and Farh, 2012). Conversely, when staff voice is ignored or silenced, it can result in mistrust, disengagement, and even ethical or operational failure (Wilkinson et al., 2004; Klaas, 2014).





## Why do we want to listen to it

### Institutional Performance & Innovation

A scoping review of global higher education institution (HEI) staff voice behaviour studies from 2013 to 2023 suggests that enabling staff voice reveals grassroots challenges, promotes quality improvement, and encourages new pedagogical and organizational ideas. These outcomes enhance institutional adaptability and competitiveness (Zhang et al., 2023; eCampus News, 2021; Taylor & Francis, 2022).

### Well-being & Belonging

Recognition of staff voice fosters psychological safety and supports a sense of belonging, factors shown to mitigate burnout and improve job satisfaction, retention, and trust. Psychological safety, when paired with a culture of listening, contributes to decreased stress and burnout during institutional uncertainty (Smith & Jones, 2024; Wilson et al., 2025; Lee & Patel, 2023).

### Academic Freedom & Governance

Staff voice is deeply tied to democratic principles within universities. Its absence has been associated with reports of silencing, for example the suppression of academic and student debate about Palestine at institutions across the UK and USA (Barker-Singh, S. 2025; Speri, A. 2025; Shwaikh, MMB & Ruth Gould, R. 2020).

### Recruitment & Retention

Recent studies in higher education show that incorporating staff voice into governance and decision-making processes improves institutional recruitment reputation and contributes to greater staff stability (Martínez-Gómez et al., 2021; Enlighten Publications, 2020; Universitat Politècnica de València, 2021).

## Why is it so challenging

### Power Imbalances & Hierarchy

Secure tenure and professional status, particularly distinctions between academic and professional services staff, often shape who feels empowered to express concerns. In the UK, early career academics, those on insecure contracts, and professional staff frequently report feeling silenced due to entrenched hierarchical norms (Fernandes, Pereira and Wiedenhöft, 2023; Kinman, 2023; Holcombe et al., 2023; Townsend and Wilkinson, 2020).

### Cultural & Normative Barriers

Cultural expectations within universities often emphasise collegiality and reputation over open dissent or critical dialogue. This dynamic discourages candid feedback and creates environments where constructive criticism is perceived as disloyal or disruptive. According to Fernandes, P., Pereira, R. and Wiedenhöft, G. (2023), many members of staff choose to remain silent rather than risk violating unspoken cultural norms that praise harmony over honesty in institutional discourse.

### Fear of Reprisal or Inaction

Fear of backlash can deter staff from speaking up. Past experiences of being ignored, sidelined, or retaliated against often lead many to self-censor. Research on UK higher education highlights that insecure contracts, heavy workloads, and entrenched hierarchies amplify these risks, particularly for early career academics and professional services staff (Kinman, 2023; Townsend and Wilkinson, 2020). Staff voice is therefore highly dependent on psychological safety and trust; when these are absent, silence becomes the default response (Fernandes, Pereira and Wiedenhöft, 2023; Klaas, 2014).

## Relationship with leadership style

Governance structures in UK Higher education are complex and job roles diverse; staff voice is particularly sensitive to leadership approach. Ozkan et al. (2022) describe several types of leadership approaches in HE, including servant, transformational, and inclusive leadership styles, each with distinct implications for staff engagement.

### Servant Leadership

Servant leaders prioritize empathy, listening, and staff wellbeing, traits that align with creating psychologically safe environments. Emotional intelligence, a core quality of servant leadership, has been identified as essential for navigating cultural and organisational change in UK HE (People Insight, 2024). These behaviours encourage trust and reduce the perceived risks of speaking up, key to unlocking authentic staff voice.

### Transformational Leadership

Advance HE (2024) have highlighted transformational leadership as vital for cultivating inclusive academic cultures. Leaders who communicate vision, inspire change, and actively empower staff tend to foster higher levels of motivation, engagement, and open dialogue. Research in UK HE departments shows that when Heads of Department exhibit transformational traits, like individual consideration and intellectual stimulation, staff report greater trust and feel more confident contributing feedback and ideas.

### Inclusive Leadership and Trust

Inclusive leadership, defined by accessibility, openness, and fairness, is strongly associated with increased staff engagement and expression. Recent research points to trust as the critical mediator: when leaders genuinely empower staff and demonstrate follow-through on input, voice behaviour improves. Conversely, delegation without adequate support or responsiveness can erode trust and suppress participation. Inclusivity is especially important in diverse university environments like UAL, where intersecting identities may affect whether people feel safe to speak up.

## Why is it hard to do it well

### Tokenism vs Genuine Engagement

Many universities establish committees or councils designed to amplify staff voices. However, without transparent follow-through or a clear theory of change, these bodies often function as symbolic gestures rather than mechanisms for real impact. This form of tokenism, where engagement efforts are not clear and lack impact, has been documented in both organisational and higher education contexts (Hahn et al., 2017; Johnston, K.V. 2019).

### Structural Complexity

Shared governance in universities often serves mainly academic staff, with professional and operational personnel lacking consistent representation in decision-making forums. This structural imbalance reinforces hierarchies and limits the diversity of input in institutional processes (Luhman & Cunliffe, 2013; Becker, A. H. et al, 2022).



## Variable Needs Across Staff Groups

Academic staff, Early Career Academics (ECAs), Hourly Paid Lecturers (HPLs), Technical staff, and Professional Services staff face distinctly different expectations, pressures, and organisational positions. This is before considering those roles commonly outsourced to external companies in UK universities, but embedded in daily university life, such as cleaning and catering roles. Voice mechanisms must therefore be tailored, not uniform, as “one-size-fits-all” approaches risk disengagement and the exclusion of underrepresented groups (Morrison, 2011; Townsend and Wilkinson, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2020; Kinman, 2023).

## Leadership Gaps

Authentic engagement depends on leaders who can actively listen, frame feedback constructively, and manage meaningful follow-up. However, UK higher education leaders often juggle multiple roles: administration, teaching, research, and pastoral support, leaving limited time to develop and exercise these vital relational leadership skills. A 2021–22 UCU workload survey of over 9,000 UK HE staff reports unmanageable workloads driven by rising admin demands, increased student-staff ratios, and persistent staff shortages (Kinman, 2023). Concurrently, Advance HE highlights that HE leaders must balance strategic vision with urgent operational tasks, frequently without dedicated training or capacity (Advance HE, 2023). This role overload, combining teaching, line management, committee work, and student support, leaves many leaders ill-equipped to sustain authentic engagement in the complex social systems of UK universities (Holcombe et al., 2023; Kinman, G. 2023; Advance HE, 2023).

## Guiding Principles

Given the complex landscape of staff voice in the UK Higher Education (HE) sector, marked by organisational hierarchies, competing priorities, and systemic inequities, we believe the Design Justice framework offers a particularly relevant and effective approach for this research. Design Justice, as articulated by Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020), centres the voices of those who are most impacted by design decisions and aims to challenge structural inequalities rather than reproduce them.

This perspective aligns with our commitment to equity and inclusion in service design. It pushes us to not just consider what is being designed, but *for whom, by whom, and to what end*. By grounding our understanding of service design in the principles of Design Justice, we seek to surface and address the power dynamics that shape how staff voice is facilitated, heard, and acted upon.

Specifically, we aim to interrogate:

**Who is included or excluded from policy and governance conversations?**

**How do power dynamics shape the organisation's approach to staff voice?**

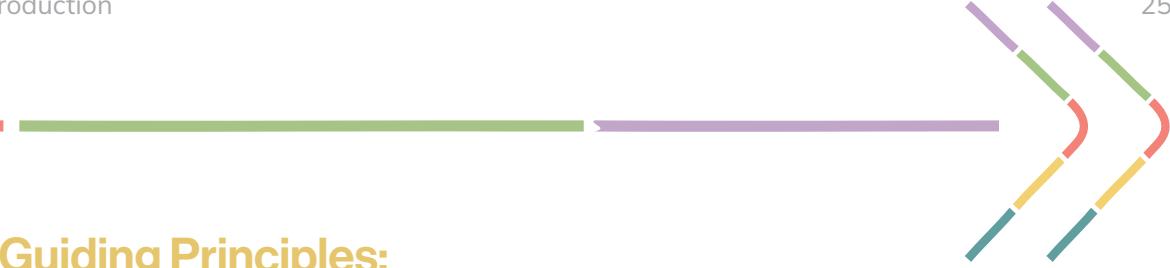
**In what ways are staff recognised or compensated for additional contributions beyond their contractual roles?**

Our understanding of Service Design reinforces this by foregrounding the experiences of all stakeholders, staff delivering and affected by services, and using qualitative and participatory methods to understand the organisational ecosystem.

Co-Design, informed by participatory design traditions (Sanders & Stappers, 2008), allows us to work collaboratively with staff in shaping services that reflect their lived realities, not just top-down priorities. And Research through Design (Koskinen et al.,

2013) enables us to explore possibilities through iterative prototyping generating practical, situated insights while staying responsive to feedback from diverse staff groups.

Given that Co-Design can risk becoming tokenistic if not implemented critically (Moll et al., 2020), we developed a clear set of guiding principles at the outset of the project. These served as a compass throughout, ensuring that our methods remained inclusive, reciprocal, and sensitive to power dynamics.



## Our Guiding Principles:

**Inclusivity and Equity**

Ensure all staff, particularly those from underrepresented groups, have equitable access to and feel empowered to participate in staff voice mechanisms.

**Transparency and Accountability**

Establish clear, open processes for collecting, sharing, and acting on staff input, with defined roles and accountability for follow-through.

**Simplicity and Accessibility**

Design user-friendly systems that reduce unnecessary complexity and workload, making participation easy and manageable.

**Alignment with Social Purpose Goals**

Integrate staff voice structures with broader institutional commitments to social justice and positive societal impact.

**Adaptability and Responsiveness**

Build flexible systems that can evolve in response to emerging needs, insights, and feedback from stakeholders.

**Reciprocity**

Acknowledge and value staff contributions by incorporating mechanisms that offer meaningful recognition or return.

## Overall Methodology

This project takes place within a complex knowledge-intensive organisation, a University made up of four Colleges and several Institutes, each made up of several Schools and courses, plus a central unit. Governance is complex and practices vary across the Colleges and Institutes. Because of this we took an approach grounded in Service Design, Co-Design and Research through Design, with a strong focus on the guiding principles outlined above as well as on issues of trust, and adopting ways of working that allowed us to work in the open.

### Service Design

Service design is a human-centred discipline which focuses on designing services in the public or private sector, working in a participative, iterative and qualitative manner with all stakeholders, and considering wider systems at play" (Grimaldi et al., 2024).

A central feature of using a service design approach is the importance of working with all stakeholders, those affected by the service as well as those delivering it. In the context of organisational development, this means prioritising the lived experiences of all actors within the system, including leadership, management, and staff. This inclusive orientation aligns with the principles outlined by Sangiorgi and Prendiville (2017), who emphasise service design's capacity to reconfigure organisational relationships and value through collaborative processes.

Additionally, a service design approach grounds its methods in qualitative research, engaging people across the organisation to build a rich and contextual understanding of the wider landscape and ecosystem in which the service operates (Sangiorgi and Prendiville, 2017).

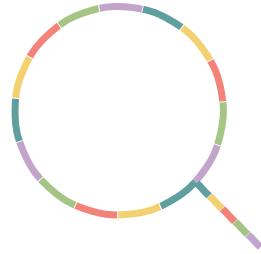
### Co-Design with a Participatory Design Lens

Co-design aims to create a collaborative vision of what is being designed. Commonly used within service design, it involves both designers and non-designers in co-creating services. While designers may guide the process, co-design encourages contributions from all participants based on their expertise and lived experience (Sanders and Stappers, 2008).

Co-design has its roots in Participatory Design, which emerged in Scandinavia during the 1970s as an approach to involve both workers and management in developing new computer systems, ensuring the resulting systems were mutually beneficial for all stakeholders involved (Ehn and Kensing, 1990; Kuhn, 2005).

However, as co-design has gained popularity, so too has critique of its misuse. In recent years, it has sometimes been applied tokenistically: without inclusive participation, acknowledgment of power imbalances, or mechanisms to ensure that participant input meaningfully influences decision-making (Moll et al., 2020).

Because of these risks, we drafted guiding principles at the scoping stage of our project to ensure fidelity to participatory values and equitable involvement throughout.



## Research Through Design

Research through Design (RtD) is an approach in which the practice of design forms part of the research process. Designers create prototypes early and frequently, test and iterate or discard them as the process evolves (Koskinen et al., 2013).

RtD allows stakeholders closely affected by a design to engage with prototypes directly, providing constructive feedback, suggestions, and refinements. Rather than asking stakeholders to imagine features in the abstract, the prototyping process surfaces what will work or require modification within the organisation. This iterative mode of inquiry helps generate applied knowledge that is deeply contextual.

## Trust and Working in the Open

Trust is a critical foundation for engaging staff voice, especially within hierarchical organisational contexts where prior exclusions or power dynamics can inhibit open communication. Building trust deliberately, through transparency, care, consistency, and responsiveness, is essential for enabling authentic participation (Schnackenberg and Tomlinson, 2016).

Working in the open: sharing how decisions are made, who is involved, and what happens to contributions, helps counter scepticism, reduce information asymmetry, and support inclusive engagement. Participatory design literature highlights that trust is built through relational processes and shared spaces where participants feel seen and respected (Man et al., 2022). In our work, positioning ourselves as embedded researchers, staff working alongside colleagues, helped foster credibility, empathy, and long-term collaboration.

## How We Built Trust in Practice

We took several deliberate actions to build and sustain trust throughout the project:

### Framing the work as research, not consultancy

We positioned this project as a rigorous research initiative, signalling a commitment to inquiry, iteration, and openness to complexity, rather than arriving with predefined solutions.

### Following ethical research protocols

By going through the university's research ethics process, we created conditions that helped participants feel confident that their voices would be respected and protected.

### Ensuring broad and diverse participation

We sought out contributions from across the university, including staff from different grades, departments, and roles, as well as trade union representatives to ensure a fuller picture of staff voice.

### Using authentic language and direct quotes

Interview data was presented using realistic, unvarnished language, including frustrations and critiques, rather than filtering for positivity. This helped people feel heard and represented.

### Acknowledging contributions explicitly

Wherever possible, we made visible the role of individuals and groups who contributed to the process, whether through credited input, feedback, or shaping direction.

### Highlighting good practice already in place

We surfaced and celebrated examples of effective work happening within the university, recognising the knowledge and effort already being invested by staff.

### Engaging staff forums and networks

We presented our work in spaces where staff already gather, further embedding the project in existing relationships and channels of trust.

### Leveraging our identity as internal researchers

As a few core team members are long-standing staff and lecturers ourselves, we brought a deep familiarity with the institutional context, enabling us to empathise with the challenges, constraints, and aspirations of colleagues.

## How We Worked in the Open in Practice

Working in the open was not only a principle, but a practice. We operationalised this through several channels and activities:

### **Creating a project website and newsletter**

We shared regular updates through a public-facing website and a staff newsletter, inviting engagement and visibility.

### **Publishing summary outputs at key stages**

To avoid siloing insights, we shared public summaries of findings, design directions, and decisions throughout the project timeline.

### **Presenting at committees and governance bodies**

We took findings and progress to formal spaces, ensuring visibility at decision-making levels.

### **Sharing insights at co-design sessions**

As part of our iterative design process, we regularly fed back what we were learning and how it was shaping emerging ideas, including in co-design sessions.

### **Testing with a wide range of staff**

Early and refined concepts were tested with diverse groups to ensure they resonated, were understandable, and addressed actual needs.

### **Bringing stakeholders into review stages**

Key actors, including those in decision-making roles, were involved in reviewing and refining the final project proposals, ensuring alignment and support.

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## Positionality and Conducting Research Within Our Own Community

The core team was made up of 4 academics in various levels of seniority: a professor, two senior lecturers, and a service designer. All members of the team were students at UAL before working here and all have experienced precarious working conditions, hourly and fractional contracts. The team member with the

longest employment at UAL has been working here over 20 years, and the most junior was in her second year. The team was made of three women and one man, with varied ethnicities and countries of origin (Italy, Hong Kong, USA, and China) and with several neurodivergent team members.





Because we were conducting research inside our own university, our insider status offered both opportunities and responsibilities. It allowed us to build on pre-existing relationships and trust, enabling access to honest conversations and rich insights. However, it also required a high level of reflexivity: to remain aware of our positionality, to listen deeply, and to ensure that familiarity did not lead to assumptions or blind spots.

As reflected in our article for *Canvas*, (May, J. 2025) this project was as much about building new trust as it was about honouring and extending existing trust. By working collaboratively and transparently, we aimed to model a way of doing organisational research and design that is grounded, ethical, and genuinely inclusive.



## Methods by Phase

This project adopted a Service Design approach, grounded in co-design and research-through-design methodologies, to ensure staff-centred, functional outcomes aligned with UAL's mission and values. Our process was structured to enable deep understanding, inclusive participation, and iterative development of solutions that reflect the lived experiences of UAL staff.

The research was structured around the following phases:

### 01. Understanding the Current Landscape

#### Desk Research

We began by reviewing existing internal and external materials to develop an understanding of the organisational, policy, and cultural context of staff voice at UAL.

#### Ecosystem and Asset Mapping

To situate the work within UAL's organisational complexity, we mapped:

- The governance structures across the four Colleges, Institutes, and central functions.
- Where key areas such as Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) and Sustainability are positioned.
- The formal and informal spaces where staff voice is currently expressed or acted on.

#### Job Families

We also analysed UAL's staff job families (e.g. Academic, Technical, Professional Services) to ensure the design of solutions accounted for the varied roles, responsibilities, and experiences across the institution.

### 02. Identifying Good Practice

To ground our work in what's already working, we identified and analysed:

- Internal good practice across UAL, spotlighting initiatives and processes that staff perceive as enabling or empowering.
- External examples from other universities and sectors to understand alternative models and scalable strategies for embedding staff voice in complex organisations.

### 03. Deepening the Brief

#### Staff Survey Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis of responses to recent staff surveys to better understand how staff currently experience voice mechanisms and where they see gaps, blockers, or opportunities.

## 04. Engaging Stakeholders

### Stakeholder Mapping and Engagement

We mapped and engaged a wide range of stakeholders across colleges and functions, including:

- Staff from different grades, job families, and contract types
- Trade union representatives
- Middle managers and senior leaders
- Governance actors and staff forums

These conversations helped surface challenges, power dynamics, and contextual differences across the institution.

## 05. Collaborative Design and Iteration

### Co-Design Workshops

We facilitated a series of participatory workshops with staff, including those on networks, champions, and forums to:

- Share emerging insights
- Ideate possible solutions
- Prototype and test concepts in a collaborative setting

### Prototyping and Testing

Designs were iteratively developed, shared, and tested within staff networks and key governance groups. Feedback loops ensured the evolving proposals were grounded in staff realities and organisational feasibility.

## 06. Reporting and Recommendations

We delivered a comprehensive final report capturing:

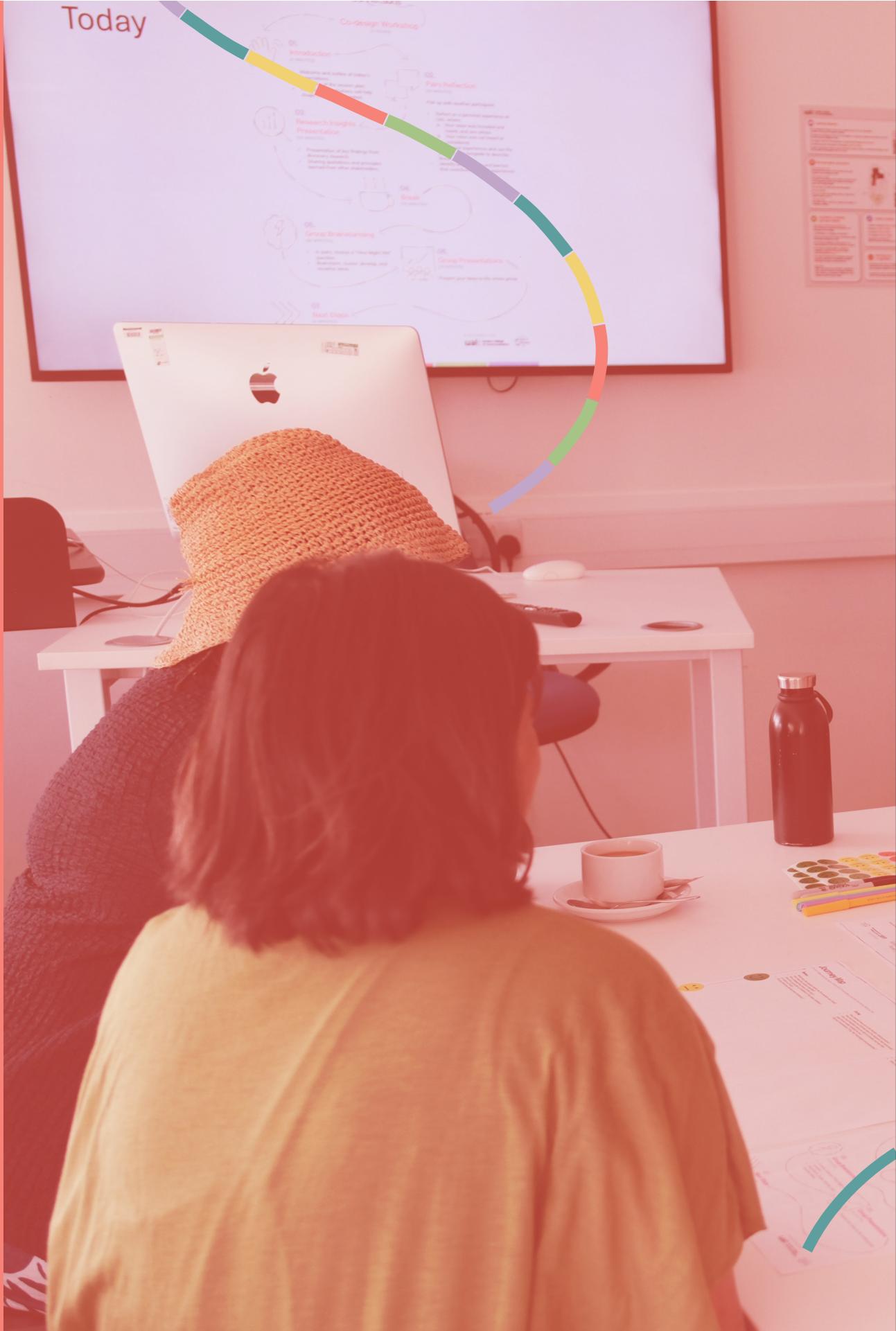
- Key findings and insights from each phase
- Detailed analysis of current barriers and enablers for staff voice
- A set of actionable, co-designed recommendations

The findings were presented to senior leaders, governance committees, and other stakeholders to support institutional learning and implementation.

05

# Discovery

Today





## Literature Review

### Introduction

**'Voice is about having opinions and observations heard. How voice is realised, recognised and acted upon is what matters. There is no "real" voice if it is not listened to.'**  
**(Wilkinson, et al., 2004).**

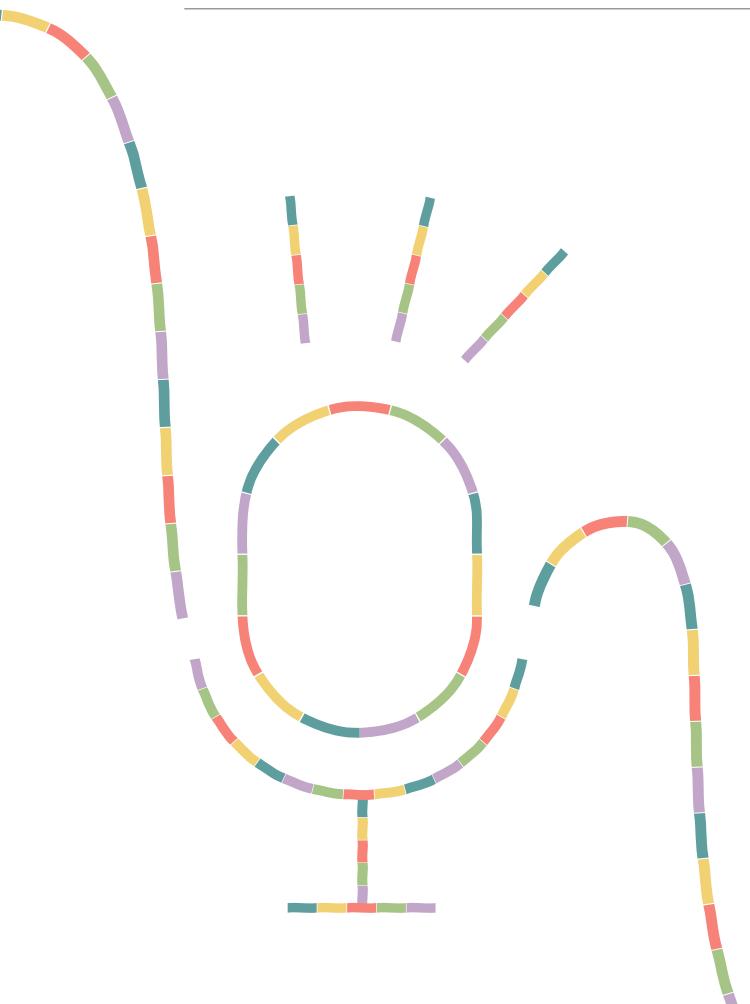
Recent studies find that work on employee voice in universities, while growing, is limited (Nisha, et al., 2025). Much of the scholarly literature on employee voice has been developed without sufficient attention to sector-specific contexts

(Townsend & Wilkinson, 2020), with few studies comprehensively analysing the unique challenges of higher education. To address these gaps, this review clarifies the historical context of staff voice, maps the evolving conceptions of voice, examines motivations for fostering staff voice, key barriers and enablers (e.g. psychological antecedents, line-manager support, etc.). It also identifies voice frameworks used to measure and evaluate staff voice, and explores links between staff voice, sustainability and leadership. Drawing on employee voice scholarship from the past 25 years, elucidates the cultures and frameworks that can support sustainable staff voice in Higher Education.

### History of Staff Voice in the Workplace and Higher Education

As a starting point, staff voice, which is often referred to as employee voice, workplace voice or voice in the literature, is the means and mechanisms for employees to raise issues and concerns, put forward interests and opinions, as well as ideas to contribute to the organisation decision-making with management (Paulet, et al., 2021). The concept of "voice" has evolved from collective union representation to diverse forms of direct participation.

In early conceptualisations of voice, it was framed as alternative to "exit", emphasising that dissatisfied employees might choose to speak up rather than leave (Hirschman, 1970). Concepts of voice around this time were situated in industrial relations, where voice largely meant collective representation through trade unions and joint consultation mechanisms. Here, much of industrial literature views the individual or collective articulation of grievances, as the sole component of voice (Gollan, 2001; Wilkinson, et al., 2004).



The decline of trade unions impacted the discourse and practices around collectivised voice and shifts towards more managerial cultures. Much of the research through the mid-2000s, the necessity of employee voice was championed in the context of business enterprise practices aimed at leveraging voice for primarily commercial motives, as opposed to prosocial reasons for giving employees a say (Wilkinson, et al., 2004). Here, voice operated primarily as a contributor to competitive advantage, mediated through top-down strategic Human Resource Management (HRM), with the same actors being credited as the creators of the employee voice systems (Marchington, 2007).

Whilst establishing and sustaining competitive advantage remains a driver in the design of voice mechanisms (Boxall and Purcell, 2011; Holland, 2020; cited by Mowbray, et al., 2022), the employee voice discourse is again evolving to reflect more social and sustainable forms of governance, management and leadership. For example, Sustainable HRM, 'expands HRM's remit beyond the traditional focus on economic goals, to a "triple bottom line" viewpoint, whereby environmental and social goals, in the short and long term, become an articulated aspect of HRM's role.' (Paulet, et al., 2021). Distributed leadership frameworks (Jones et al., 2012), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Staniskiene, et al., 2018), regenerative leadership models (Hutchins, 2023) are adjacent models in contemporary discourse of workplace sustainability.

Overall, the history of staff voice shows a shift from representative, collective, union-led voice in industrial contexts to a broader array of mechanisms that are consultative to the participatory by characteristic. Yet in higher education, increases in managerial control, marketisation and corporatisation has resulted in reduced staff autonomy (Jones, et al., 2012). While a single successful approach to effective leadership in HE has not been identified in UK research, collaborative, participative and distributed models of shared leadership are championed as part of the solution (ibid).

## Staff Voice Definitions, Types and Mechanisms

Employee voice is recognised as a broad concept encompassing multiple meanings, purposes and practices. Given that the subject of staff voice is present, if not ubiquitous, across many disciplines and job sectors, its meaning has also been interpreted in different ways by both researchers and practitioners (Wilkinson, et al., 2004). Van Dyne et al. (2003) define it as discretionary communication of constructive opinions for both suggestions and concerns. Dundon et al. (2004) describe it as encompassing participation, complaints, suggestions and representation. It is important to note that voice is distinct from mere communication in that it implies an attempt to influence matters of importance in the organisation. In this way, voice behaviour is intentional and planned, occurring in an interpersonal context (Liang, et al., 2012).

Considering the contextually and temporally-specific nature of employee voice, Wilkinson, et al. (2020) argue for a functional definition of employee voice, as "the ways and means through which employees attempt to have a say, formally and/or informally, collectively and/or individually [...] to influence organisational affairs relating to issues that affect their work, their interests, and the interests of managers and owners." (Wilkinson et al 2020, p. 5). Understanding the distinctions between formal vs. informal voice and individual vs. collective voice is help in the classification and analysis of voice mechanism. In addition, further distinctions between promotive vs. prohibitive voice can be made (Liang, et al., 2012; Townsend, et al., 2020). Paulet, et al, (2021) highlight how modern workplaces must balance both.

## Formal vs. Informal voice.

Formal mechanisms are the structured processes and channels an organisation provides for employee input, for example, staff surveys, consultative committees, regular staff forums or union representation, whistleblowing and grievance and appeals processes. Typically, these sessions are formally recorded according to procedures to allow for systematic evaluation (Klaas, et al., 2012). In comparison, informal voice occurs where suggestions or concerns are expressed outside of structured processes, for example, in casual conversation, a meeting or e-mail (Klaas, et al., 2012). Despite earlier literature describing the formal and informal voice mediated primarily through management and/or HR processes, informal voice is neither restricted to only one-to-one conversations nor only direct interactions with managers specifically. Morrison (2011) argues that healthy organisations need both formal mechanisms that are transparent, accountable and inclusive, and informal cultures that value storytelling, local insight and bottom-up initiatives.

## Individual vs. Collective voice.

Individual voice denotes an employee raising matters on their own behalf or under their own initiative. Collective voice involves the representation of a group of employees. Historically this was via elected representative or unions, but many organisations today encourage other forms of collective voice mechanisms like staff networks, that work alongside or in place of union channels.

## Promotive vs. Prohibitive voice.

Liang et al. (2012) propose the categorisation of promotive vs. prohibitive voice, which describes the content of voice. Promotive voice, also referred to as constructive voice (Wilkinson, et al., 2021) or suggestion-focused voice (Morrison,

2011), is employees' expressions of new ideas or suggestions for improving the overall functioning of their organisation or embedded working groups. In comparison, prohibitive voice, also referred to as problem-focused voice (*ibid*), describes employees' expressions of concern about work practices, incidents or employee behaviour that are harmful to their organisation. Both are needed, Liang argues, as each have different psychological antecedents. These are important in universities because staff need to contribute ideas and tacit knowledge for pedagogical and workplace innovation (promotive) and they need to speak about issues like discrimination or unethical practices (prohibitive).

Morrison's (2011) comprehensive review of employee voice literature identified that to-date, research had mostly conceptualised voice as a dichotomous choice, analysing the structural, relational and personal (psychological) determinants and antecedents that either promote voice or silence. Their research inferred that the body of research lacked analysis pertaining to how staff apply mechanisms and practices to voice their views or concerns.

Dundon et al. (2004) maps voice mechanisms to a functional purpose. Examples mechanisms include: upward problem-solving groups, suggestion schemes, attitude surveys, team meetings or briefings, open-door policies, grievance and complaint systems and union/representative channels. However, the context in which the mechanism is applied matters, and the precise purposes ascribed to very similar mechanisms can differ from one organisation to another and among different respondents (Wilkinson, et al, 2004). The measure and evaluation of voice mechanisms (which will be covered in more depth in a later section), should therefore not be assessed simply against the quantity or "breadth" of voice channels, but by their quality and "depth" referring to the degree of influence employees actually have through

those channel; i.e., how empowered they are to affect decisions (Cox, et al, 2006; Paulet, 2021). As such, the quality of, not just quantity of voice channels is key to successfully establishing these relationships. A workplace with embedded voice would offer numerous opportunities for both individual and collective voice and ensure those voices meaningfully impact outcomes, rather than being perfunctory.

## Motivations for Engaging and Supporting Staff Voice

Organisations and individuals embrace staff voice for a variety of reasons, ranging from pragmatic business objectives to ethical and pro-social principles. Understanding these rationales provides clarity on why voice is valued and highlights the contrast between instrumental and moral drivers of voice initiatives.

One prominent instrumental rationale is voice for the purpose of improving organisational performance and competitive advantage (Boxall and Purcell, 2011; Holland, 2020; cited in Mowbray, et al., 2022). This is frequently framed in terms of business outcomes, for example, Wilkinson (2024) observes that many institutions support voice in pursuit of higher productivity and better decision-making. Identifying the nuance, Dundon et al. (2004) similarly found that voice forums are often introduced as a way to surface grievances or frustrations, with a longer-term intention of generating improvements that add value to the organisation.

This study of 18 UK-based organisations across multiple sectors including academia, specifically, one city school, found that the two dominant motives for staff voice were to eliminate employee dissatisfaction and improve business performance. While this is a relatively small sample size with limited reach into academia, this business-case logic may nevertheless underpin many voice initiatives in higher education, connecting staff input to enhanced institutional performance and innovation.

In addition, some organisations embrace voice to uphold principles of participation and employee influence. Wilkinson et al. (2020) and Mowbray et al. (2022) highlight that voice can be pursued to empower staff in influencing decisions, not just to further management and business goals. This perspective reflects a more participative rationale, viewing staff as stakeholders whose input in the context of HE, should shape university policies, practices and strategy.

Significant moral drivers of staff voice are pro-social, meaning staff are driven by a desire to improve the organisation's performance, processes or climate for the collective good. Thus, pro-social voice can be seen as both promotive and prohibitive depending on the context, with staff voicing suggestions or concerns intended to bring about improvement and change in the organisation (Mowbray, 2022; Klaas, 2014; Morrison, 2011). Such motivations are other-oriented and contribute to a positive organisational climate. Klaas (2014) notes that pro-social voice often reflects altruistic intent – employees speak out to help create a better work environment for everyone. Altruistic, improvement-driven motives as key reasons why staff engage in voice, especially in settings like higher education where employees are deeply invested in their institution's mission (Mowbray, et al., 2022). Initiatives like voluntary staff networks can platform this prosocial energy.

The pursuit of justice offers a slight contrast to prosocial motivations. Olson-Buchanan and Boswell (2008; cited by Klass, 2014), describe this form of "justice-oriented" voice as driven by perceptions of wrongdoing and "focuses on achieving restitution for perceived mistreatment and/or restoring justice". Justice-oriented voice is more likely than prosocial voice to provoke defensive reactions, and employees weigh these risks when deciding whether to speak up (*ibid*).

In the context of higher education, it is useful to recognise both the business case and the moral case for staff voice. Ultimately, an

effective staff voice strategy may draw on both types of motivations: leveraging staff experience and tacit knowledge to improve performance, reputation and student and staff satisfaction, while also honouring prosocial and justice-oriented values that resonate with the university's ethos. However, motivations do not guarantee that voice will be expressed or heard. Psychological factors and other pragmatic and personal determinants enable or hinder staff voice.

### Barriers and Enablers to Staff Voice: Psychological Antecedents and Determinants

Staff voice is a planned behaviour and there are psychological factors and determinants that influence whether or not people exercise different types of voice (e.g., prohibitive or promotive) and engage with different voice mechanisms (Liang, et al, 2014; Klaas, et al., 2015).

Liang et al. (2014) focus on psychological antecedents of voice behaviour, identifying three key enablers at the individual level: psychological safety, felt obligation for constructive change, and organisation-based self-esteem (OBSE). Each of these plays a distinct role in fostering voice: employees who feel a strong personal obligation to improve the organisation tend to engage more in sharing ideas for positive changes (promotive voice), whereas those who feel psychologically safe are more likely to speak up about problems or concerns (prohibitive voice). A strong sense of value and confidence as a member of the organisation, or OBSE, is also associated with greater voice, particularly promotive voice, indicating that when people believe they are respected contributors, they are more apt to express their opinions. In short, Liang et al.'s psychological antecedents suggest that feeling safe, obligated and self-assured within the workplace empowers staff to speak up. The UAL Climate Systems Mapping Report (2024) echoes this dynamic noting that when

staff do not feel listened to, this results in consultation feeling "tokenistic", contributing to a lack of perceived and experienced agency, as well as authentic participation between staff and university leadership.

Klaas et al. (2012) broaden this view, taxonomising the determinants of workplace voice findings into major categories of influence. These align with Liang's antecedents but also extend to additional organisational and interpersonal factors. Klass et al.'s categories are as follows: (a) Trait-Like Characteristics; (b) Satisfaction, Commitment, And Loyalty; (c) Risk And Safety Of Voice; (d) Voice Utility; (e) Voice Legitimacy; (f) Aversive Conditions; and (g) Culture. A limited overview and example of each determinant follows:

(a) Trait-like characteristics describe how engagement with staff voice is influenced by the similarities that the individual shares with the affordances provided by the type of voice or voice mechanism. For example, people focused on creativity and problem solving were more likely to use suggestion systems (Lipponen et al., 2008; cited by Klass, et al. 2012).

(b) Studies on satisfaction and commitment show that high commitment and trust in the organisation tend to encourage constructive, informal voice (employees try to fix issues from within).

(c) Risk and safety of voice is linked with psychological safety. Even when employees have ideas to improve the organisation, they may stay silent if speaking up feels unsafe, perhaps concerned for their progression or fear of retaliation.

(d) Voice utility describes a direct correlation between the belief that proactive behaviour such as voice will yield meaningful change and use of voice (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008; cited by Klass, et al. 2012). (

e) Whether or not voice is seen as legitimate, valued and respected (voice legitimacy) is

affected by culture, leadership, working groups, organisational climate and overall perceptions of hierarchy. Similarly, “whether one perceives making constructive suggestions to be part of one’s prescribed work role (Van Dyne et al., 2008; cited by Klass et al., 2012)” can also affect participation and use of voice. Voice behaviours, particularly those that are informal and improvement-oriented, are largely discretionary and demand emotional, cognitive and temporal resources (Wilkinson, 2021). Voice can increase fatigue due to the added psychological, mental and logistical exertion, and therefore people may avoid engaging in staff voice simply to preserve their energy and wellbeing (ibid).

(f) Aversive conditions influencing participation in staff voice are wide-ranging but generally centre around concerns of mistreatment when using formal and informal voice.

(g) Lastly, the culture determinant largely focuses on one’s own positionality relative to power. For example, people in lower-level positions or with less experience, were less likely to engage in formal voice. Klass’s classifications do not explicitly mention the impact that identity, colonisation and systemic discrimination have on individual and collective perspectives on belonging and empowerment, but Critical Race Theory (CRT) literature provides research in this area.

Other factors non-standard forms of employment (NSFE) impact psychological antecedents and feelings of safety and belonging to their organisation. Uncertain employment, such as precarious short-term or zero-hour contracts, can discourage voice. Speaking up may be considered a risk for these workers, who instead may resort to resentment, neglect or silence in their participation with staff voice (Wilkinson, 2021). The UAL Climate Systems Mapping Report (Wallace, N. et al, 2024) explicitly mentions precarious contracts impacting staff willingness to voice, linking it to reduced agency. Relatedly, high work pressures and workloads can stifle voice, as employees

are too busy or stressed to engage in extra role behaviours like participating in committees or giving feedback. In the UAL report (Wallace, N. et al, 2024), unsustainable workloads leave little time for participation in climate action or other initiatives, noting significant pressure on academic staff and students.

Most of the literature on staff voice identified in this review did not engage deeply with discourses pertaining to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), identity, protected characteristics, colonisation and systemic injustice in organisations and HE institutions. Wilkinson’s (2021) examination of growing workforce diversification, notes that “members of minority groups” fear further marginalisation if they convey minority opinions in staff voice processes. However, here, “minority” is not unpacked and serves as a catch-all term.

The impact of intersectionality and systemic discrimination is largely missing from scholarly discourses on staff voice mechanisms. For an intersectional account specific to the context of academia, Garrett (2025) looks at the experiences of 22 “racialised minority” PhDs and how predominately white institutional spaces shaped their perceptions and imaginations of careers choices. The study found that, “not a single participant felt supported by their institution in their academic careers, and their support systems usually came from other forms of mentorship and community formed by others.” It is unclear if these mentorship and community support mechanisms were formal or informal within the university or if they interfaced with voice systems at all. Garrett concludes that, “Historical and ecological whiteness have imparted the normalisation of standard cultural practices that stem from colonial hierarchical structures. These norms and practices need to be critically interrogated when attempting to increase diversity in academic roles in UK higher education.”

The UAL Climate Systems Mapping Report (Wallace, N, et al, 2024) notes that current processes, “lack a diversity of voices”, suggesting that some voices (perhaps those of BAME staff, support staff, etc.) are not being included, which impacts representation and discourages future participation amongst those groups. A critical research and evaluation of staff voice mechanisms needs to be cognizant of the potential systemic bias and discrimination acting on existing and future voice mechanisms and staff voice infrastructure and processes.

Leadership practices and managers, specifically, middle managers, are identified as focal factors in enabling staff voice and strategy to be heard, understood and operationalised within organisations. Both Liang's and Klaas's insights underscore the role of leaders and managers in shaping the conditions of voice. Middle managers act as voice intermediaries by communicating up and down the hierarchy (Mowbray, et al., 2022), and in HE, can contribute significantly to organisational change in ways that top management cannot, due to the relational proximity to frontline staff (Clegg & McAuley, 2005). The literature (Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Jones, et al., 2012; Roxa & Martensson, 2014; Hasaneffendic, et al 2017) presents a multifaceted view of how middle managers can either enable staff voice by acting as champions and facilitators or inhibit voice by acting as gatekeepers or even suppressors, sometimes inadvertently.

As enablers, middle managers provide functional, strategic and psychological support, with research suggesting that middle managers are intermediaries of change that go beyond mere implementation of top-down directives but proactive players in translating organisational strategy and both reshaping existing and creating voice mechanisms (Mowbray, et al., 2022). Lack of agency in middle management can perpetuate strategic misalignment and confusion in operationalising initiatives. An example is the UAL Climate Systems Mapping Report, citing that “experts perceived a strong

sense of bottom-up action and some sense of top-down commitment but identified a lack of traction and evidence in ‘the middle’. Staff and senior management are caught in the bind of misalignments between top-down commitments and bottom-up actions as well as competing and not-yet aligned environmental, social and racial justice commitments, plans and actions.” (Wallace, N, et al, 2024). This two-way filtering function means middle managers translate front-line realities into input for higher-level decision-making. Jones et al. (2012) and other proponents of distributed leadership argue that when middle managers embrace a collaborative, multi-level approach, they effectively distribute voice as well as leadership, and therefore the crux is not simply the middle managers, but rather empowered staff with agency to lead. This highlights that an organisation's formal policies alone are not enough, and that the agency of middle managers in implementing and supporting policies and grassroot initiatives is an integral factor in whether front-line low-level staff exercise their voice or stay silent.

Silence is not simply a personal choice or behaviour; it is also constructed. According to Paulet, et al. (2021) “constructed silence” occurs where “management builds voice channels... but creates a culture of silence through institutional structures which place constraints on employee voice” which offer the semblance of support through “lip-service mechanisms”. Importantly, these actions can be intentional or unintentional, which is why a systemic evaluation of these mechanism and broader voice structures are needed. Regardless on intention, the ramifications discourage employee voice and undermine employee relationships, leading to increased employee self-censoring and resistance.

## Structures and Frameworks for Assessing and Evaluating Staff Voice

Paulet et al. (2021) posits that the framework developed by Cox et al. (2006), which focuses on the breadth and depth of employee voice channels, when integrated with Marchington and Wilkinson's (2005) "escalator of participation," enables a more nuanced interpretation of the complex nature of employee involvement and participation. It is therefore a way to qualitatively measure the development of voice for residual and nascent models and mechanisms of staff voice.

The escalator of participation is a framework that depicts employee involvement as a rising continuum or "escalator," moving from lower levels of participation where employees are recipients of information with superficial agency, up to higher levels of participation where employees share significant power in decisions alongside management creating a socially sustainable model of governance. Considered in tandem with Cox et al. these frameworks provide a method of evaluating the breadth and depth of voice, emphasising the degree of participation at which voice occurs over its form. The degrees of participation from low to high intensity are information, communication, consultation, codetermination and control. The escalator model provides criteria to evaluate each voice mechanism in terms of: "degree of input in organisational matters; the participation level within the organisation where the dialogue takes place; the scope of the topics up for debate; and what form of involvement (upward, downward or participatory) and style, be it direct, indirect or hybrid voice" (Paulet, et al., 2021). To clarify this amalgamated framework helps evaluate individual voice mechanisms in their unique context and is not a holistic rendering of an organisation's voice culture.

Sustainable Human Resource Management (HRM) is an emerging model that extends HR's remit beyond economic outcomes to include environmental and social objectives, forming

the "triple bottom line" (Paulet, et al., 2021). Paulet identifies that in research regarding traditional HRM and Sustainable HRM (the latter encompasses Green HRM and the social dimension of Sustainable HRM) often takes a one-way, top-down approach looking at how management and HR activities can influence employee sustainable behaviours. To that point, the majority of the existing social sustainability measurement frameworks do not fully address the employee perspective, in part due to the ambiguity around what social sustainability is (Staniskiene, et al. 2018). Applying the combined lens of "breadth and depth" and "escalator of participation" facilitates a two-way consideration of voice that is socially sustainable in its understanding of bottom-up initiatives, influence and participation, thus creating a "continuous flow of information between management and employees on sustainable issues, policies and practices" (Paulet, et al., 2021). For further consideration, Staniskiene and Stankeviciute's (2018) framework for measuring social sustainability includes six dimensions that broadly align with the evaluation criteria seen in the "escalator of participation": (1) employee participation, (2) employee cooperation, (3) equal opportunities, (4) employee development, (5) health and safety, and (6) external partnership.

Even though some of the frameworks mentioned were not designed to measure staff voice specifically like Staniskiene (2018), evaluating staff voice through a combination of these measurement tools helps map the quality and depth of employee involvement and assess the mechanisms efficacy to produce and reproduce social and environmentally sustainable outcomes.

Another complementary framework for staff voice is distributed leadership (Jones, et al., 2012), a model of shared, collective leadership in which authority and decision-making are spread across multiple people and levels, rather than concentrated at the top. In a higher education context, for example, Jones et al. (2012) developed a collaborative framework that



emphasised collective collaboration, enabling lecturers, administrators and executives to jointly lead change. A key outcome of their multi-university project was the recognition that a multi-level and cross-functional approach to leadership is essential. In practice, this means creating structures like cross-department teams, committees, or project groups where staff from different levels of hierarchy and different functions work together and share leadership responsibilities. Such an approach inherently elevates staff voice, because leadership is exercised by those closest to the issues, not only by senior managers. It also helps bridge gaps between groups. For instance, Jones et al. note

that distributed leadership began to close the divide between academic staff and professional staff by involving both in decision processes. Furthermore, distributed leadership serves as a structural indicator of an organisation's social sustainability and participatory staff voice; the reason being that the organisation practicing distributed leadership likely has strong staff voice, since employees are empowered to take initiative, contribute ideas and influence outcomes beyond their narrow job roles. This aligns with the idea of deep participation (high "depth" of voice) and high-level involvement on the escalator of participation.

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## Desk Research

### Landscape of staff voice mechanisms at UAL mapped

As part of the Discovery phase of this project, we focused on understand the existing “as-is” experience of staff voice mechanisms at UAL. This phase aimed to establish a clear picture of how staff perspectives, concerns, and contributions are surfaced, acknowledged, and acted upon across different levels of the organisation.

In the context of UAL, staff voice is not expressed through a single channel, but rather a diverse mix of both formal and informal mechanisms. These mechanisms vary in structure, visibility, purpose, and effectiveness. Some are embedded within established governance frameworks, while others emerge organically through interpersonal or team-based interactions, as well as department or college-level initiatives. By mapping this landscape, we understand what mechanisms currently exist and how they function in practice, where voices enter the system, how they travel through decision-making layers, and whether and how they loop back as feedback or change.

We defined formal staff voice as mechanisms with an established governance structure and institutional sponsorship. For this research, we focussed on those mechanisms tied to UAL’s social purpose ambition around EDI and Sustainability.

Reviewing sources such as UAL’s internal platforms (Canvas, official website), governance documents (e.g., Terms of Reference for forums and committees), and informal conversations with stakeholders and colleagues, we identified four core types of formal staff voice infrastructure:

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01

#### **Champions Forums + Staff Networks**

These forums and networks are directly connected to the university’s governance structure and sponsored by the People Team. They bring together a broad range of staff and student representatives committed to advancing UAL’s EDI goals.

- Champions Forums include: Disability and Neurodiversity, Race, LGBTQ+, and Religion & Belief. These are chaired by members of the Executive Board (EB), known as forum champions, and report directly to the EB through their respective champions. Membership is by invitation only and include academic, technical, professional services staff, as well as students. Each forum meets termly to share good practice, support institutional progress against sector benchmarks, and lead awareness campaigns, events, and research initiatives aligned with its focus area (University of the Arts London, 2025b).

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- Staff Networks include: Neurodiverse Staff Network, Groups for the Equality of Minority Staff, LGBTQ+ Staff Network, and the Parents and Carers Network. They are chaired or co-chaired by staff members, serve as supportive communities where colleagues with shared social identities can connect, collaborate and advocate for change. The networks are open to all staff, and their chairs act as links to the relevant Champion Forums, ensuring staff experiences inform strategic conversations (University of the Arts London, 2025b).

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## 02

### College-level EDI Committees

These committees operate locally, intended to support UAL's EDI goals at the college level. They report directly to the College Executive Group (CEG). However, while these committees engage with EDI strategy and implementation (University of the Arts London, 2025a), they lack a clear and structured staff voice mechanism. Committee members primarily participate in general EDI discussions, with no defined process for staff to raise issues or concerns and see direct follow-up or outcomes

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## 03

### Net Zero Committee

The committee was established by UAL to lead the university's transition towards carbon neutral, aiming to achieve net zero across the entire university by 2040. The committee plays a strategic role in shaping UAL's sustainability agenda (University of the Arts London, 2025c). Since being set up, the committee has collaborated with colleagues across departments and professional areas to create meaningful opportunities for staff and students to directly influence UAL's climate strategy and help shape the university's path forward.

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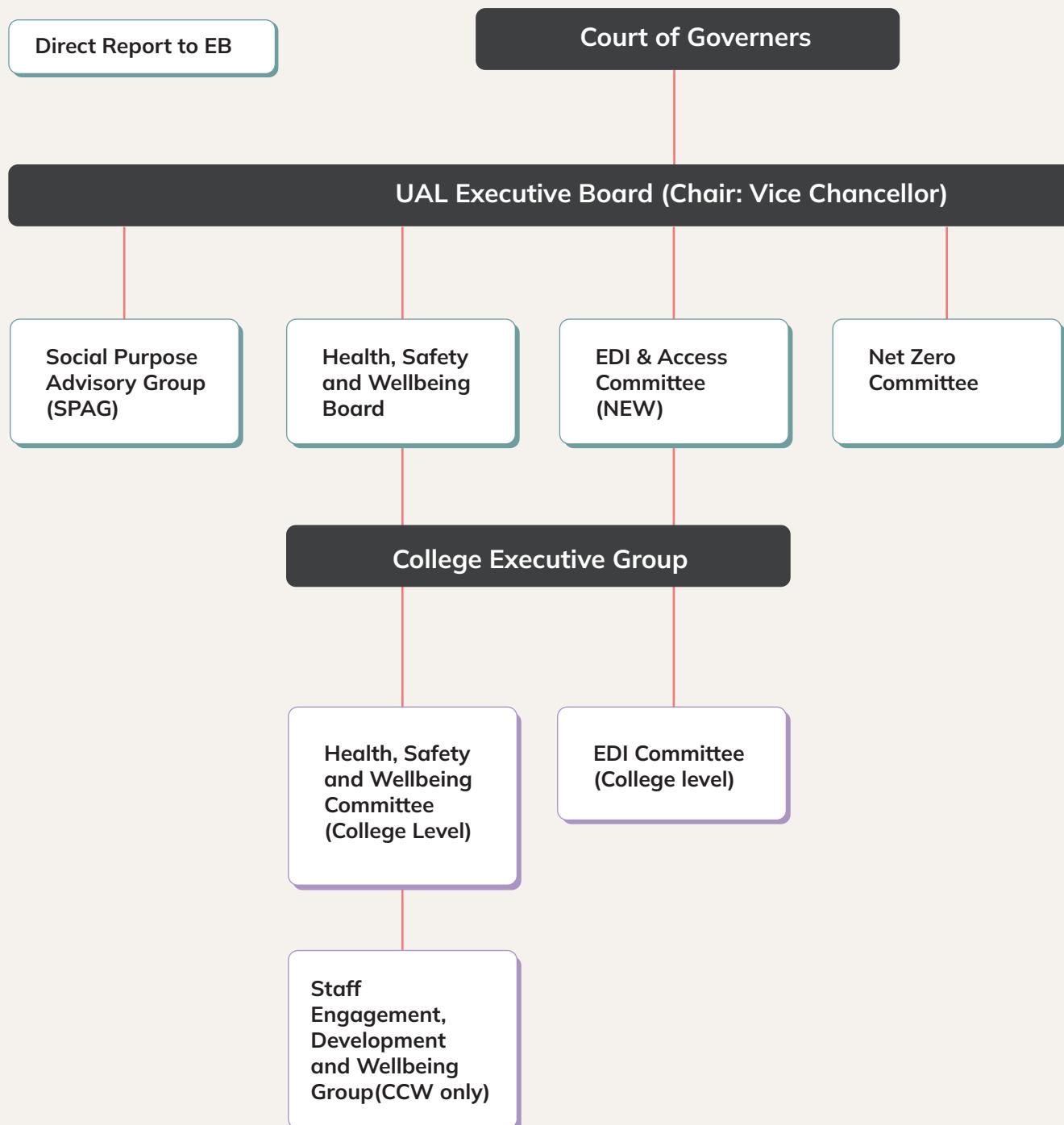
## 04

### Planning and Review Conversations (PRC) and Regular 1-to-1s

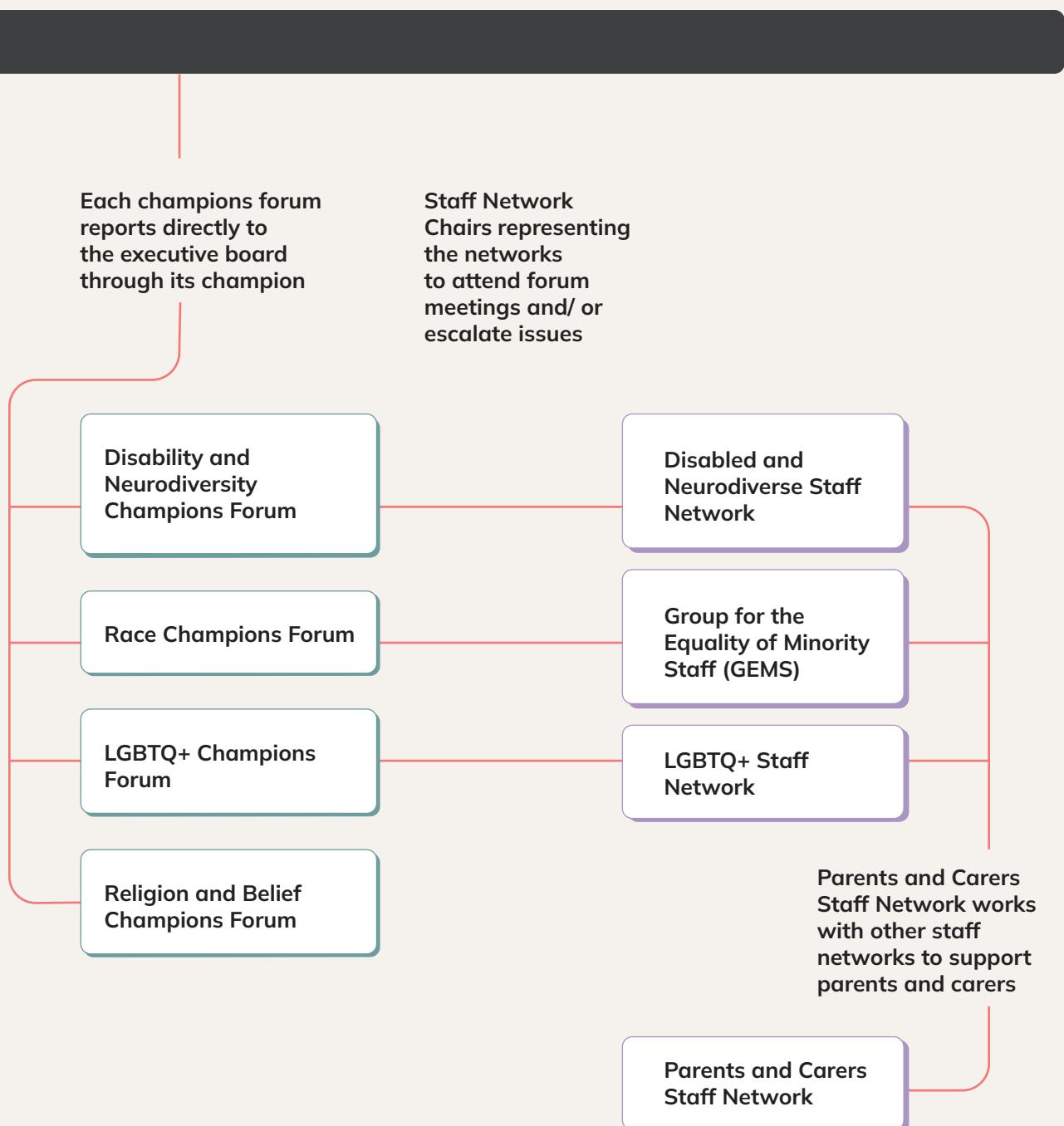
All eligible staff, including Hourly Paid Lecturers meeting the 240-hour threshold, take part in three "big picture" Planning and Review Conversations each year, alongside regular 1-to-1 catch-ups with their line manager. These sessions create structured opportunities to discuss performance, wellbeing, development, and goals, as well as exchange timely, two-way feedback (University of the Arts London, 2025d). PRCs and 1-to-1s are important to the staff experience, offering consistent channels for raising ideas, sharing concerns, and tracking progress. The extent to which conversations are documented, escalated, and acted upon can differ across teams.

## MAPPING 1

# Governance Structure

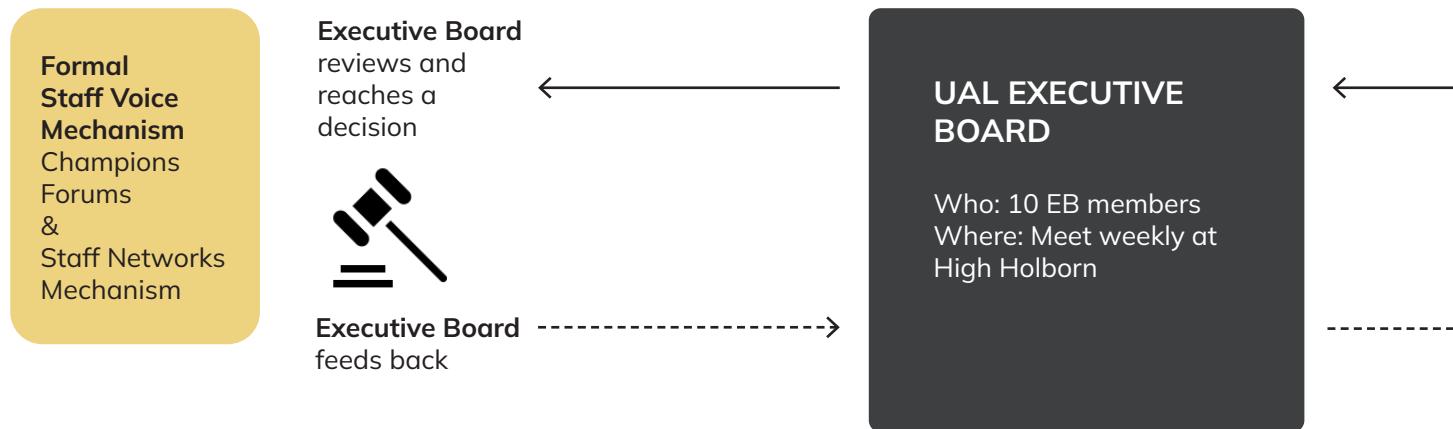


A governance map illustrates how these mechanisms sit within the broader UAL structure. This visualization highlights the relationship between networks, forums, and senior governance bodies like the CEG and EB.

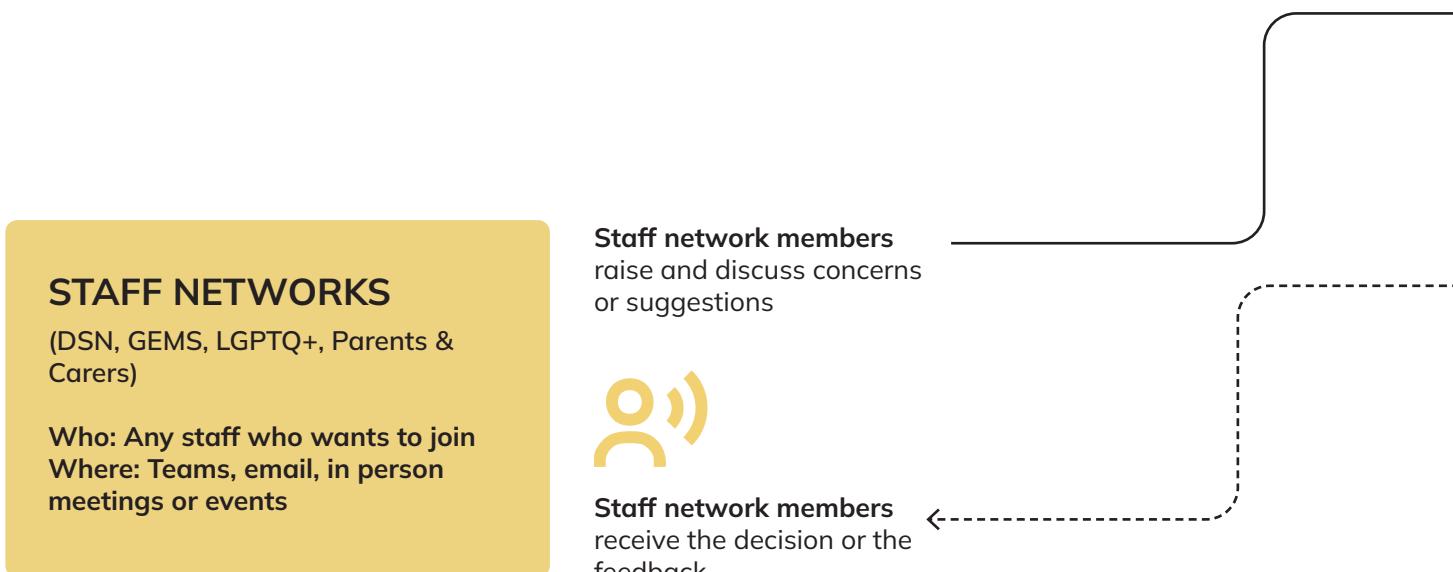


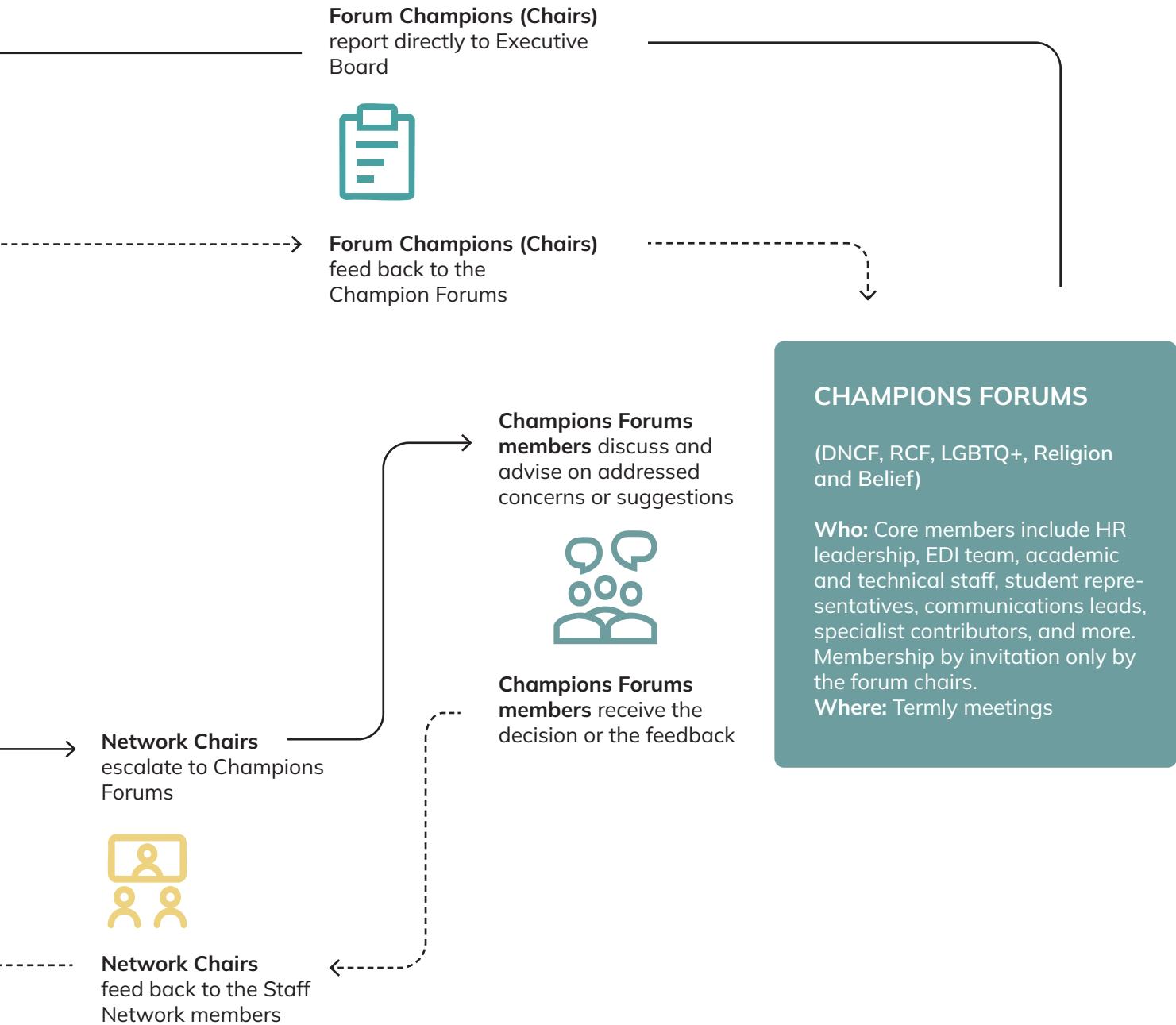
## MAPPING 2

# Voice Journey (Forum + Staff Network)



This journey map illustrates the upward flow of staff voice through various mechanisms. While the path to senior governance is generally clear, the return loop, how outcomes and decisions are communicated back to staff is often opaque. In many cases, documentation lacked clarity on feedback loops or accountability for follow-up.





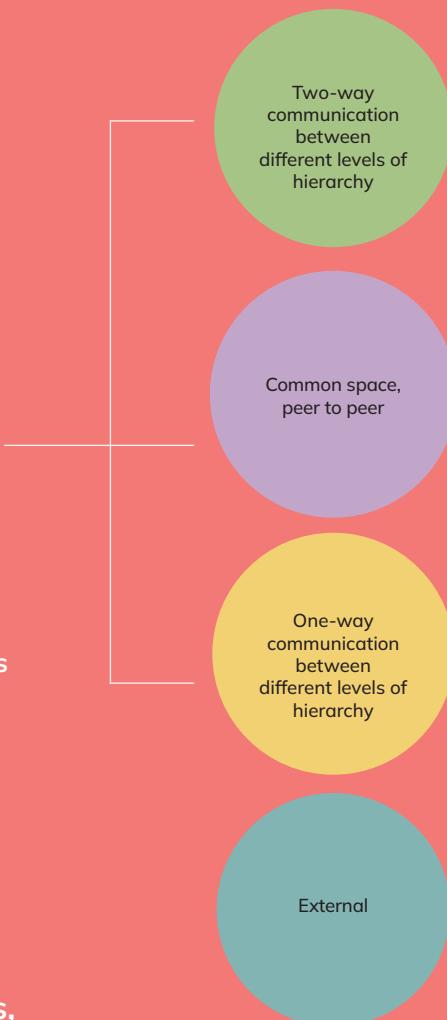
## MAPPING 3

### Informal Spaces

Recognising that not all staff voice occurs within formal structures, we also mapped informal staff voice mechanisms through conversations with colleagues and further desk research on internal platforms. This mapping captures the broader ecosystem of informal voice. It identifies spaces across team, college, university-wide, and external interactions where staff perspectives surface, such as ad hoc working groups, peer discussions, or informal forums.

The visual uses colour to differentiate types of engagement:

- **Green:** Two-way dialogue spaces (e.g., staff-student collaborations, working groups)
- **Purple:** Peer-to-peer conversations and support
- **Yellow:** One-way communication channels (e.g., email newsletters, staff surveys without follow-up)



**This mapping shows that informal mechanisms are often more dynamic and accessible. However, they frequently lack visible pathways for feedback to lead to tangible outcomes, particularly in the yellow spaces, where staff may share ideas or concerns but rarely see a response.** This presents a clear opportunity for UAL to strengthen trust and inclusion through improved communication and follow-up.



## Staff Survey Analysis

The 2024 Staff Survey, conducted by People Insight, provides a comprehensive overview of employee experiences and perceptions across UAL. With a response rate of 57% (n=3382 out of 5975 staff), the survey offers valuable and actionable insights. This analysis synthesises the key findings from the survey, identifying significant strengths, challenges, and opportunities, particularly regarding staff voice and EDI.

**57%**

Response rate (n=3382 out of 5975 staff), the survey offers valuable and actionable insights.

## Key Metrics and Contextual Understanding

Staff Engagement, the central measure of the survey, was reported at 69% placing UAL below the HE sector benchmark of 74%.

Staff Engagement

**69%**

HE sector benchmark

**74%**

Engagement is a key indicator, as it reflects staff motivation, satisfaction, and emotional connection to their work and the organisation. Survey findings in this report are primarily presented using favourability scores, the percentage of respondents who selected "agree" or "strongly agree" for each statement. This metric supports direct benchmarking across institutions. In addition, the survey included four open-ended questions, which invited staff to comment on their experiences, concerns, and aspirations in their own words. This analysis draws on both data types, favourability scores and qualitative responses, to provide a holistic understanding of staff sentiment at UAL.

## Area of Strength

The survey results indicate several areas of relative strength in staff experience at UAL. A significant majority of respondents reported a strong sense of personal achievement (73% favourable) and expressed that they find their work meaningful and fulfilling.

Clarity around individual contributions to the student experience was also high, with 87% of staff indicating they understand how their role supports this institutional objective, slightly exceeding the sector benchmark. In addition, 72% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the support they receive from their line managers, reflecting positively on local-level management relationships.

Understanding role in student experience

**87%**

Personal achievement

**73%**

Line manager support

**72%**

100

## Challenges and Areas for Improvement

### Enablement, Management and Leadership

Among the lowest scoring themes were Enablement (45%) and Management and Leadership (47%). These results point to significant concerns around staff voice, influence, and empowerment within institutional processes. A key issue was the limited sense of participation in decisions that directly affect staff roles reflected on the favourability of the statement below:

***“My opinion is sought on decisions that affect my work” (39%, -13% below benchmark).***

This response reflects a widespread perception that staff are insufficiently engaged in shaping decisions that impact their day-to-day responsibilities. Many respondents described a broader sense of exclusion from meaningful dialogue, with limited opportunities to contribute their expertise to institutional planning and change.

Management and Leadership scores revealed critically low perceptions of senior leaders' responsiveness to staff voice and transparency in decision-making:

***“Senior leaders manage and lead UAL well” (27%, -18% below benchmark).***

***“Senior leaders make effort to listen to staff” (32%, -13% below benchmark).***

Staff expressed frustration with consultation processes that felt performative or too late to meaningfully influence outcomes. Many described a lack of authentic engagement and a growing disconnect between senior leadership and the realities of frontline work, as seen in the quotes below:

***“Even when staff are consulted, it feels like it is more to appease us... the decision is already made.”***

***“I’d make listening in the senior leadership much less performative... Away days often involve ‘listening’ but there is a real sense of disconnect...”***

## Diversity and Inclusion (D&I)

The D&I theme reported an overall score of 51% favourable, 13 points below HE benchmarks. Particularly concerning was staff's sense of being valued for their background and lived experiences (49% favourable, -21% below benchmark):

*"To be inclusive instead of saying you are inclusive...including all voices - race, sex, gender, class."*

Staff frequently identified a discrepancy between institutional rhetoric on EDI and their day-to-day experiences. Comments consistently emphasised the need for deeper cultural change, moving beyond superficial diversity initiatives:

*"EDI should not be a tick box. We care about students... Hard-working people who speak up are not respected."*

Additionally, staff highlighted the emotional and professional toll of unpaid EDI labour, noting insufficient institutional recognition or reward for such contributions:

*"I would adjust the staff benefits to reflect the added labour that is carried by marginalised groups within the community..."*

## What Staff Seek to Change

The survey highlighted several consistent themes regarding areas that staff would like to see improved at UAL, reflecting strong collective sentiments across various roles and departments:

### Genuine and Timely Consultation

Staff expressed frustration over consultation processes they viewed as performative or occurring only after key decisions had been finalised. Many comments emphasised a desire to be meaningfully involved in decisions that directly affect their roles, expertise, and working conditions:

*“To be able to have a say in any changes that will have an impact on me and my work before they happen...”*

### Authentic Listening and Leadership Visibility

Staff repeatedly stressed the importance of authentic, visible leadership that genuinely listens and acts upon concerns. Comments frequently indicated perceptions of senior leaders as disconnected from frontline experiences and decision-making processes as lacking transparency:

*“Senior leadership should properly listen. Complaints about working conditions and archaic processes...should be acknowledged and acted upon.”*

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## Recognition and Valuing of Staff Expertise

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Many staff articulated a desire for greater respect and recognition of their professional expertise and lived experiences, particularly from senior management. The sense of being undervalued or overlooked was frequently highlighted:

*“When will senior leaders realize that they’re losing out to learn from us - those who work closely with students - and that we bring expertise and insight...”*

*“Respect for experience and expertise, especially from frontline roles.”*

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## Inclusive Representation and Diversity at Senior Levels

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There were significant calls for more visible diversity in leadership roles, inclusive practices across the institution, and increased accountability for genuine EDI initiatives. Staff strongly advocated moving beyond symbolic gestures to embed real inclusion and equity:

*“More diversity at higher levels and genuine recognition of the burden of EDI-related work.”*

*“EDI should not just be a tick box - hard-working people who speak up should be respected and supported.”*

## Meaningful Action and Cultural Change

Staff consistently voiced scepticism regarding surface-level diversity and inclusion measures, urging deeper cultural transformation and more tangible outcomes from institutional initiatives:

*“People attend racism training, but underlying biases remain unchanged... It is not until people of different backgrounds get to know each other when the barriers break.”*

*“Creating a culture where individuals are valued beyond performative gestures.”*

These themes reveal a clear demand among staff for enhanced transparency, respect, inclusion, and genuine listening, highlighting key areas for institution-level reflection and improvement.

## Best Practice Case Studies at UAL

While the staff survey highlighted system-level challenges, particularly around leadership, communication, and trust, it is important to acknowledge the meaningful work already happening across UAL. As a large and decentralised institution, much of progress around staff voice and influence on decision-making takes place at college, department, or team level. However, these efforts are not always visible across the wider university.

Communication across UAL largely relies on Canvas and internal emails, which can make it difficult for staff to stay informed about

initiatives outside of their immediate teams or department. As a result, many valuable actions and initiatives remain siloed, limiting opportunities for shared learning and wider institutional impact.

We gathered a range of UAL case studies to better understand what has worked well in practice. These examples are drawn from Canvas, informal conversations, primary research conducted during this project. Each case offers insights into the success factors, the enabling conditions for staff voice and inclusion in decision-making.

## UAL's Journey to Net Zero Engagement

The Social Purpose Lab, in collaboration with members of the Climate Emergency Network (CEN), led a university-wide engagement process to support UAL's journey to net zero. Designed to be open and transparent, the process invited participation from a wide range of stakeholders through varied activities that captured diverse perspectives and concerns.

Participants were meaningfully involved, with the opportunity to influence decision-making directly. Their feedback shaped the final recommendations, which were accepted in full by the Net Zero Committee. Throughout the process, the plan, progress, and decisions were clearly communicated to ensure the community remained informed and engaged. (University of the Arts London, 2024b)

### SUCCESS FACTORS:

- Open, inclusive engagement structure
- Diverse, accessible activities for participation
- Direct influence over decision-making
- Clear, ongoing communication with stakeholders
- Full adoption of community recommendations

## Climate Systems Mapping Research Pilot

The Climate Systems Mapping Project at UAL, led by Professor Ramia Mazé and Dr Niki Wallace piloted a research project to study the University using systems theory and transition design, to explore how UAL can make positive change in support of climate justice. The project used participatory action research to gather input from staff and students across the university. This “insider knowledge” approach ensured that the lived experiences and expertise of staff member were central to understanding UAL’s contributions to both extraction and regeneration. (Wallace et al., 2024, pp. 6)

Through structured workshops and collaborative mapping tools, participants mapped the current realities (What is...?) and speculative futures (What if...?) at UAL. They uncovered tensions between top-down commitments and everyday practices, highlighting opportunities including to better align strategies and grassroots initiatives, improve utilisation of existing spaces, ensure equitable workloads, and more in support of systemic change to a regenerative future. (Wallace et al., 2024, pp. 6–8)

The project delivered a practical toolkit and valuable insights, which can inform the future institutional work at UAL and be adapted for use in other projects adopting similar approaches. It also serves as a strong example of how research and systems methods can be applied to drive future institutional initiatives at UAL.

### SUCCESS FACTORS:

- Participatory approach valuing diverse staff and student experience
- Accessible and visually engaging tools to support participation
- Creating safe spaces for open dialogue
- Trust building through consistent and transparent communication of purpose
- Opportunity for critical reflection

## Awareness Days: Religion and Belief Champions Forum + EDI

UAL has been developing a consistent approach to how it celebrates and marks important events. A wide range of Awareness Days promote equality, diversity, inclusion, wellbeing and sustainability across its community. These include Black History Month, LGBTQ+ History Month, Race Equality Week, Trans Awareness Week, and Disability Awareness Month, alongside wellbeing initiatives such as University Mental Health Day and Mental Health Awareness Week, and campaigns like Earth Day. In addition, the Religion and Belief Champions Forum has played a central role in ensuring that religious and cultural diversity is respected, with initiatives like the UAL Religious and Cultural Observances Calendar, which supports celebration and awareness of the UAL community's diverse beliefs and practices. This calendar also helps staff and students plan activities to avoid scheduling conflicts across faiths and traditions.

### SUCCESS FACTORS:

- Cross-university representation in early stages
- Regular check-ins and iterative feedback
- Commitment to listening through broad engagement
- Creation of Religious Observance and Festivals Calendar

*"For me it's having those sorts of key people across the organisation who are quite good at testing the temperature of what a large section of our community think, feel and do. When it works well—for example, bringing a bit more consistency to Awareness Days—that started off in a committee with a wide group of people from across the university. It then came at every stage of that project. It came back to that committee to check on and then it was also senior leaders involved in making those decisions. And it did take*

*longer. It's taken a long time. But I'm really pleased with the outcome of that project because we have got consistency [...] The Awareness Days and the Religion and Belief Forum felt genuinely collaborative and inclusive and there were lots of people that genuinely did [feel that way]. I think that there are still groups of people who would say that there were problems with it, but we've worked closely with EDI on it as well."*

- Rebecca Munro, Director of External Communications

## Reasonable Adjustments + Disability and Neurodiversity Forum and Neurodiversity Group

UAL's approach to improving the Reasonable Adjustments process was data-driven, collaborative, and sustained. Staff survey findings validated concerns raised by the Disability and Neurodiversity Network, creating momentum for action. A workshop involving key groups mapped an ideal service, leading to targeted improvements and a structured project plan. Training, equipment logistics, and clearer guidance for managers were all enhanced. Progress is monitored and communicated regularly, and ongoing advocacy by group leaders ensures continued visibility and influence. The process balanced formal structures with informal, strategic presence in senior-level discussions. (O'Brien, 2024)

### SUCCESS FACTORS:

- Advocacy strengthened through anecdotal and measured data
- Policy and process review with traffic light assessments
- Clear prioritisation
- Ongoing monitoring and communication

*“When the staff survey and the action planning around the staff survey were discussed at EB, I said, “I’m hearing from the Disability and Neurodiversity Group that this is a specific issue that we really should be doing something about, and now we’ve got data in the staff survey confirming that group’s articulation. This feels like a strong case for something we should do.” The HR representatives in that meeting who came into EB for that conversation, who had been part of and privy to that were like, “Yes, we concur. We’ve heard the articulation, and we’ve now also got statistically*

*relevant data. We’ve got user-research and data. This feels like a thing we should do something about”. And then there’s a softer thing: having the voice that I have as the Chair of that group on an ongoing basis means in an ad hoc way, when we’re talking about this or that issue, at the right point, I can always go, “And we need to remember about this thing and this group”. So, there’s both the formal, and the opportunity to be part of conversations when they happen.”*

*- Chris Condron, Chief Digital Officer*

## Starting the Conversation and Continuing the Conversation (CCW)

At CCW, the Starting the Conversation series was introduced as a staff engagement initiative to strengthen dialogue between college leadership and the staff community. The first event, held in spring 2024, provided an open forum and structured activities where staff could share concerns, identify needs, and highlight priorities. Building on this, the winter 2024 conference titled Continuing the Conversation, focused on feeding back the actions taken in response to earlier discussions, demonstrating a commitment to closing the feedback loop. As a CCW event that was held at the larger Chelsea campus, the series highlighted both the opportunities and challenges of engaging staff across multiple sites and contract types. Overall, the initiative marked an attempt to create a transparent and responsive space for staff voice.

### SUCCESS FACTORS:

- Advocacy strengthened through anecdotal and measured data
- Policy and process review with traffic light assessments
- Clear prioritisation
- Ongoing monitoring and communication

*“The first conference I put on was about a year ago, around Easter last academic year, and we called it ‘Starting the Conversation.’ That was really about just hearing from our staff—what they needed, what they didn’t need, what was helpful, what wasn’t helpful. It was a very open call for staff to tell us what their issues are and what they care about. We then tried to put on workshops, talks, and focused activities around that feedback and kept that theme going. The winter conference we just had at the end*

*of 2024 was, kind of cheesy, but we called it ‘Continuing the Conversation.’ That was about saying, ‘Right, okay, so six months ago you said all of this, this is what we’ve done,’ and trying to feed that back.”*

- Sarah Chowdry-Grant, Head of College Operations CCW

## Social Purpose Innovation Fund

The Social Purpose Innovation Fund pilot created a new space for collaborative, community-led innovation at UAL. Open to both staff and students, the fund supports creative solutions to pressing social and environmental challenges. Applicants pitch project ideas and, through a participatory grant-making process, decide collectively how funding is allocated. As part of the grant-making process, applicants connected with one another, sharing ideas, insights, and challenges. This created opportunities for knowledge exchange, collaboration, and even the formation of joint projects, extending the pact beyond individual initiatives. (University of the Arts London, 2024c)

This approach was shaped in response to findings from the Climate System Mapping research (Wallace, N. et al., 2024), which highlighted concerns about central decision-making and limited involvement of those most affected. By giving visibility to local innovations and empowering applicants to shape funding outcomes, the fund fosters greater trust, transparency, and collective impact across the university.

### SUCCESS FACTORS:

- Participatory, transparent process and decision-making
- Promoting cross-community collaboration and relationship-building
- A pilot informed by internal research and staff feedback
- A practical model for allocating resources to support social purpose work

## Funding Opportunities: Inclusion Impact Fund

*"The university had decided that a large proportion of their income would go towards funding a bigger proportion of recruitment directed at hiring staff of colour... I feel like it was called [the Inclusion Impact Fund]."*

*I think the Inclusion Impact Fund at Camberwell at the time hired three new members of staff, including myself, using that fund. And it meant that—to carry on the spirit of why that fund was in place—they added into our job description, because we were cross-programme roles, some things to do with initiating programme wide focuses on climate, racial and social justice.*

*What it meant is that, because it's in our role description, it doesn't feel like lip service to my demographic. It's part of the role. What it's meant long-term is that we are constantly initiating programme-wide projects that are embedded into the curriculum at different levels through the BA years, through the Graduate Diploma programme, through the MA. And making sure there's a thread between it all...*

### SUCCESS FACTORS:

- Role descriptions aligned with social justice aims
- Cross-programme roles with embedded influence
- EDI integration into curriculum across all levels
- Visible impact on student experience

*The cascading effect was that we as a programme are quite proactive compared to what I hear about other programmes. There's still loads of work to do. But I think then that also cascades to it being visible to student experience as well, because they recognise that we're making an effort in those spaces. I feel like that's a good example of a journey from real policy."*

*- Jhinuk Sarkar, Previous Co-Chair of Group for Equality of Minority Staff, Senior Lecturer in Illustration CCW*

## 3-in-3 (LCC)

The Three-in-Three was launched by LCC Head of College, Kene Igweonu. It brings together diverse staff from all job families and departments for three lunch meetings over three months. These sessions are designed not only to gather staff voice, but to enable staff to “mentor up”—shaping leadership understanding and influencing change. When ideas gain collective backing, the Head of College lends their authority to help realise them. The result is meaningful cultural engagement, trust-building and action. Feedback from participants has been overwhelmingly positive and affirming.

### SUCCESS FACTORS:

- Inclusive cross-departmental and role participation
- Regular structured engagement
- Collective idea ownership
- Feedback and reflective mechanisms
- Leadership humility

“The Head of College 3-in-3 is an investment, a culture change initiative using a reverse mentoring approach. Basically, I recognised that I’m not a fountain of all wisdom. And to lead a college of this size, I’ve got to draw on the collective wisdom of my staff. So we pick one member from every job family in the College – every school and department. We get an average of 12 to 13 people [...] and I invite them to come and lunch with me. They meet with me three times in three months [...] that’s why it’s called 3-in-3, because I couldn’t find a better name for it! Those meetings are opportunities for them to effectively mentor me to do my job better. So that’s [one of the ways] we get that staff voice [in leadership decisions]. Now, in some of these meetings, initiatives come up from staff, and then what I commit to doing is that if the people around the table buy into whatever idea someone’s proposing—and they’re usually ideas around culture change specifically—

that means there’s a collective engagement with that particular issue. What I do is I symbolically loan my authority as Head of College to that individual or to that group to make that thing happen. We’ve been doing that for the past two and a half years now and it’s been brilliant. The feedback I get—I have a qualitative survey where people can go in there once they’ve finished the 3-in-3 and drop in anonymous feedback—it’s been overwhelmingly positive.”

- Kene Igweonu, Provost of LCC and Executive Dean for Impact and Innovation

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## Best Practice Case Studies in Academia and Other Organisations

In addition to learning from within UAL, this research also looked at practices from other higher education institution, as well as large organisations in different sectors to understand how they approach staff voice. These external examples allow us to look beyond UAL's the immediate context and consider how similar challenges, such as leadership responsiveness, fragmented communication, and low levels of trust, are being addressed elsewhere.

Many large organisations face comparable structural and cultural barriers. By studying how others have responded, what has worked well and what has not, we can identify practical

strategies and models that may be adapted to UAL's needs and values.

The external case studies offer a broader perspective on how **staff voice can be embedded, recognised, and acted upon across different organisational cultures**. They provide important insights as UAL considers how to design more inclusive, transparent, and sustainable staff voice mechanisms.

## Colgate University's Staff Affairs Council

Colgate University established the Staff Affairs Council (SAC) in response to the staff need for greater representation in university decision-making. The SAC serves as a formal body dedicated to facilitating collaboration and communication between university leadership, faculty, and staff (Colgate University, 2025).

The SAC's responsibilities include advising the president and cabinet on staff concerns, questions, and ideas, and reporting outcomes back to the broader staff community. It functions as a resource to university leadership, offering staff feedback on university affairs upon request.

The council is also tasked with identifying inequities within the staff experience and elevating them to the appropriate department or division for resolution, intentionally considering how its work impacts all staff across campus (Colgate University, 2025).

To ensure diverse representation, the SAC comprises elected officers, division representatives, affinity group representatives, non-voting liaisons, and at-large members, inclusive of diverse social identities, positional authorities, employment categories, and divisions. The council operates with clear objectives: increasing the sense of belonging, recognition, and value of staff members; identifying staff concerns and proposing recommendations; promoting the development of inclusive policies aimed at retaining current staff and attracting new talent; and integrating staff more fully into university affairs while fostering a culture of mutual support, respect, and professionalism (Colgate University, 2025; Moskell, 2024).

### SUCCESS FACTORS:

- Clear remit and governance
- Inclusive representation across roles, identities, and employment categories
- Direct communication channels to senior leadership
- Structured feedback with transparent reporting to staff community
- Recognition of contributions through awards and formal acknowledgements

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## “The Voice”: Commercial Services Department at University of Glasgow

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The Commercial Services Department at University of Glasgow created “The Voice,” an employee-led group designed to foster open dialogue between staff and leadership. Comprising volunteers from various departments, including Catering & Events, Accommodation, Retail, Sport, and the Print Unit. The group meets informally to discuss workplace improvements and address challenging topics collaboratively (University of Glasgow, 2025).

Key initiatives include developing a graphic to clarify the distinction between effective management and bullying, and introducing the Outstanding Colleague Recognition awards, with group members serving on the judging panel. Leadership supports participation by protecting time for involvement and facilitating online meetings to accommodate diverse schedules (University of Glasgow, 2025).

### SUCCESS FACTORS:

- Inclusive, cross-departmental volunteer participation
- Commitment to transparency and open communication
- Leadership support with protected time to prioritise staff participation
- Direct influence on workplace environment
- Regularly recognise staff contribution

## Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust

After receiving a poor Care Quality Commission (CQC) rating and experiencing high levels of staff turnover, Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust recognised the need for a major cultural shift. Managing such a large and complex organisation required a renewed focus on employee voice, particularly under the guidance of a newly appointed chief executive with a clinical background (CIPD, 2024).

Central to this transformation was the move towards a 'Just Culture' model, aimed at replacing blame and rigid hierarchy with fairness and learning. The Trust also introduced Freedom to Speak Up Guardians, providing a confidential channel for employees to raise issues (CIPD, 2024).

To better understand staff experiences, the Trust implemented a wide range of surveys, many mandatory, to monitor staff sentiment. However, to reduce survey fatigue, they began applying sentiment analysis and, crucially, shared evidence of how survey results were shaping decisions. Employee voice is now a standing item on the board's agenda, with monthly meetings focused on one division at a time, offering direct channels for staff to speak to leadership (CIPD, 2024).

### SUCCESS FACTORS:

- Leadership prioritising employee voice
- Commitment to listening through board engagement
- Introduction of 'Just Culture' to foster learning over blame
- Formal support via Freedom to Speak up Guardians
- Use of sentiment analysis and actively demonstrate how decisions were informed by feedback

## Milton Keynes College: Embedding Employee Voice into Organisational Culture

As one of the largest further education providers in its region, Milton Keynes College faced a period of leadership transition in which the senior management team (SMT) saw an opportunity to place staff engagement at the centre of its organisational direction. They made an explicit commitment to embedding Employee Voice as a core element of leadership practice and workplace culture (McGrath & Rutherford, 2013).

This commitment was paired with a re-articulation of the college's vision and working ethos. Leaders repositioned the institution not only as an organisation that delivers qualifications but as one focused on improving learners' life chances. In this model, Employee Voice became a key channel for ensuring that strategic decisions reflected the everyday experiences and insights of staff (McGrath & Rutherford, 2013).

To make this vision tangible, the SMT implemented a mix of formal and informal communication channels designed to encourage open dialogue and mutual trust. Examples included fortnightly "water cooler" emails, a staff blog platform, an anonymous suggestion email, streamed Principal addresses, a college-wide Q&A forum, and the Information and Consultation of Employees (ICE) steering group. Alongside these, leaders worked to flatten organisational hierarchy, ensuring staff could communicate directly with decision-makers. They stressed that genuine engagement relies on cultural change, underpinned by transparency, timely responses, and consistent messaging to avoid the "distortion" that can occur in hierarchical systems (McGrath & Rutherford, 2013).

### SUCCESS FACTORS:

- Visible leadership commitment to openness and trust
- Flattened structures to enable direct communication and reduce hierarchy
- A range of inclusive, accessible voice mechanisms
- Tangible, timely actions in response to staff feedback
- Leadership framed voice as integral to strategic and operational success
- Emphasis on clarity, consistency, and responsiveness in communication

At Milton Keynes College, Employee Voice has evolved into a strategic tool for improving organisational performance. It is built on the belief that when employees are trusted, involved, and heard, the organisation becomes more adaptable, inclusive, and capable of high performance (McGrath & Rutherford, 2013).

## Toyota's Think People System

Toyota's success in operational excellence is rooted in its deeply embedded culture of continuous improvement and respect for people. At the heart of this approach is the Thinking People System (TPS), a philosophy that empowers employees to actively engage in decision-making, take ownership of processes, and contribute meaningfully to quality and efficiency (Curtin, 2024; Powell, 2023).

One of the key initiatives sustaining this culture is Kaizen, which encourages every employee to suggest and implement improvements, reinforcing a bottom-up flow of ideas. Daily Asa-ichi meetings create space for team-based dialogue and problem-solving, while the Andon system allows any worker to stop production to address quality concerns immediately, demonstrating Toyota's commitment to real-time, employee-led intervention.

Despite its success, Toyota recognises ongoing challenges. These include the need to sustain engagement in long-term improvement efforts and to overcome cultural resistance when fostering participative practices, particularly in hierarchical environments (Powell, 2023). Yet, Toyota's structured voice mechanisms and commitment to empowering its workforce continue to deliver results.

Lessons from this model emphasise the importance of **respectful collaboration, structured feedback loops, and organisational adaptability** to maintain competitiveness in a changing industry landscape.

### SUCCESS FACTORS:

- Empowered staff take ownership of process quality and outcomes
- Structured daily meetings support transparency and joint problem-solving
- Real-time voice mechanisms ensure rapid response to quality issues
- Kaizen culture fosters continuous, employee-driven improvements
- Leadership commitment reinforces staff trust and long-term engagement

## What We Learned:

### Insights from Discovery Phase

#### **Staff Voice Is Dispersed Across a Fragmented Landscape**

Staff voice at UAL is expressed through a combination of formal and informal mechanisms that vary significantly in structure, accessibility, and influence. While formal structures such as Champion Forums, Committees, and Networks provide defined routes for input, their scope and reach are uneven across the institution. Informal mechanisms, including team discussions and local initiatives, offer important channels for expression but lack integration into wider governance processes. This fragmentation results in inconsistent staff experiences and limits the visibility and impact of contributions.

#### **Feedback Loops Are Weak or Absent**

In many cases, staff input appears to flow upwards through institutional structures, but there is limited evidence of feedback travelling back in a consistent or visible way. This weakens the effectiveness of voice mechanisms and undermines trust in the system. Even when consultation takes place, it is often experienced as retrospective or symbolic, rather than as a genuine opportunity for shared decision-making.

#### **Collaborative Processes Strengthen Engagement**

Where staff were actively involved in shaping processes from the outset, such as in the development of the Awareness Days policy or the Reasonable Adjustments review, outcomes were stronger and more widely supported. These initiatives succeeded by embedding structured feedback, cross-university representation, and consistent communication. They also benefited from alignment between formal governance and informal advocacy, ensuring that strategic decisions were rooted in staff experience.

## **Lack of Leadership Visibility and Responsiveness**

Survey data and case study findings point to a need for more visible, engaged, and accountable leadership. Trust in senior management is relatively low, and many staff perceive a disconnect between institutional priorities and operational realities. Where senior leaders created structured opportunities for two-way dialogue, staff reported higher levels of trust, ownership, and satisfaction.

## **Informal Channels Are Accessible but Disconnected**

Informal spaces for staff voice are often perceived as more open and approachable, and they contribute in building communities of staff with a shared purpose. However, their outputs rarely feed into formal decision-making processes. As a result, they may allow staff to share concerns or connect with peers, but lack the influence needed to drive change. There is a clear opportunity to better connect these informal voices with institutional structures and governance.

## **Staff Voice Is Most Effective When It Is Embedded**

The case studies show that most effective staff voice initiatives are those embedded into the everyday practice of the organisation. When staff voice is treated as an ongoing, structured element of institutional governance, rather than a one-off exercise like the staff survey, it contributes more directly to culture change, operational improvement, and strategic alignment. Routine mechanisms would enable the university to pick up ideas, suggestions, and concerns as they arise, allowing for faster, more responsive action. Integrating staff voice into leadership meetings, role design, curriculum development, and planning processes supports more consistent, transparent, and equitable outcomes.

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## Primary Research

### Research Questions, Approach and Methods

To build both a practical and qualitative understanding of staff voice and decision-making processes at UAL, the Discovery phase employed a mixed-method approach. This included desk research, targeted literature reviews, semi-structured interviews, and ethnographic observation through attendance at staff forum meetings.

The primary research questions were developed to guide the focus of both the primary and secondary research. These questions were not asked verbatim during interviews but served to orient the line of inquiry throughout the Discovery phase.

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**How do people describe 'staff voice' in their context?**

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**What infrastructure, processes, and systems are in place for formal and informal staff voice?**

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**What are the experiences of staff engaging with these systems through formal and informal mechanisms?**

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**What mechanisms are currently used by the UAL staff community to advance social purpose goals?**

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**What does a successful experience of staff voice look like? (Parameters may include: meaningfulness, impact, inclusivity, effectiveness, staff agency, recognition of contribution, and alignment with UAL's strategic priorities.)**

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**What are the enablers and barriers to a positive staff voice experience and successful integration of staff voice in institutional decision-making?**

It is important to note that findings from qualitative research are inevitably situated. They **reflect the particular knowledge, experiences, and institutional perspectives of participants at a given moment in time.** In this study, care was taken to ensure that insights synthesised from

interviews and other data sources reflected a diversity of perspectives and intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1991), with attention to positionality, grade, role, job family, seniority, exposure to governance processes, and involvement in staff voice mechanisms that support EDI and climate action.

## Interview Selection Criteria

A total of

**25 stakeholders**

were interviewed across a range of grades and job families, with a focus on those currently involved with UAL's formal and informal mechanisms of staff voice. Participants included individuals from Academic, Professional & Administrative, and Operational job families. Staff from Hourly-Paid Lecturing and Technical job families were not interviewed in this cohort, however, many interviewees did advocate for Hourly-Paid Lecturers and Technical staff.

**15 interviews**

were conducted with staff in senior leadership positions, including Executive Board members, Forum Champions, and chairs or co-chairs of EDI and climate action committees. Several of these participants occupied multiple overlapping roles across formal governance and staff community-led initiatives.

### Purposive sampling.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. The process prioritised EDI committee chairs and Forum Champions as an initial pool, supplemented through additional recommendations through the call-out and invitation process. To ensure breadth, at least one senior leader was selected from each job family. Consideration was also given to represent all colleges within UAL, and ensure variation in staff experience across grades, positionality, and project focus areas (e.g., EDI, climate, governance).

## Interview Schedule

All interviews were conducted remotely via video call and lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to reflect on their personal and institutional experiences, while also engaging with broader topics of staff voice, social purpose, and governance. The interview discussion guide was organised into five sections:

01

**Infrastructure and Processes for Staff Voice – Barriers and Enablers for Staff Voice**

02

**Barriers and Enablers to Staff Engagement with Staff Voice Mechanisms, EDI and Climate Action Initiatives**

03

**Perceptions of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Staff Voice and UAL Decision-Making Processes**

04

**Transparency, Accountability, Measuring Impact and Evaluation**

05

**Opportunities and Future Directions**

All interviewees were given the choice whether to be partially or fully anonymised, and all interviews were conducted under UAL ethics approvals.

## Analysis and Thematic Development

Interview transcripts were initially coded using Zotero, following an inductive approach, capturing emergent patterns and recurring challenges and concerns. After all interviews were coded, we iteratively sorted the coded interview quotes into thematic categories using excel.

The final phase of this interview synthesis involved a further distillation, iteration and affinity mapping of the thematic categories and quotes into several distinct themes. This process was done using Miro.

The team generated **21 insights** (see next section: Insights and Themes from Discovery) **grouped into 5 themes**.

## Insights and Themes from Discovery

Five interconnected themes emerged from the Discovery analysis:

- 01      Remit of Committees and Forum**
- 02      Trust, Transparency, and Communication**
- 03      Decision-Making Processes and Closing Feedback Loops**
- 04      Resource and Time for Social Purpose Work**
- 05      Empowering Local Action.**

Each theme is informed by multiple insights drawn from primary research and other secondary research activities. While presented separately, the themes are not discrete or siloed. Instead, they reflect the systemic nature of the challenge, highlighting how social and cultural dynamics and procedural ambiguity shapes experiences of staff voice and decision-making across UAL.

## Overview of Theme 1: Remit of Committees and Forums

### INSIGHT 1: Role of Champions, Chairs and Forums

*"I don't quite get whether all the groups have the same structure, format, terms of reference – if you like, ethos – for inputs and outputs. I don't know whether they should or not. I'm not sure how they plug into the decision-making, including governance."*

- Chris Condron, Chief Digital Officer

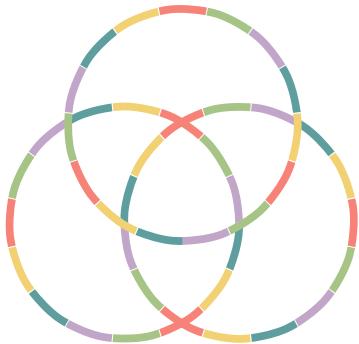
There is not a consistent understanding of the function of Forums and Champions. In the absence of clear guidance or formalised processes, Champions are unsure of their remit, and Forums vary in purpose. Some operate as informal spaces for surfacing staff views, while others take on decision-making functions typically associated with formal committees. This ambiguity leads to confusion about where authority lies and how input is used.

As a result, some initiatives developed through informal mechanisms **generate positive outcomes but may lack alignment with governance processes**, making them difficult to support, resource or sustain over time.

### INSIGHT 2: No Shared Understanding for Decision-Making Structures

Staff and senior leadership alike lack a shared understanding of how staff voice mechanisms integrate with formal governance. Forums and staff groups can operate without clear remits or differentiation from decision-making bodies, and it is unclear how or if their input connects to formal decisions. As a result, staff perceive that the Executive Board ignores or overrides staff voice, when the reality is that many decisions fall outside of the Executive Board's remit.

Without clearly **formalised routes to integrate staff voice input**, consultation can feel symbolic rather than influential.



*"And I think we need to be much clearer about how those informal structures fit into the formal structures... Because the Religion and Belief Forum, for example, operates like a committee. And they've done some brilliant work – the calendar is one of them – but I'm not quite sure that's something an informal forum needs to be doing. Informal forums should be collating people's views and making sure that they are presenting a collective view, not individual views."*

- Kene Igweonu, Provost of LCC and Executive Dean for Impact and Innovation

**INSIGHT 3:****Misunderstanding of the Executive Function**

*"I don't think we really know where decisions get made. And because of the opacity of it all, people assume that all the bad – and maybe all the good, I suppose – comes from the Executive Board. When in fact, like all executive boards, EB has a particular kind of power that should not be underplayed. It is critical, but its power is also constrained because of its inability to execute anything below strategy."*

- Executive Board Member

There are misunderstandings about where and how decisions are made across the university. The Executive Board is responsible for strategic direction but cannot execute actions below that level. Due to unclear remits and governance processes, it is often assumed that the Executive Board directly plans and operationalises initiatives – it doesn't. This leads to confusion, uncoordinated delivery and misplaced accountability and blame.

A **lack of defined processes** connecting **strategy, decision-making and planning** results in **disjointed follow-through**.

**INSIGHT 4:****Supporting Engagement**

The university aims to ensure that staff voices are heard and that feedback influences decision-making with various job roles contributing to relationship-building and organisational learning and listening. In this effort, engagement is a crucial step to gathering and understanding staff voice. However, **engagement responsibilities are not specifically defined** within many job roles or governance structures.

As a result, people who facilitate engagement with staff voice often lack the authority and mechanisms needed to channel insights into university decision-making processes. Uncertainty over where engagement sits, leads to role confusion and weakened influence of some job roles.

*"There are different views on where [engagement] should sit [within the university...] I think that's a bit of a barrier. And a barrier around success. The Internal Communities Manager role, sometimes felt she didn't know where her place was in the grand scheme of things. She was setting up lots of meetings with people we'd identified as hard-to-reach groups. She was going in very softly, with monthly drop-in meetings where people could just raise things with her. She wasn't broadcasting; she was listening. And she kept saying, "I don't know if I feel like I'm being useful here." Where we weren't able to really help shift the dial was that she wasn't able to have that agency into the governance. **She was collecting all this wonderful feedback but, apart from listening and using it in comms, didn't really have the agency to influence governance in that way.**"*

- Internal Communications Manager

## Overview of Theme 2: Trust, Transparency, Communication

### INSIGHT 1: Honesty Over Optics

There is a perceived lack of transparency from leadership around the challenges, missteps or limitations the university faces. This impacts trust and can lead to defensive communication.

Staff would appreciate blunt and honest reflection, especially when outcomes fall short. Without open dialogue with leadership, **staff feel disconnected from institutional direction.**



### INSIGHT 2: Translating Strategy at All Levels

***"The decisions [the Executive Board] makes very frequently turn into things that we have to respond to. We have to do things with. We have to perform to. It is creating far too much content. Is creating far too many too many processes. It's creating far too many obligations that belong then to other people."***

- Paul Haywood, Academic Dean Special Projects CSM

*"There are forums like Race Champion Forum where we can express our views, and the people that are present there are hopefully people that have gathered many other views from staff voice. But then, what is done with them, and how they're incorporated into the decisions made, I feel like sometimes that's murky waters. It's mixed. Sometimes I feel like I understand where the consultation is going to directly be offered into the decision-making process and inform it. And then other times, I do have to say – being brutally honest – that sometimes it can feel like lip service. **That we are consulted to tick a box to say that we've been consulted, but actually a decision might have already been made.**"*

- Jhinuk Sarkar, Previous Co-Chair of Group for Equality of Minority Staff, Senior Lecturer in Illustration CCW

UAL's strategic direction is not consistently translated into concrete expectations across levels of the organisation. Staff often do not see how strategies relate to their roles or day-to-day responsibilities, and grassroots initiatives are not always able to map onto institutional goals.

Conversely, **top-down decisions may lack context or clarity in how they are communicated**, reducing their perceived relevance. This misalignment limits coherence between strategic planning and operational delivery.

**INSIGHT 3:****Valuing Informal Listening**

*"I think the capacity to, or rather, providing the capacity for staff to have space to informally tell you what the issues are — I think senior leadership would reap a lot more benefits from those informal spaces. I think collaborating doesn't always have to be this really formal: "let's have an agenda; let's get some actions; let's do this...bang bang bang"... Because if you don't get to know your staff, how can you know how to collaborate with them properly?"*

- Jhinuk Sarkar, Previous Co-Chair of Group for Equality of Minority Staff, Senior Lecturer in Illustration CCW

Informal listening posts are an effective mechanism to surface staff experiences and build local trust. They enable proactive responses and support a culture of openness and everyday dialogue. Staff benefit from **regular, low-pressure spaces to share concerns and ideas**, which **fosters trust and psychological safety**.

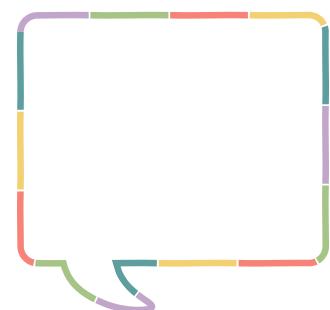
These informal qualitative mechanisms are often undervalued compared to formal data collection or structured forums, which can feel intimidating or overly procedural, discouraging input from a harder-to-reach members of staff.

**INSIGHT 4:****Aligning Local Action and Strategy**

The lack of clarity around strategy and governance creates points of friction between what staff initiate and what the institution can support. As a result, informal initiatives may exceed resources and operational capacity or fail to align with strategic priorities, which can result in initiatives not being supported. Without a clear understanding of strategy, staff feel disconnected from these decisions, which undermines confidence in UAL's commitment to collaboration and transparency.

*"It feels like what you get is lots of micro things, but no engagement with strategy. And as a result, everyone just bounces off each other."*

- Executive Board Member



## Overview of Theme 3: Decision-Making Processes and Closing Feedback Loops

### INSIGHT 1:

#### Visibility of Timelines and Critical Milestones

Staff lack visibility and knowledge of decision-making timelines for processes like budgeting or strategic planning. Forums and other groups often miss windows of opportunity to input ideas and proposals without clear understanding of these formal processes. Therefore, when consultation occurs outside of the opportune timeframe, it can make staff feel like they were not considered in decisions and the process feels disingenuous like a tick-box exercise.

*"I think that there is a temporal one [way to improve collaboration and cooperation between staff and senior leadership] as well: **understanding when decisions are open.**"*

- Executive Board Member

### INSIGHT 2:

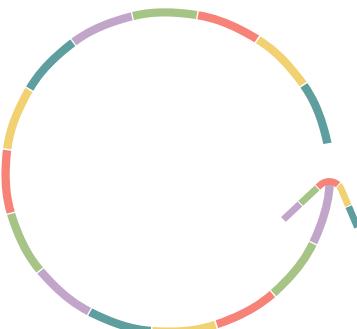
#### Recognition of Ideas and People

Staff experience a lack of both recognition and clarity on how their input meaningfully informs decision-making. This is due to weak feedback loops and messaging that lacks decision-making rationale.

When decisions or initiatives advance without acknowledgement of people or ideas with clear links to the consultation process, engagement feels performative, **eroding trust and confidence in the university's commitment to listening.**

*"The update, which was recently published as the **Climate Action Plan**, again erases many of the people that took part in some of the things that are mentioned, and it even claims some of these things that happened in grassroots, as part of what the Social Purpose Lab is doing. So there has been a backlash and a real morale downer for many in the climate action seeing that."*

- Anonymised Interview Quote



**INSIGHT 3:****Communicating “Why”**

*“I don’t think we do that very well, at least not in a structured, transparent way. Often, I’ll see things like, “Here’s how many people we spoke to,” and “Here are the themes that came up.” But that doesn’t always connect to: “Here’s the decision we made. Here’s where there were tensions. Here’s why we made the call we did, even knowing it wouldn’t align with everyone’s views.” Instead, it’s more like: “Well, we talked to people, so now we know,” and then—decision made. And when staff have genuinely tried to engage, that kind of process can end up feeling really negative.”*

- Anonymised Interview Quote

Staff are often informed of how, when and where consultation occurred, but not why or how particular decisions were made. This communication gap stems from a lack of clear decision-making processes and remits across consultation and governance structures. In the absence of clear procedures to respond to and integrate staff input, **staff feel detached from outcomes**.

If can’t see how their voice feeds into real decisions, it undermines the purpose and credibility of engagement.

**INSIGHT 4:****Measuring Staff Voice and Local Action**

Staff voice raised through informal mechanisms can lack traction in formal decision-making when not accompanied by robust supporting data because they lack the kinds of formal data that decision-makers rely on. This can result in valuable insights, signals and opportunities being overlooked.

It also creates hesitation among leadership about what they can or should bring forward, particularly if there is no mandate or supporting information to validate the issue.

*“But when it’s something that an individual in the group feels passionate about – something that doesn’t come with data or isn’t widely shared. That’s when I’m not sure what my role is. Am I supposed to advocate for that person’s voice? Am I supposed to say, “Well, I think EB would think...”? Am I supposed to take it there or not? Because it’s not clear.”*

- Chris Condron, Chief Digital Officer

## INSIGHT 5:

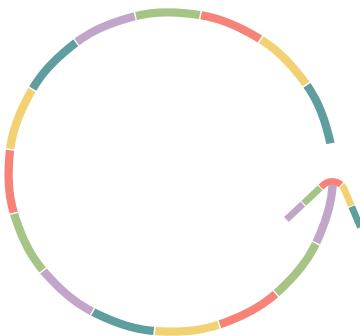
## Balancing College Autonomy with Institutional Clarity

In UAL's college-centre structure, balancing local autonomy with institutional coherence can be contentious. This structure allows for flexibility and contextual decision-making, but it also results in fragmentation, siloed communication, duplication and inconsistent staff experiences.

Efforts to standardise staff voice initiatives are often resisted due to mistrust in central oversight, making it difficult to stabilise, support and measure these initiatives.

*[There are] challenges because we are a group of six colleges coming together, each with their own ways and their own culture. So that's really important. That should be kept. I don't think it's about making everybody the same. I don't think it's about that. But there is something about having University-wide structure. **So whether you've got a member of staff at CSM, LCF, CCW or LCC, they should experience the same thing.** They should in terms of things like policy. You shouldn't have a member of staff in one place going, "Yes, you can go to as many conferences as you want", and then somewhere else, "You're not going anywhere". It's about the consistency. And I think if people can see consistency, they're more likely to go, okay."*

- Jheni Arboine, Educational Developer  
Academic Enhancement



## Overview of Theme 4: Resource and Time for Social Purpose Work

### INSIGHT 1:

#### Embedding Social Purpose in Roles

Social purpose goals pertaining to EDI and climate action are not typically embedded in formal roles and responsibilities. When these objectives are not clearly integrated or measured, staff often pursue them informally or deprioritise them. This results in **inconsistent engagement, limited strategic alignment and a reliance on individual initiative to carry out social purpose.**

Without formal structures, some managers may also overlook or undervalue this work, thus reducing the capacity for sustained action and wider impact.

*"I think that is the way to go—embedding it so that people see that piece of work or see their input into those areas as really embedded in their day-to-day work... I think making it a little bit more targeted in terms of objectives, making it measurable, and enabling people to say, "What did you do to support these agendas?", would get people thinking it's something they can do, even if it's not their personal interest area."*

- Sarah Chowdry-Grant, Head of College Operations CCW

### INSIGHT 2:

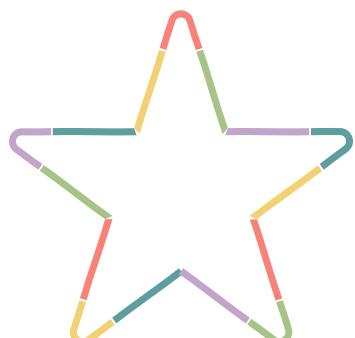
#### Social Purpose Work Often Relies on Goodwill and Requires Sustainable Structures of Support

Staff-led work on EDI and social purpose is often under-resourced, relying on personal time and commitment. Without formal roles, funding or time allocation, these efforts risk burnout and disengagement. Sustainability requires institutional structures that recognise, support and resource this work.

Remuneration is a structural obstacle, but **backfilling or removing tasks can alleviate time for social purpose.**

*"Then their manager, and by extension, the directors of their group, recognise that this is work that needs doing and is important to the university. It should be tracked in objectives. There should be an evaluation of whether it works or not. That is the enabling bit, which I think is often missing."*

- Rebecca Munro, Director of External Communications



## Overview of Theme 5: Empowering Local Action

### INSIGHT 1: Scaling Grassroots Initiatives

When leadership institutionalises grassroots initiatives to align them with high-level strategy and objectives, the goal is to help scale these initiatives by providing resourcing and other measures of support.

Without clear communication, feedback or shared ownership in the formalisation process, staff can feel that their contributions are discounted or misrepresented. The **absence of feedback and shared sense of ownership undermines trust and reduces motivation** to contribute.

*"Lots of niche level innovation which is not aligned into larger structures that make those visible that allow for this to be scaled up or scaled out or that even allow those kind of mid-level managers and above to appreciate and credit and stabilise those things as ongoing initiatives."*

- Ramia Maze, Professor of Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability LCC

### INSIGHT 2: Filling in the Gap

High-level strategic ambitions and grassroots innovation remain disconnected due to a persistent structural gap. "Middle leadership" roles (for lack of a better term), such as Deans and Programme Directors, are well-positioned to bridge this space, translating strategy downward and stabilising grassroots work upward. However, they often lack the operational capacity, authority and resourcing to act in this way. Whilst the Executive Board leads on strategic direction, it recognises that detailed knowledge and momentum sit lower in the organisation.

Without **clear accountability structures or processes for validation, decision-making and evaluation at the middle level**, initiatives remain fragmented and difficult to embed.

*"I hope this isn't too critical, but I see a bit of a **disconnect between that high level and what's happening on the ground—the operational action or change needed to achieve some of that...** but there is work to do to translate the ambitions and the strategy into action on the ground."*

- Sarah Chowdry-Grant, Head of College Operations CCW

**INSIGHT 3:****Excluded Hourly Paid Lecturers (HPLs)**

*"The second biggest barrier is our HPLs and our multiple weird contracting arrangements. We have a **whole heap of staff that we treat very differently to our established staff, and they make up the majority of the staff voice**. But they are often excluded from a lot of the staff development activities. Structurally, that's just a barrier."*

- Sarah Chowdry-Grant, Head of College Operations CCW

Many staff, particularly HPLs and those on precarious contracts, are regularly excluded from development opportunities and staff voice mechanisms.

Participation is stymied by structural **barriers such as contract types, inconsistent access to resources and unclear eligibility**. These arrangements create a system that is experienced as exclusionary and disempowering, undermining the goal of an inclusive staff community.

**INSIGHT 4:****Lack of Representation in Formal Structures**

Committees and forums are not well represented by lower-grade roles and often lack ethnic diversity. These structures are typically populated by senior leadership, where ethnic minority representation is limited.

Without intentional inclusion, lower-grade and ethnically diverse staff are less likely to be present or heard. As a result, **key perspectives are underrepresented in decision-making** unless senior leaders actively engage with and are informed by effective informal listening channels.

*"The aim would be to expand those groups a bit more. Even though at CCW we've got many more people sitting there, in terms of ethnic diversity, that hasn't improved... One (goal) is trying to help some of our staff move up into senior management roles. **But until that happens, maybe there's also something about opening up those committees and forums to people who aren't in senior management roles.**"*

- Samantha Elliot, Associate Dean Student Journey CCW



## INSIGHT 5:

**Initiative Fatigue: Too Much, Too Brief**

Staff experience initiative fatigue with too many disconnected actions and projects that are not sustained after significant time and energy are invested. A **lack of coherence between high level strategy and action planning, combined with a tendency to continually launch new initiatives**, prevents long term follow through and a sense of continuity in strategic aims.

As a result, even impactful grassroots efforts are not resourced or scaled, contributing to cycles of short-term activity that drain staff energy and allow previously addressed challenges to resurface.

*"That's a big challenge for the university because what we tend to do is once a project's been delivered, we kind of move on because we have to work on something else. So sometimes we then put at risk big pieces of work that have taken loads of time and energy and collaboration. They become stale in a few years' time because we've moved on to something else."*

- Rebecca Munro, Director of External Communications

## INSIGHT 6:

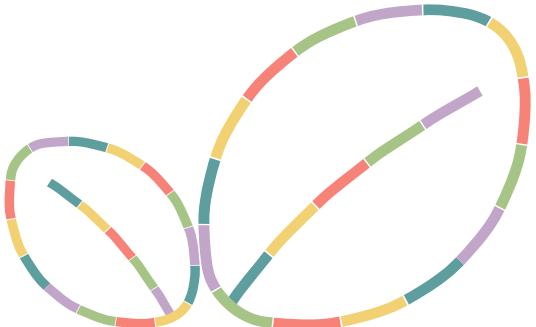
**Lack of Continuity Between Past and Present Actions and Strategy**

UAL struggles to establish continuity between initiatives, both current and historical. Much of the knowledge about what has been tried – and what worked – remains tacit and disconnected from strategic planning.

While some formal and grassroots work have aimed to document past and active efforts, it highlights a broader issue: **staff contributions lack visibility and recognition**. As a result, new initiatives risk repeating earlier work or overlooking lessons already learned.

*"But there are some occasions where things may just go into the ether or drop off, because we tend to have a habit sometimes of creating an intervention, seeing that it had a really positive impact, and then saying, "Job done, tick," and not doing it again. Then, lo and behold, a year later, the same problem arises... We need to sustain it, otherwise, we may well have that problem back."*

- Samantha Elliot, Associate Dean Student Journey CCW



## How insights inform the co-design

Following the synthesis of insights and themes, we conducted an ideation session to formulate **How Might We (HMW) questions** relevant to each of the themes. In general, HMW questions, are concise, open-ended prompts used in design to reframe a problem as an opportunity for creative solutions.

The HMW questions were **mapped to a matrix** focussing on the **potential value/impact and feasibility/effort**.

## Prioritisation of Research Areas

Following the generation of the **How Might We (HMW)** questions, we identified the need to focus our efforts on a smaller number of opportunities that could realistically be developed and tested within the scope of the project. To guide this prioritisation, we used a **Feasibility and Impact Matrix** to assess where interventions would offer the most meaningful contribution.

The themes **Remit of Committees and Forums** and **Decision-Making Processes and Feedback Loops** were prioritised for further exploration in the Define (co-design) and Develop (testing) phases that followed.

In the Discovery Playback session that followed with project stakeholders, we shared the entirety of primary and secondary research findings, insights and themes and examples of best practice in staff voice. In addition, the HMW questions were shared, which supported discussions with key decision-makers regarding what themes were most feasible to pursue within the scope and resource of this project.

### Feasibility

Feasibility was assessed based on the capacity and expertise of the core project teams Service Futures Lab, Social Purpose Lab, and People & Culture, as well as the extent to which initiatives could be delivered collaboratively with UAL stakeholders. We also considered the time constraints of the project, with delivery required by July 2025, and prioritised initiatives that could be piloted or tested within this timeframe.

### Impact

Impact was determined by drawing on insights from the Discovery phase, including desk research and interviews. We prioritised initiatives that addressed widely expressed concerns and had the potential to create significant improvements in the visibility, coherence, and inclusivity of staff voice mechanisms.

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## Top Priority Areas

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### 01 Decision-Making Processes & Feedback Loops

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### 02 Remit of Committees and Forums

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These two themes were selected as priority areas due to their alignment with the project's scope and their potential for high impact. They address urgent and recurring issues raised across stakeholder groups such as the **lack of clarity around roles, responsibilities, and how decisions are communicated**.

Focusing on these areas allows us to design tools and processes (e.g., visual remits, follow-up protocols, consultation guidance) that can be tested in the short term and embedded in existing structures.

They also offer a strong foundation for broader cultural and systemic change by **making processes more transparent and participatory**.

## Lower Priority Areas

### 01 Empowering Local Action

### 02 Trust, Transparency, and Communication

### 03 Resources and Time for Social Purpose

While these areas are recognised as important, they were deprioritised in this phase due to their **complexity and scale**. Initiatives in these areas often require the development of new systems, long-term cultural shifts, or significant cross-institutional alignment elements that are beyond the scope and timeline of this project.

For example, introducing new recognition or resourcing mechanisms would require institution-wide policy change. Similarly, creating entirely new communication infrastructure or reforming deeply embedded cultural dynamics would involve extended engagement and budgetary planning. **These areas have therefore been noted as valuable directions for future work, rather than immediate design priorities.**

Though some insights were out of scope for this project timeline and teams, they are still valuable contributions for various teams within the university. **These are therefore included in this report, and we are in the process of presenting these insights widely to teams throughout the university.**

# Design

06

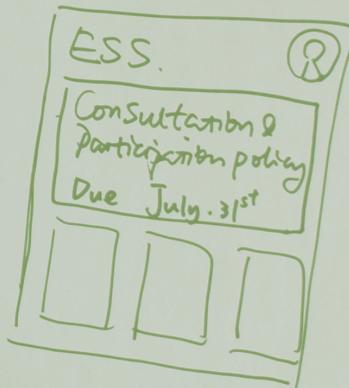
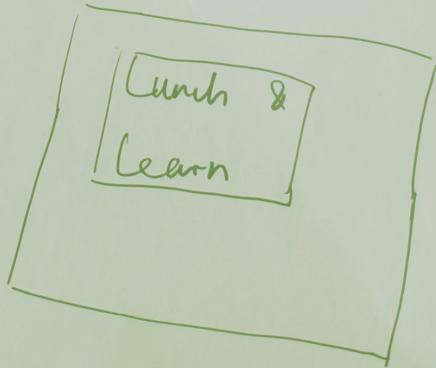
Senior  
agers

How to make  
it accountable  
but not a  
barrier to  
participation.

Sit  
independently

Expertise in  
the Uni  
that builds  
up knowledge  
(a person)

These  
are the ways  
to improve  
processes



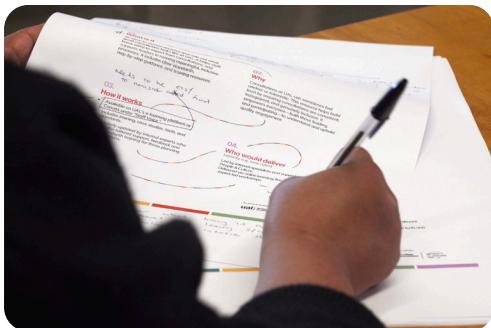
## Methodology in Design phase (Co-Design, Testing, Prototyping)

Our Design phase followed a participatory service design approach, integrating discovery research, co-design, iterative prototyping, and concept testing: W



### Co-Design

Staff were central to the design process, contributing lived experiences and institutional knowledge. Co-design sessions engaged 16 participants in-person and several asynchronously, ensuring broad representation across job families and sites.



### Testing

Concept testing was conducted through a mix of live workshops and asynchronous tools. Feedback captured a range of sentiments from enthusiasm to scepticism, particularly concerning implementation feasibility and workload pressures.



### Prototyping

Concepts were developed collaboratively and grouped by themes. Prototypes such as decision-making visualisations, repositories, and follow-up protocols were iteratively refined in response to feedback.

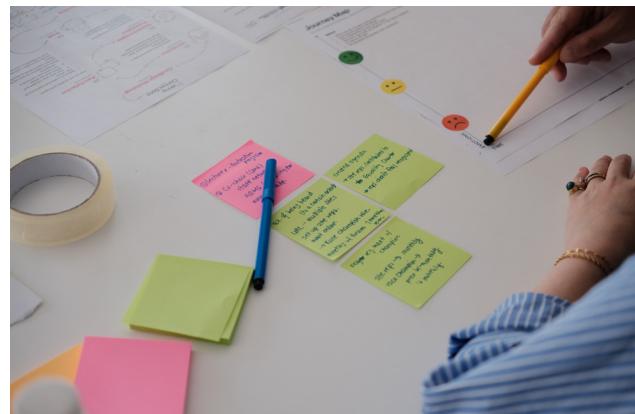
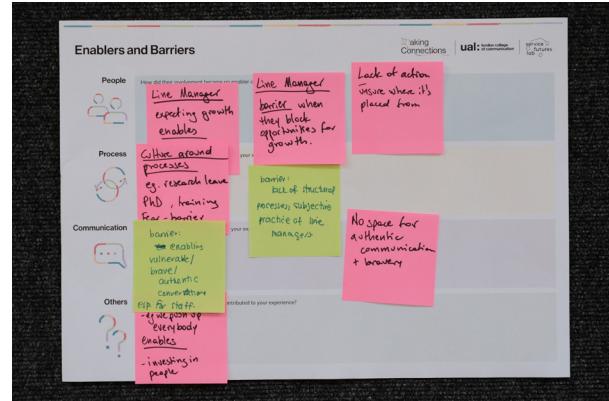
## Design

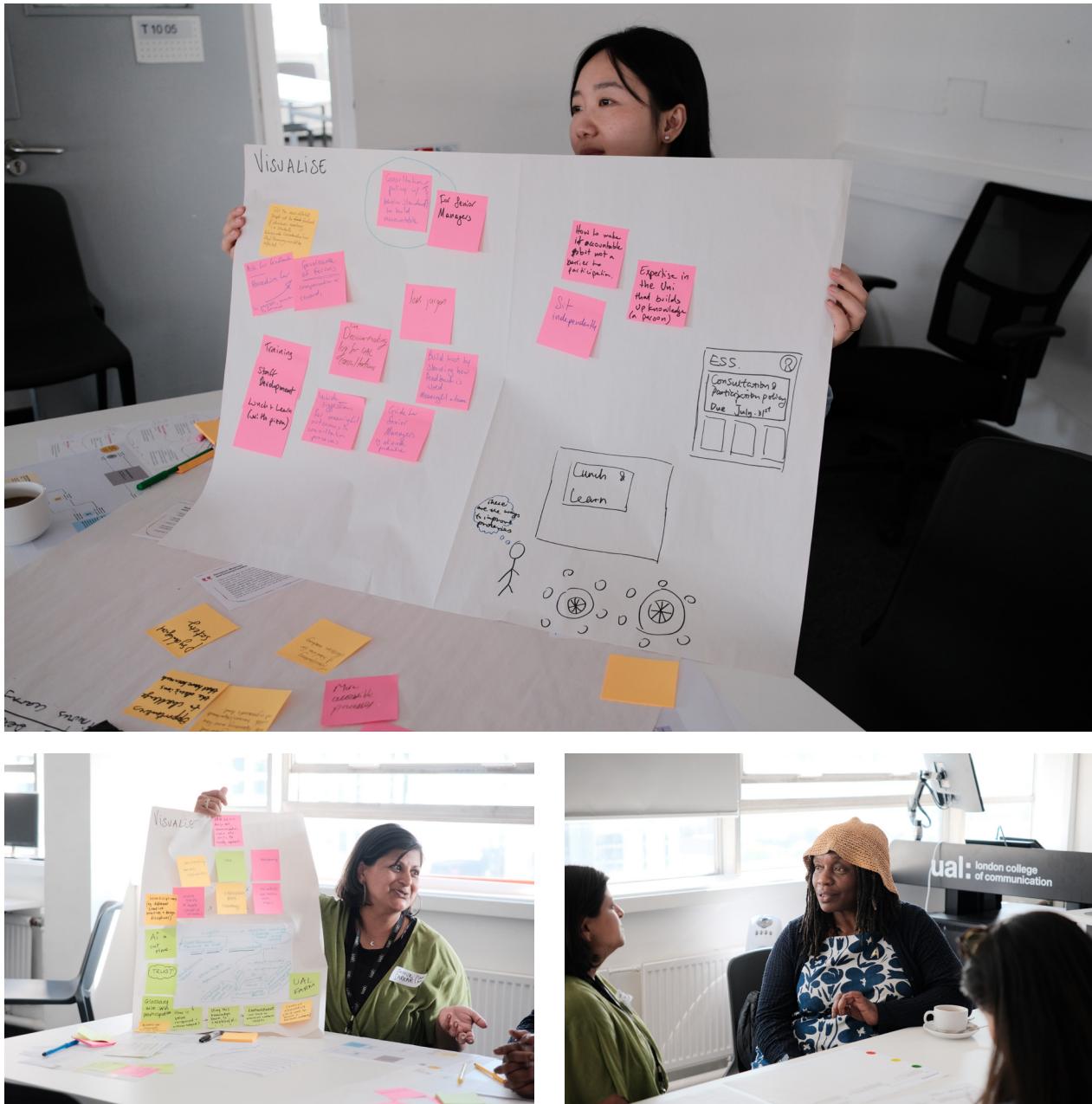


Building on the outcomes from Discovery, we identified the appropriate level of information to provide to our co-design participants, balancing the need to spark relevant ideas with sufficient context from our research.

The Design phase began in April, during this time, we developed workshop materials and delivered **two in-person and one asynchronous co-design session**. In addition, we conducted both live and asynchronous concept testing with over 30 staff members.

This phase culminated in the creation of 12 co-design concepts aimed at strengthening staff voice mechanisms and driving institutional change in areas such as decision-making, trust, and communication.





Prior to the co-design activities, participants were invited to reflect on their lived experiences specifically when, how, and where they had previously contributed their voices to influence change. They considered what made those experiences either positive or negative. We explored the principles underlying these reflections to identify the key factors that shaped their experiences.

Drawing from these insights, we presented a summary of findings from the Discovery phase, along with a set of “How Might We” (HMW) questions. Teams of 2 to 4 participants then worked collaboratively to develop ideas and initiatives that could positively influence UAL’s current staff voice mechanisms.

## 12 Co-Design concepts

The 12 ideas span a wide range of interventions, from improving the visibility of decisions and creating better feedback loops, to enabling fairer participation in institutional work and recognising staff contributions.

Collectively, these concepts aim to make UAL's decision-making more transparent, inclusive, and responsive, while building trust and empowering staff at all levels to influence meaningful change.

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- 01      Knowledge Bank**
- 02      Decision Portal**
- 03      Meaningful Consultations Resource**
- 04      UAL Decision Roadmap**
- 05      Decision Follow-Up Protocol**
- 06      20% Time for Special Projects**
- 07      Revamping the All-Staff Briefings**
- 08      Making Meetings Matter**
- 09      One Source of Truth**
- 10      Multi-Channel Feedback**
- 11      Celebrating and Recognising All Staff**
- 12      Diverse Representation in Decision-Making**

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## 01. Knowledge Bank – Visualising How UAL Decides

A creative service that transforms complex decision-making processes into clear, visual explanations. Staff and students co-create visual timelines and diagrams to clarify how decisions are made, improving understanding and transparency across UAL.



### 01. What is it

A service that helps turn complex decision-making processes into clear, visual explanations. Any decision-making body, such as committees, networks or forums, can commission one of these visuals, which are created by paid UAL creatives using a consistent visual style. The illustrated timelines, key roles, decision loops and reporting relationships will make it easier to understand how things get done at UAL.

### 02. Why

Decision-making at UAL can feel opaque and hard to follow. This initiative tackles that by making decision processes transparent and accessible. It helps everyone at UAL understand when and how decisions happen — and who's involved, so they can better participate.

### 03. How it works

- Teams request a visual explanation of their process (e.g. course committees, boards).
- The [Knowledge Bank](#) pairs them with student or staff creators via ArtsTemp.
- Creators are briefed and supported with clear visual guidelines.
- Completed visuals are shared on a central platform, forming a growing visual library.

### 04. Who would deliver (specify e.g. new roles)

Managed through the [Knowledge Bank](#) and delivered by ArtsTemp creators. Creators are trained and paid students or staff with creative skills in graphic design, data visualisation, animation, video, etc. Visuals are shared via the [Decision-Making Portal](#) or Log.

### 05. Contributors

Jhinuk Sarkar, Jheni Arboine

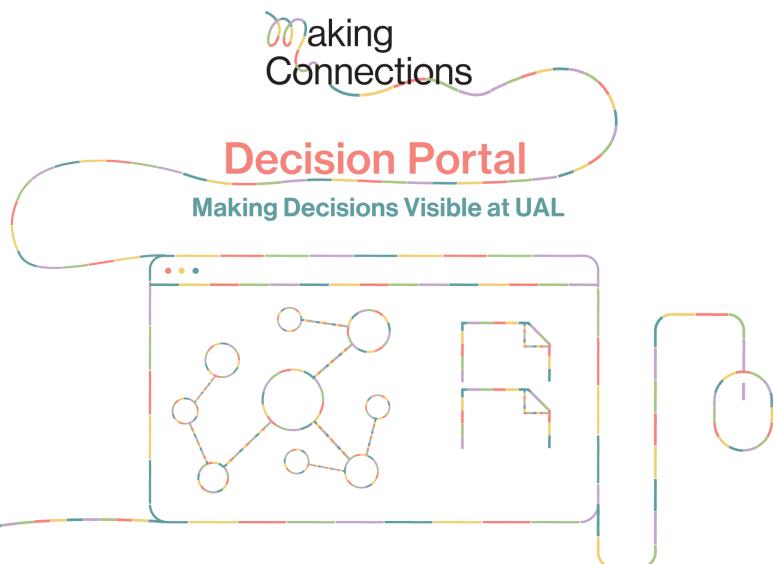
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**ual:** london college of communication



## 02. Decision Portal – Making Decisions Visible at UAL

An online platform where staff can explore key decisions, see who made them, and understand why. The portal includes decision logs and visuals to enhance transparency and engagement with institutional governance.



### 01.

#### What is it

A central online space where staff can see and explore key decisions made across UAL — including what was decided, by whom, and why. Colleagues can read decision logs, understand decision pathways, and see visualisations that bring the process to life.

### 02.

#### Why

Staff often don't know how or why decisions are made — or how to have input. This portal increases transparency, builds trust, and makes institutional decisions easier to follow. It offers new ways for staff to engage beyond annual surveys.

### 03.

#### How it works

- A central portal (could be a menu item on Canvas) hosts the space which includes visualisations and log.
- Visualisations from the [Knowledge Bank](#) are linked to help explain structures.
- Decisions are recorded in a log that shows what was decided, who decided, and based on what. This is a simplified version of the minutes of meetings, pertaining only to decisions made.
- The portal evolves into an archive of institutional decision-making.

### 04.

#### Who would deliver (specify e.g. new roles)

Delivered through Canvas or another internal platform. Entries are logged by decision-makers or comms leads, supported by the [Knowledge Bank](#)

### 05.

#### Contributors

Cian McAlone, Najia Ahmed

In association with:

## 03. Meaningful Consultations Resource

A practical guide outlining what effective consultation looks like at UAL. It includes standards, training, and case studies to support leaders in conducting inclusive, transparent, and consistent engagement processes with staff representatives.

**making Connections**

### Meaningful Consultations Resource

Supporting Better Engagement at UAL

**01. What is it**

An easy-to-access resource that sets out what good consultation looks like at UAL. It helps staff know what to expect from consultations, and supports leaders in running meaningful, inclusive processes. It includes clear standards, step-by-step guidance, and training resources.

**02. Why**

Consultations at UAL can sometimes feel unclear or tokenistic. This resource helps build trust by ensuring consultations are consistent, transparent, and genuinely inclusive. It empowers everyone—both those leading and participating—to understand and uphold quality engagement.

**03. How it works**

- Available on UAL's e-learning platform or Canvas under "Staff Voice."
- Includes training, case studies, tools, and standards.
- Regularly updated by internal experts who also offer tailored support, feedback and more in-depth training for those planning consultations.

**04. Who would deliver**  
(specify e.g. new roles)

Led by internal specialists and supported by People & Culture.  
Delivered via online learning, live sessions, and expert-led workshops.

**05. Contributors**

Cian McAlone, Najia Ahmed

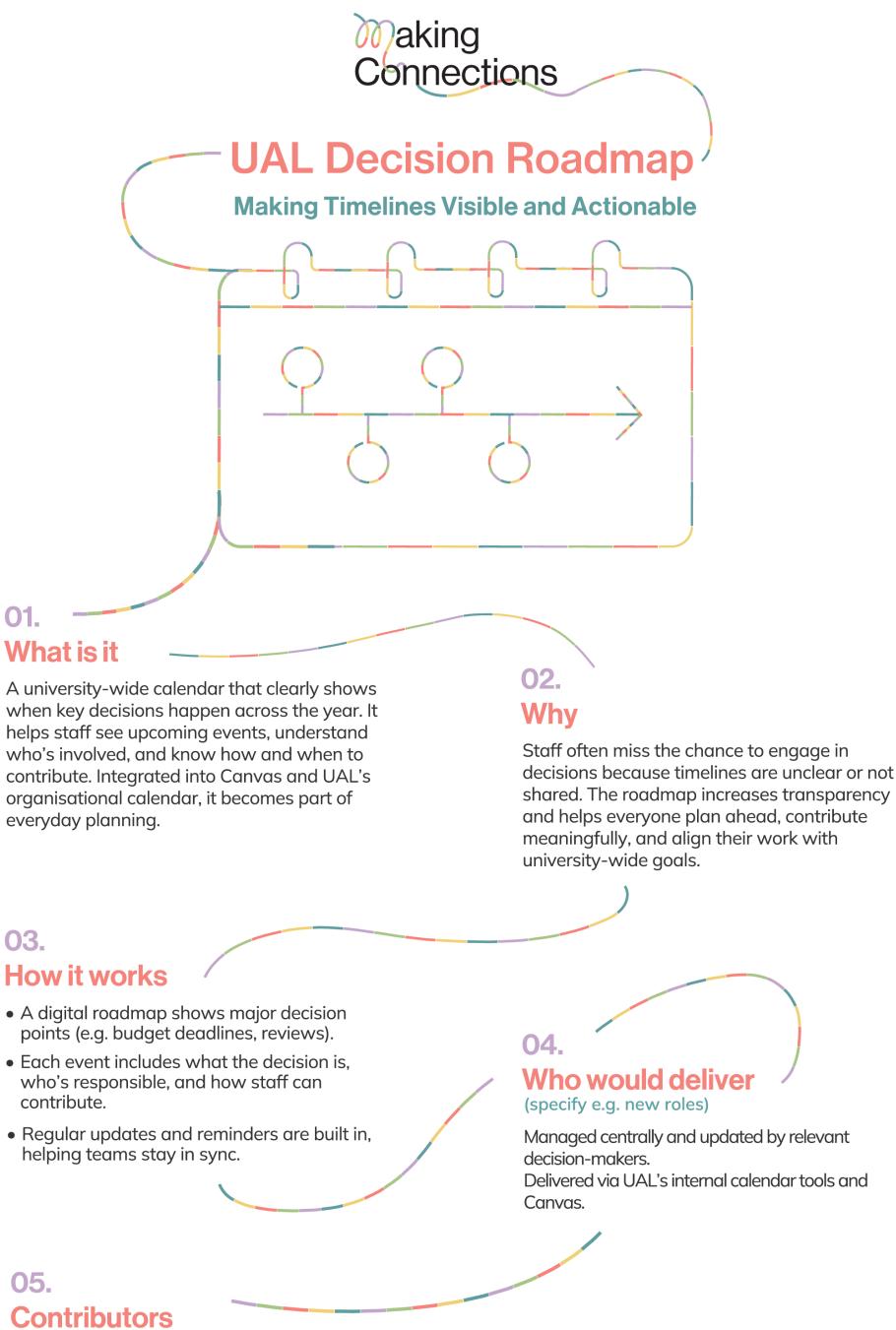
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service futures lab

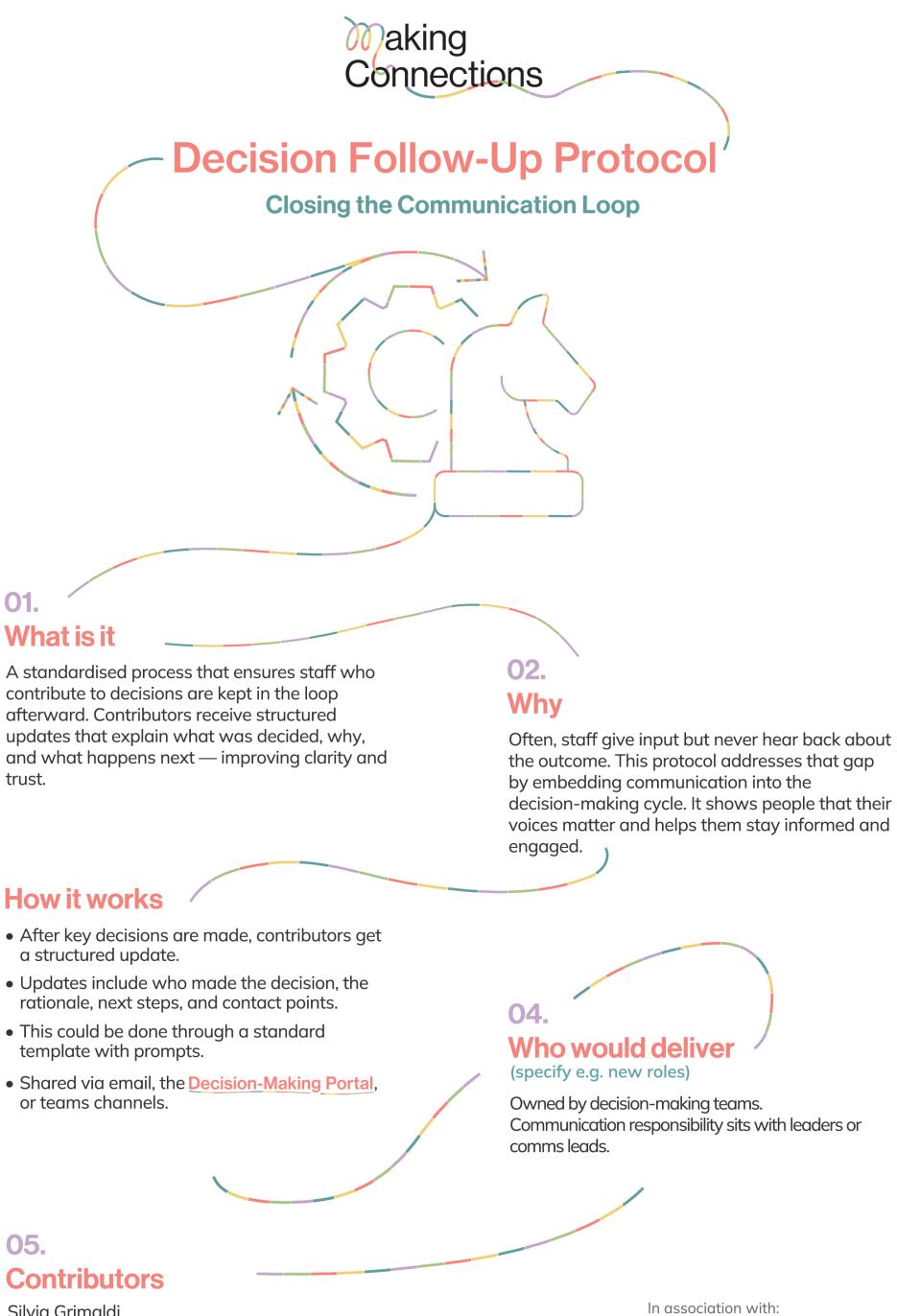
## 04. UAL Decision Roadmap

A shared calendar that highlights key decision-making dates throughout the academic year. Integrated into daily tools like Canvas, it helps staff representatives see when and how they can contribute to upcoming decisions.



## 05. Decision Follow-Up Protocol

A communication framework ensuring that staff who give input into decisions receive timely updates about the outcomes, rationale, and next steps by closing the feedback loop and fostering trust in the process.



## 06. 20% Time for Special Projects

A model that allows staff to dedicate up to 20% of their time to strategic UAL-wide initiatives, aligned with their personal development goals, offering a fair and supported way to contribute without overwork.



01.

### What is it

A model that lets staff dedicate up to 20% of their contracted time to UAL-wide strategic projects—without taking on unpaid work. Staff choose projects aligned with their values and development goals, all agreed through annual review conversations.

02.

### Why

Staff want to contribute to meaningful initiatives but often lack time or formal pathways. This model provides a structured, supported way to take part in UAL's strategic work—fairly and without overwork.

03.

### How it works

- Each year, 4–5 projects are selected jointly by staff representatives and the Executive Board.
- Staff choose how to (and whether to) contribute through PRC meetings.
- Participation is self-managed and tracked with line manager support.
- Workload is factored into the PRC conversation with 20% time being standard.
- Regular feedback and check-ins ensure alignment and progress.

04.

### Who would deliver (specify e.g. new roles)

Coordinated by People & Culture and supported by senior leaders. Staff representatives and the Executive Board jointly govern the project cycle.

05.

### Contributors

Jonathan Wright, Matilda Agace, Naomi Richmond-Swift, Veron Lai

In association with:

## 07. Revamping the All-Staff Briefings

A refreshed briefing format where committee representatives share updates on university initiatives. It strengthens connection to strategy and progress, offering regular, visual, and thematic communication to all staff.



### 01.

#### What is it

A refreshed format for UAL's all-staff briefings, where committee representatives share updates, progress, and insights from university-wide groups. Briefings become a regular touchpoint for hearing directly about UAL's strategic focus, themes, and current initiatives.

### 02.

#### Why

Many staff feel disconnected from UAL's strategic direction and ongoing initiatives. These briefings help make institutional work more visible and participatory, creating shared understanding and alignment across the organisation.

### 03.

#### How it works

- Committee representatives present highlights and updates during the briefings.
- Visual summaries and "year focus" themes are clearly communicated.
- Updates are structured around shared goals and staff-named priorities.

### 04.

#### Who would deliver (specify e.g. new roles)

- Organised by internal comms, with contributions from forum and committee representatives.
- Champions or nominated speakers from working groups participate.

### 05.

#### Contributors

Serena Bloise-Thomas, Adriano Digaudio, Liz Evans

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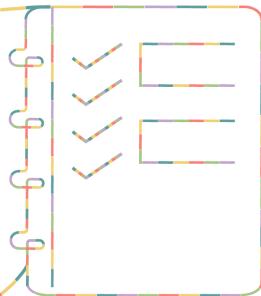
## 08. Making Meetings Matter

A standardised approach to planning and communicating meeting agendas, timelines, and responsibilities. It improves clarity, structure, and staff participation by making working group processes more transparent and actionable.



### Making Meetings Matter

Visibility of Agendas and Schedules



**01. What is it**

A consistent structure for sharing committee and working group agendas, decision timelines, and responsibilities. Staff will be able to see what's being discussed, who's involved, and how it connects to broader decision-making—helping everyone prepare and contribute meaningfully.

**02. Why**

Too often, meetings feel disconnected or unclear. Agendas lack focus, timelines are hidden, and accountability is vague. This initiative brings clarity, purpose, and structure—so working groups can take real action.

**03. How it works**

- Meeting agendas are shared in advance and follow a standard format.
- Visible timelines show how decisions progress and escalate.
- A clear organigram outlines roles and responsibilities.
- Anonymous channels allow for agenda suggestions and feedback.

**04. Who would deliver**  
(specify e.g. new roles)

- Managed by forum and working group leads.
- Supported by a new coordination role focused on scheduling and communications.

**05. Contributors**

Serena Bloise-Thomas, Adriano Digaudio, Liz Evans

In association with:



## 09. One Source of Truth

A single, reliable repository for up-to-date policies, procedures, meeting minutes, and decisions. Accessible via Canvas, it reduces confusion and ensures staff can easily find consistent, trustworthy information.

**One Source of Truth**  
Streamlining Access to Key Information

**01. What is it**  
A unified space (likely on Canvas) where staff can find accurate, up-to-date information about UAL policies, procedures, and committee discussions. Meeting minutes and decisions are archived and searchable, so staff don't need to rely on word-of-mouth or outdated links.

**02. Why**  
Staff often struggle to find reliable policy info or understand what decisions are being made. This initiative reduces confusion and ensures that everyone has access to consistent, up-to-date information—improving confidence and reducing duplication or misinterpretation.

**03. How it works**  

- Meeting minutes and policy documents are published and indexed in one place.
- Canvas search is improved to better surface relevant content.
- Senior leaders ensure updates are passed through mid-level managers to teams.

**04. Who would deliver**  
(specify e.g. new roles)  

- Supported by internal comms and IT.
- Maintained by committee secretariats and policy leads.

**05. Contributors**  
Serena Bloise-Thomas, Adriano Digaudio, Liz Evans

In association with:

**ual:** london college of communication | **service futures lab**

## 10. Multi-Channel Feedback

A range of accessible channels, for example, drop-ins, anonymous forms, and listening sessions that make it easier for staff in all roles to share feedback. Ensures varied voices are heard and acted on.



### 01. What is it

A range of flexible, accessible channels for staff to give feedback—beyond the staff survey. Includes small-group conversations, drop-in sessions, digital forms, and team-level discussions. Designed to suit different roles, time constraints, and communication styles.

### 02. Why

Many staff feel current feedback systems are limited and inaccessible—especially for frontline teams. This approach makes feedback more inclusive and responsive, surfacing issues that might otherwise be missed and showing staff their voices are valued.

### 03. How it works

- Sessions with leadership (e.g. "Doors Open" events, listening circles).
- Anonymous feedback options via forms or suggestion boxes.
- Regular summaries of what's been heard and what actions follow, in the same way UAL does with students. We have teams who are already very good at doing this on the student side, so it would require expanding these teams.
- Integration with decision-making to ensure feedback loops are closed.

### 04. Who would deliver (specify e.g. new roles)

- Led by senior leadership with support from internal comms and HR.
- Feedback summaries managed by central teams and shared transparently.

### 05. Contributors

Alison Walcott, Lucia Conejero Rodilla, Loretta Mao

In association with:

ual: london college of communication

service futures lab

## 11. Celebrating and Recognising All Staff

An inclusive recognition scheme that celebrates contributions across academic and professional services roles. Focuses on values-led initiatives like EDI and sustainability, boosting morale and visibility of often-overlooked work.



### Celebrating and Recognising All Staff

Highlighting Everyday Contributions, Including Non-Academic Roles



**01. What is it**

A formal recognition scheme that celebrates staff contributions—especially in areas like EDI, sustainability, and values-led initiatives. Staff can nominate each other for awards that are inclusive of both academic and professional services roles. Recognition is shared through events, communications, and rewards.

**02. Why**

Staff contributions often go unrecognised, particularly among professional services. Academic staff has awards in various categories but these don't extend to professional services staff. This initiative addresses that gap by making appreciation a visible and regular part of UAL culture. It boosts morale and motivates continued engagement with strategic priorities.

**03. How it works**

- Open nominations from peers, managers, or self.
- Transparent selection process, with a focus on inclusive criteria.
- Recognition is shared through events, newsletters, and certificates—possibly with incentives.
- Categories reflect UAL's values and strategic focus.
- This could connect with the 20% Time for Special Projects concept.

**04. Who would deliver**  
(specify e.g. new roles)

- Overseen by HR, EDI leads, and sustainability teams.
- Run in partnership with internal comms and staff networks.

**05. Contributors**

Alison Walcott, Lucia Conejero Rodilla, Loretta Mao

In association with:




## 12. Diverse Representation in Decision-Making

A policy ensuring diverse staff representation in decision-making bodies. It mandates inclusion across roles and grades, helping create more grounded, equitable decisions and valuing everyday staff experiences.



#### 01.

#### What is it

A policy that ensures UAL decision-making bodies (committees, forums, working groups) include staff from a range of job roles and grades—not just senior leadership. It introduces clear representation guidelines, so decisions are more inclusive, balanced, and reflective of everyday realities.

#### 02.

#### Why

Decisions made in silos can overlook key perspectives. By diversifying who's at the table, UAL can create more grounded, equitable decisions—and make staff feel their experiences and expertise are valued at every level.

#### 03.

#### How it works

- Applied consistently to every new group.
- Deliberately inclusive of academic, professional services, and administrative staff.
- Participation may rotate or be opened to broader calls to enhance accessibility.
- Monitored to prevent tokenism and ensure meaningful engagement.
- HPS participants are compensated for their involvement, and a remission model is in place to support participation.
- Guest observers may be included, with clearly defined roles — for example, representation on the Executive Board.

#### 04.

#### Who would deliver (specify e.g. new roles)

- Developed and implemented by governance teams and senior leadership.
- Embedded into committee selection processes and structures.

#### 05.

#### Contributors

Alison Walcott, Lucia Conejero Rodilla

In association with:

ual: london college of communication



These 12 concepts then grouped into thematic clusters:

### **Visualising Decision Pathways**

Diagrams and calendars explaining committee roles, timelines, and decision points

### **Feedback Mechanisms**

Standardised follow-up protocols and inclusive consultations

### **Recognition & Communication**

Expanded recognition schemes, diversified all-staff briefings

### **Repositories & Platforms**

Centralised places for decision documentation and tracking

### **Time & Resources**

20% time for special projects (noted as a longer-term goal)

## Testing Sessions

To validate the concepts generated in co-design phase, two testing sessions were conducted: one in-person, drop-in session at the CSM Platform Bar, and one asynchronous online session open to colleagues across the university.

### 1 - WELCOME

**UAL Making Connections - Concept Testing**

**Welcome to the Making Connections Project**

The Making Connections initiative, commissioned by UAL's People and Culture department and the Social Purpose Lab, and carried out by the Service Futures Lab, aims to enhance the infrastructure, processes, and systems for informal staff voice at UAL. The goal is to strengthen the connection between the grassroots energy, ambition, and imagination of our staff community and the university's decision-making processes, thereby accelerating UAL's ability to achieve its social purpose goals, particularly in areas of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), as well as social and environmental sustainability.

In our recent co-design session, over 15 participants contributed ideas to shape the future of staff voice mechanisms. We now invite you to review and provide feedback on these ideas.

**How to Participate:**

- Review the Ideas: Review the concepts generated during the co-design session on the left.
- Provide Feedback: For each idea, please share your thoughts using the comment function to share your feedback on:

  - Why you believe it is a strong and valuable idea.
  - Areas or opportunities where the idea could be further developed or enhanced.
  - Any concerns or reasons why the idea might not be effective or feasible.

**Additional Information:**

- **Anonymous:** Your participation is anonymous.
- **Sharing:** Feel free to share this link with colleagues who may be interested in contributing.

**Thank you for your valuable input!**

### 2 - HOW TO

To create a comment, click on the comment icon from the toolbar on the left,  Click where you want to put the comment and then type your comment. Press the return key when done.

### 3 - INSTRUCTIONS

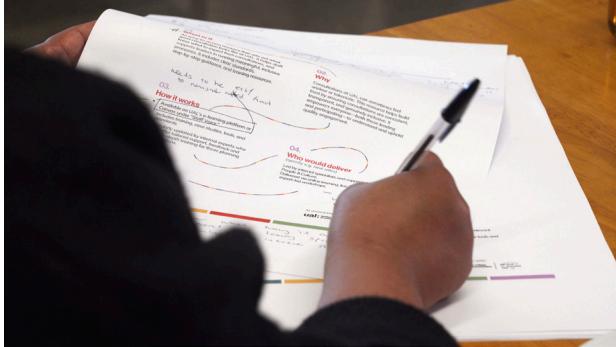
**Review the Ideas:** Review the concepts generated during the co-design session on the right.

**Provide Feedback:** For each idea, please share your thoughts using the comment function to share your feedback on:

- Why you believe it is a strong and valuable idea.
- Areas or opportunities where the idea could be further developed or enhanced.
- Any concerns or reasons why the idea might not be effective or feasible.



Fig. Snippets of Online Testing Session



## In-Person Testing Session

The in-person session at CSM was particularly well-attended, with over 30 colleagues participating throughout the day. Attendees represented a diverse cross-section of the UAL staff community, ranging from Grade 2 to Grade 7 and spanning multiple job families and colleges.

Despite the testing session being advertised in all staff communications, most participants heard about the session on the day it took place. To support last-minute engagement, the team printed and distributed flyers on-site and carried out in-person outreach. On the morning of the session, the team engaged colleagues in shared spaces, including offices and hallways - inviting them directly with warmth and enthusiasm. This informal, human-centred approach proved highly effective in encouraging participation and building interest.





Some participants attended individually, while others arrived with colleagues or as teams during lunch time. The atmosphere was intentionally informal and welcoming. Coffee, pastries, and light refreshments were provided to create a relaxed and open setting, encouraging candid conversation among peers on improving staff experience at UAL.

## Testing Materials and Structure

For testing, we translated outputs from the earlier co-design workshops into 12 concept ideas. Each concept was presented on an information sheet, which included:

### What the idea is

### Why it matters

### How it would work

### Who would deliver it

### Who contributed to the idea



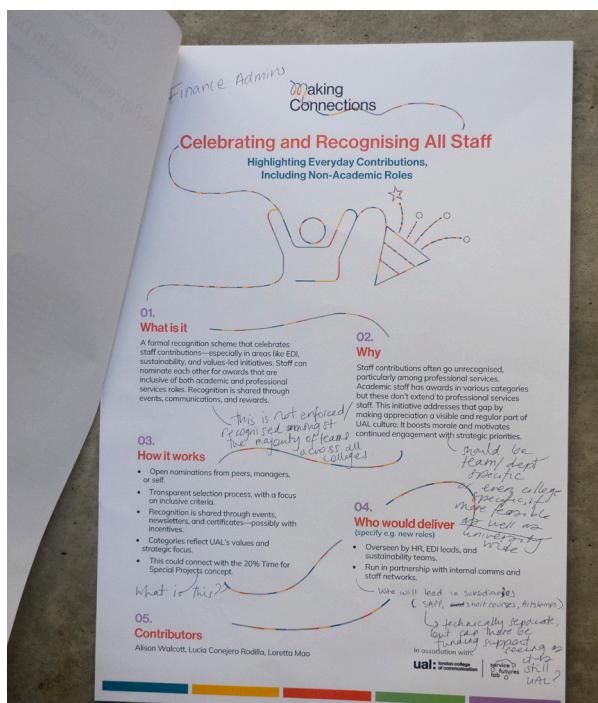
Participants were invited to review each concept and provide feedback on:

### The strengths and perceived value of the idea

### Opportunities for refinement or further development

### Concerns about feasibility, implementation, or sustainability

Feedback was captured via worksheet, post-its and informal discussion. Participants also had opportunities to engage in dialogue with the project team, offering deeper insight based on their lived working experience.



Some of the key insights from the feedback were :

### **Workload Sensitivity**

Staff were receptive to ideas but consistently flagged concerns around capacity. Proposals must avoid adding workload or must be accompanied by appropriate resourcing.

### **Desire for Clarity**

Ambiguity around roles, decision-making processes, and consultation practices drives mistrust. Staff welcomed clarity through visual tools and clear communication.

### **Digital Fatigue**

New systems should improve, but not complicate the existing platforms. Integration and user-friendliness were repeated priorities.

### **Cynicism About Change**

Repeated experience with top-down, under-communicated changes have led to scepticism. Transparency and visible action from leadership are crucial for trust.

### **Equity and Inclusion**

There was strong support for ensuring diverse voices are included, especially from underrepresented job families and identities.

## Executive Board Feedback Sessions

To complement the testing sessions with staff, two Executive Board (EB) members participated in structured concept testing. These conversations focused on assessing the feasibility, cultural alignment, and operational implications of emerging proposals. Their feedback offers valuable insight into institutional complexity, senior leadership priorities, and the practical constraints of implementation.

### Balancing Clarity and Complexity

There was strong alignment with the project's diagnosis of complexity as a barrier to participation. While leaders acknowledged UAL's structural intricacies, they emphasised that complexity must not become an excuse for opacity. Clarifying decision-making pathways, committee functions, and feedback responsibilities was widely endorsed. As one participant noted, **"You can have complexity, but you can still have really well-ordered systems."**

### Clarity of Structure, Roles, and Responsibilities

Proposals such as the Knowledge Bank and clearer committee remits were positively received, particularly for their potential to bring greater coherence to existing governance structures. Leaders highlighted the importance of clearly defining roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority within forums, networks, and committees. This clarity was seen as essential for supporting engagement, managing expectations, and enabling more effective participation. However, there was also caution around introducing entirely new systems, with a preference for building on and streamlining existing structures rather than duplicating them.

### Toolkits and Capacity Building

There was particular enthusiasm for an in-house consultation toolkit, either as a resource, training programme, or embedded advisor role. Leaders highlighted that inconsistent consultation practices across the university result in missed opportunities and scepticism. A toolkit that supports reflection, practice, and mutual accountability was viewed as both feasible and impactful, particularly if positioned as a confidence-builder for managers. Leaders also highlighted that a "hearts and minds" piece would need to accompany this, to ensure adoption.

## Avoiding Over-Standardisation

While there was appetite for clearer guidance and consistent expectations, leaders cautioned against rigid standardisation. Local variation across colleges and teams was seen as not only inevitable but valuable. They suggested framing guidance as optional templates or principles, allowing adaptation to context: **“Be clear about where variation is acceptable rather than aiming for total consistency.”**

## Trust, Culture, and the Middle Layer

Discussions reinforced the need to empower operational and middle-management layers with decision-making confidence and clarity. The current tendency for issues to **“travel up the silo and come back down”** was described as inefficient and disempowering. Leaders supported enabling trusted, well-defined delegation, and called for structures that support **“mutual accountability”** rather than top-down direction.

## Recognition and Feedback Loops

Leaders were supportive of more visible recognition for contributions to social purpose and staff voice, though they advised caution around creating new award structures. Instead, they recommended enhancing existing mechanisms (e.g., expanding SU award categories). Financial recognition models like the “20% time” proposal were flagged as potentially inequitable across diverse staff roles.

## Key Recommendations from Leadership Feedback

### **Start small and strategic**

Begin with feasible, high-impact changes, like clearer remits for Champions and improved consultation processes.

### **Design for clarity, not overload**

Prioritise tools and guidance that reduce friction, rather than adding to cognitive load.

### **Build human connections**

In-person, relational mechanisms should complement digital tools.

### **Enable, don't over-direct**

Encourage local experimentation within a shared framework, not through top-down mandates.

This leadership engagement highlighted a shared appetite for change and a readiness to support initiatives that bring coherence and transparency to how staff voice operates across UAL. However, leaders also emphasised that successful implementation will depend on avoiding complexity creep, investing in trust, and ensuring initiatives are adequately resourced.



## Prioritisation and Direction for Further Prototyping

In the Design Playback session, we introduced a prioritisation matrix to help assess which proposals should be further developed and prototyped. This matrix provided a structured framework for evaluating proposals based on two key dimensions: impact potential and feasibility within UAL's current capacity, both informed from the co-design and testing sessions. The approach enabled project stakeholders to align around which concepts could deliver the most value while remaining realistic within institutional constraints.

Proposals were categorised into three tiers: **Bring Forward**, **Quick Wins**, and **Longer-term Opportunities**.

**Bring Forward** concepts were those with high potential for impact but requiring moderate investment and coordination to implement.

These included:

---

A **Knowledge Bank** featuring clearly defined roles, committee structures, and visual diagrams of how forums and networks function, led by the Executive Board.

---

Development of **Meaningful Engagement Resources**, including tailored support for managers and staff across job families.

---

A **Follow-up Protocol** and the **Making Meetings Matter** initiative to standardise meeting agendas, outcomes, and communication, though further refinement is needed to adapt these to varied contexts across UAL.

---



**Quick Wins** were low-effort, high-impact ideas that could be implemented using existing structures.

Two standout proposals in this category were:

---

Revamping **All-Staff Meetings** to include more diverse presenters and two-way dialogue, without adding workload to staff.

---

Extending **Recognition and Awards** to all staff roles, particularly for contributions to EDI and sustainability, possibly by adapting the SU or academic award frameworks. Careful attention is needed to avoid overlaps with career progression or compensation mechanisms.

---

**Longer-Term Opportunities** were ideas that showed promise but lacked immediate feasibility due to technical, cultural, or workload constraints.

These included:

---

A **Decision Portal** and **Roadmap** to centralise governance information.

---

Creating a single “**source of truth**” for staff voice data and implementing **multi-channel feedback systems**.

---

The **20% Time for Special Projects** concept, which, while addressing the need for staff to participate in social purpose initiatives, was flagged as unworkable given existing workload pressures.



This **structured prioritisation** allowed the project team to focus on a realistic path forward, supporting immediate action, refining promising ideas, and capturing longer-term ambitions for future phases. Stakeholders in the Design Playback session aligned with this prioritisation framework and endorsed the direction for continued development.

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## Prototyping

Following the stakeholder alignment, a working session was held to align with other social purpose workstreams, including Net Zero, to explore potential next steps.

From this session, four concepts were selected for further refinement. These were refined through prototyping and tested in four additional feedback sessions with relevant stakeholders.

### 01

#### **Network Governance: A Clear Framework for Decision-Making and Accountability**

The Network Governance concept aims to bring consistency, transparency, and structure to UAL's Champions Forums and Staff Networks. These groups currently operate with varying practices and unclear governance, which limits their ability to influence change and represent staff voices effectively.

This proposal introduces a unified governance model that includes:

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**Standardised Terms of Reference (ToR)**

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**Clear definitions of roles and responsibilities**

---

**Visualisations of decision pathways and reporting lines**

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**Guidance for feedback mechanisms and follow-through**

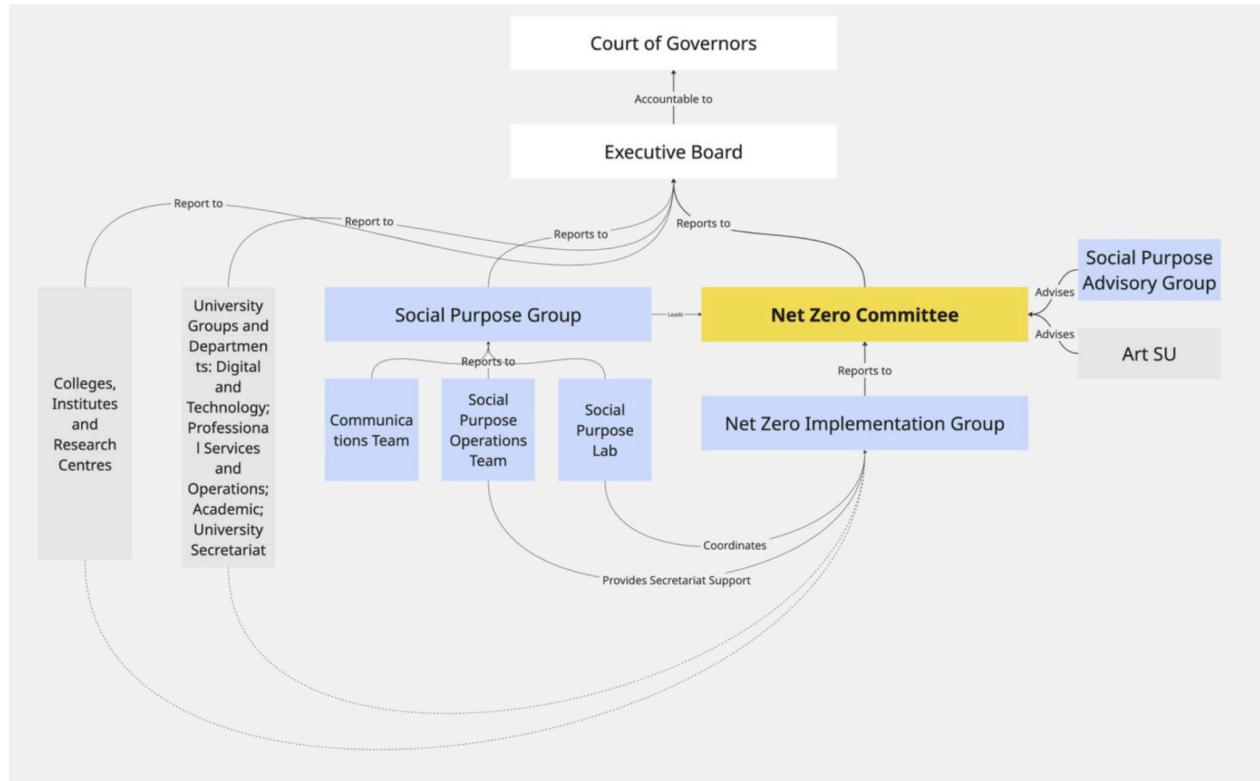


Fig. UAL Net Zero Committee - Governance Structure (formerly known as knowledge bank during ideation)

**The framework also outlines forum structures, such as termly meetings, commissioned projects, the role of Champions as intermediaries rather than decision-makers, and clarifying what decisions can be made in Forums, and which need to be escalated. Proposals include formally integrating Networks into this structure, offering them recognition, budgets, and clear routes into institutional governance.**

Key benefits identified include improved alignment with strategic goals, greater accountability, and support for collaboration. Risks noted include the potential for over-centralisation and the risk of overburdening a small number of staff.

The framework will support the delivery of EDI commitments at both college and university levels. There is also interest in developing processes for establishing new forums and creating interactive visual tools to help staff understand governance flows.

02

# Engagement Toolkit & Leadership Symposium: Building Trust Through Inclusive Decision-Making

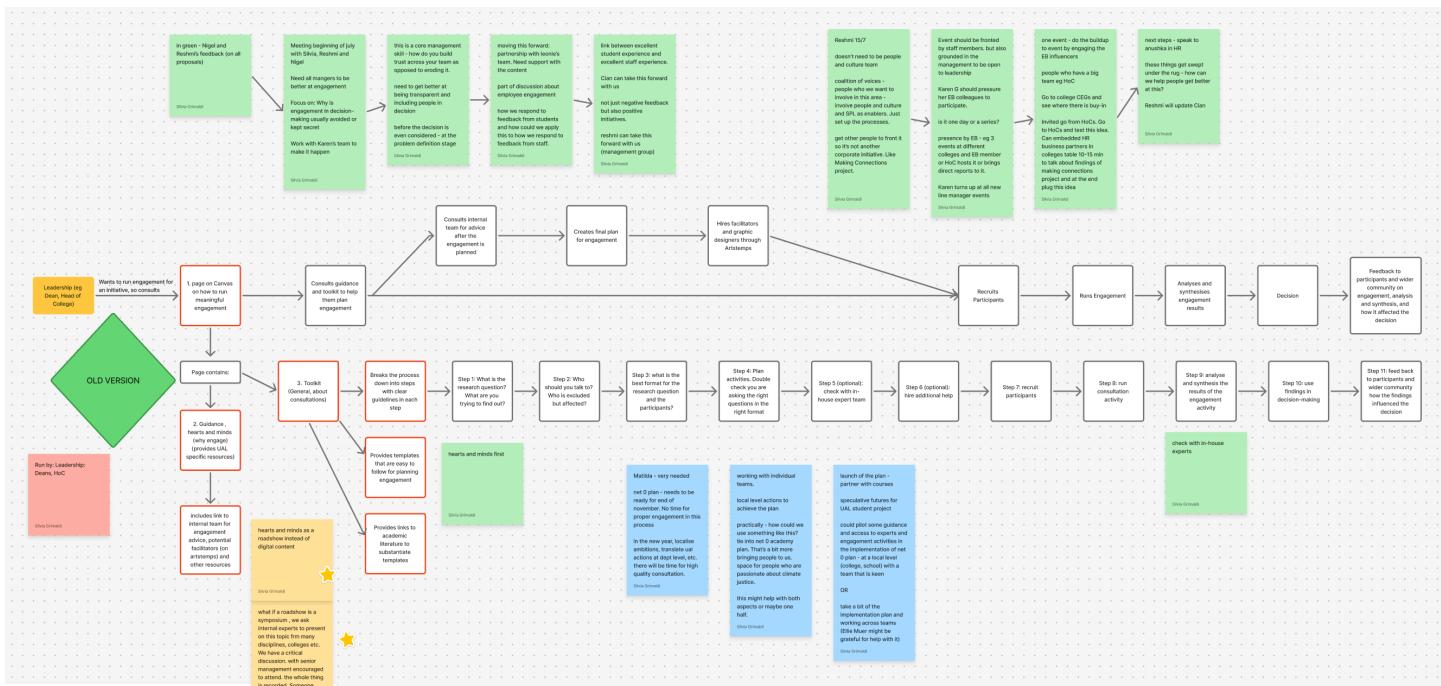
This concept includes two interconnected elements: a practical engagement toolkit and a leadership symposium.

The Engagement Toolkit is a values-led, step-by-step resource for leaders, particularly Deans and Heads of College, focused on designing inclusive and transparent engagement processes. It addresses a recurring issue identified in the research: staff are often consulted too late or not at all, leading to exclusion and distrust.

Hosted on Canvas, the toolkit includes:

- Templates and checklists for inclusive engagement
- Literature links and reference materials

To support adoption, a one-day in-person event titled “Hearts & Minds in Engagement” will serve as a launch and learning opportunity. Aimed at Grade 7+ staff, the symposium will pilot the toolkit, feature live case studies, and offer practical workshops. In addition, as a university we have a lot of top experts in engagement, who could be featured in the event. This approach reframes engagement as a trust-building leadership practice, rather than a compliance exercise.



We tested this idea with a stakeholder to assess its relevance and practicality. Their feedback affirmed the value of the concept and highlighted several important considerations for development and delivery:

**Rebrand as a Conference** Renaming the event a conference (rather than a symposium) better communicates its action-oriented, practical focus.

**Strong Appetite, Practical Challenges** There is widespread interest in the topic, but delivery depends on resourcing and leadership support. Attending a full-day session may be difficult without a clear top-down commitment.

**Timing and Leadership Alignment** The arrival of the new Executive Board and institutional leadership is a timely opportunity to set a new tone. Modelling inclusive behaviours now can foster a shift away from viewing engagement as a checkbox exercise and toward seeing it as a core leadership responsibility.

**Build on Recent Listening** The event can serve as a follow-up to the new leader's ongoing staff engagement, making visible that feedback has led to tangible next steps.

**Cultural Shift, Not Optional Extra** Staff need to see inclusive engagement as part of their role, not an optional add-on. Framing it as leadership behaviour embedded in everyday practice is key.

**Move Beyond Model Training** Avoid generic training models that lack application. Instead, create opportunities for participants to practice engagement approaches and integrate them into wider organisational development efforts.

**Design for Inclusion**

- Actively involve academic staff, including Hourly Paid Lecturers (HPLs) as contributors or presenters, and budget their time appropriately.
- While in-person delivery supports relationship-building, offer asynchronous and online channels to ensure broader participation.
- Choose a date and communicate clearly, rather than trying to accommodate all calendars, clarity is better than delay.

**Keep Content Practical**

Strike the right balance between academic insight and everyday leadership relevance. Participants should leave with tools they can immediately apply.

**End with Action**

Make the event itself a model of good engagement. Include an action-planning session that gathers practical ideas and co-develops resources with participants.



**Meaningful Consultations Resource**  
Supporting Better Engagement at UAL

*Fig. Updated Engagement Toolkit & Leadership Symposium that can be accessed via Canvas*

### Meaningful Engagement

A resource would address a widespread issue of unclear and inconsistent consultation practices within organisations.

Often, staff and stakeholders are invited to participate in consultations without a clear understanding of the purpose, process, or how their input will influence decisions.

This lack of clarity can lead to disengagement, mistrust, and a perception that consultations are performative rather than meaningful. By offering structured guidance, the toolkit would promote: Transparency in how consultations are designed and conducted. Consistency across departments in engaging staff and stakeholders. Accountability, helping ensure feedback loops are closed and decisions are communicated effectively. Empowerment of managers and teams to own the decision-making process with confidence and clarity.

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## 03

# Making Meetings Meaningful: Standardised Templates and Transparent Communication

This concept introduces a more structured and accessible approach to how meetings are planned, documented, and followed up, particularly within forums and staff networks.

The proposal includes:

- Standardised pre-meeting agenda templates
- Post-meeting summary templates including decision logs, rationale, contributors, actions, and next steps, to be distributed to those who contributed to the conversation
- Central publication of summaries on SharePoint or Canvas, accessible to all staff

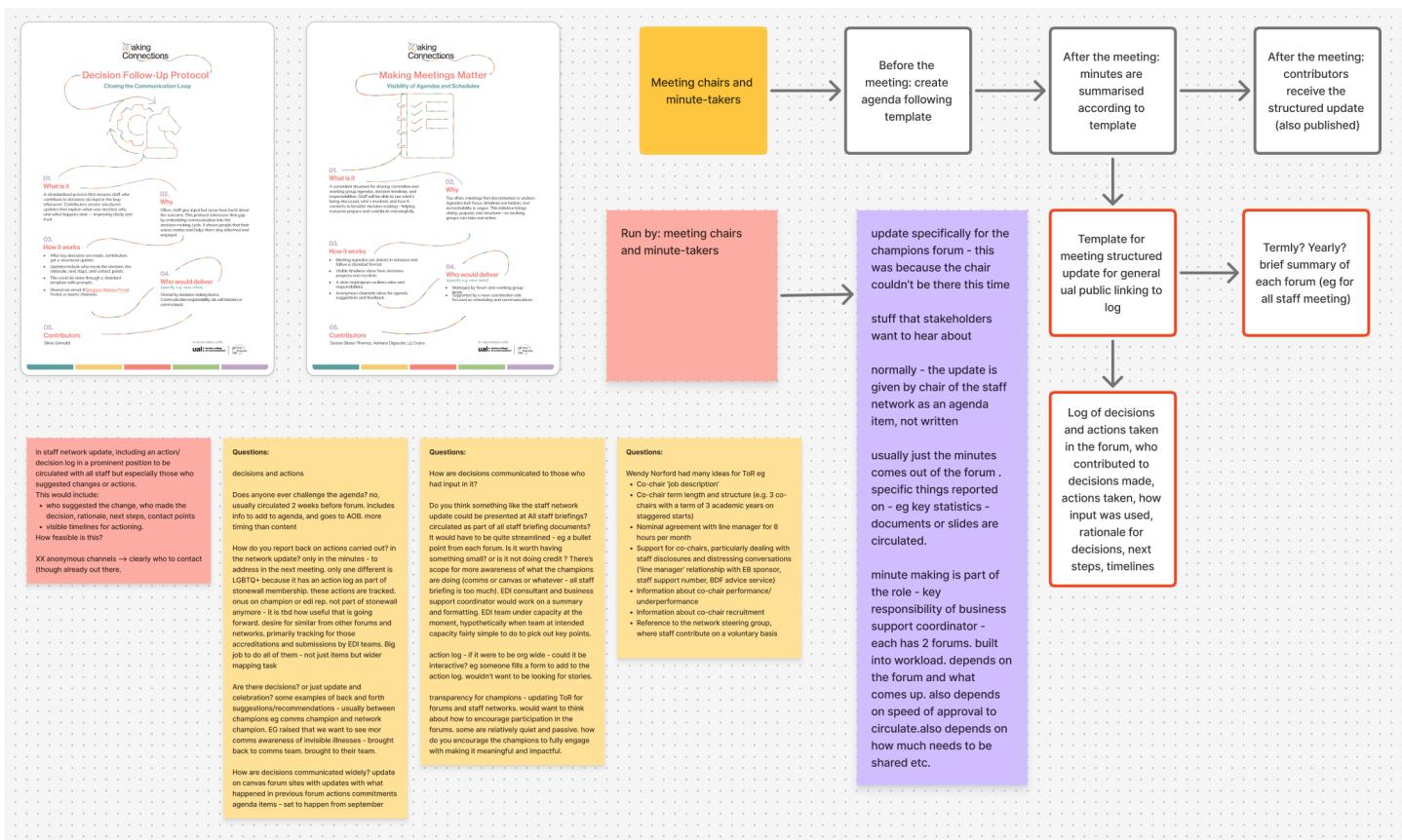
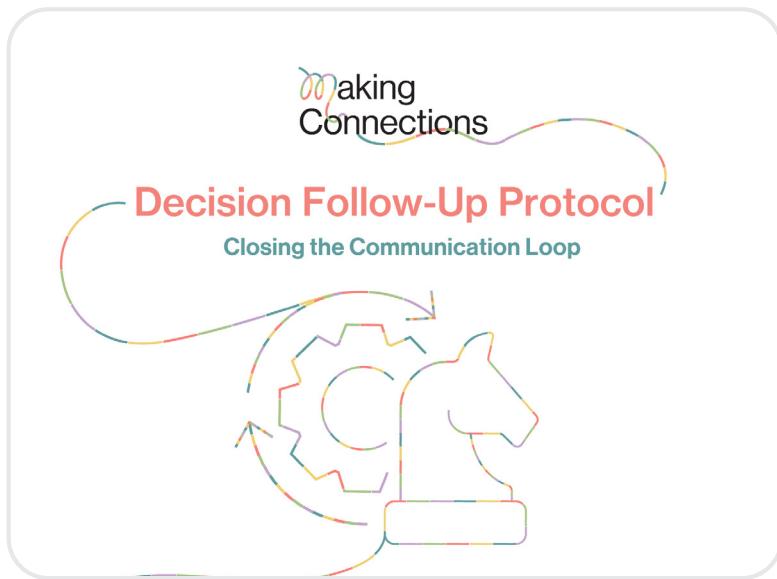


Fig. Combining decision follow up and making meetings matter to come up with standardized templates for meetings



**The aim is to ensure that outcomes and decisions are visible to both attendees and those who may not be present but are impacted or interested.**

**Feedback highlighted a desire for better follow-up communication and clarity around who makes decisions and why.**

Suggestions included integrating bullet-point updates into all-staff briefings and making meeting outcomes easier to track. Concerns focused on feasibility, particularly in terms of capacity within EDI teams, and the need for cultural change to ensure consistent use. Overall, there was strong support for the idea, provided it remains simple and not overly burdensome.

## 04

### Quick Wins to Enhance Recognition and Visibility

In addition to the larger concepts, two quick wins were identified that can build on current initiatives:

#### All-Staff Meetings as a Platform for Staff Voice

Inviting staff from a range of levels and networks to present their work at all-staff meetings would offer a cross-college platform for diverse voices. This approach increases visibility for grassroots efforts and publicly acknowledges the staff leading them.

#### Expanding Staff Awards to Recognise EDI and Sustainability Contributions

Staff awards, which have historically focused on academic achievement, could be expanded to include non-academic staff and those contributing to EDI and sustainability goals. This shift would address concerns about inclusion and recognition raised through the project.



**These quick wins offer immediate opportunities to strengthen staff voice, increase recognition, and demonstrate leadership support for inclusive practices.**

## Insights from Design

The Design Phase deepened our understanding of how staff voice is experienced across UAL, and what is needed to make it more visible, valued, and actionable. By engaging staff through co-design, prototyping, and testing, we surfaced a number of shared challenges, and also uncovered practical opportunities for change.

### Staff want to contribute, but not at any cost

There is a strong appetite among staff to influence how the university operates, particularly on issues tied to values like equity, inclusion, and sustainability. However, enthusiasm is tempered by real concerns around capacity. Many staff are stretched, and even the most well-intentioned ideas risk being seen as additional burden if they are not supported with time, clarity, and leadership commitment. Staff are more likely to engage when the effort involved is recognised, compensated, or clearly aligned with their existing roles.

### Clarity and visibility are foundational

One of the most consistent themes throughout the design process was the desire for greater clarity. Staff often don't know who makes decisions, how decisions are reached, or what happens to their input once it's given. This lack of visibility breeds scepticism and erodes trust. Clear communication, visualisation of governance structures, and consistent follow-up which includes transparency around the trade-offs in the decision are not just "nice to haves", they are essential to building trust and participation.

### Relational engagement works better than broadcast communication

The in-person testing session revealed how powerful informal, face-to-face engagement can be. Most participants joined the session after being personally invited on the day, often in shared spaces or through hallway conversations. This highlights the limitations of standard internal comms and points to the importance of relational, human-centred methods when seeking authentic engagement, especially with staff who may feel disconnected from institutional processes.



### One size doesn't fit all

While consistency is important, both staff and leadership emphasised the need for adaptable solutions. Local teams, job roles, and working contexts vary widely across UAL. As a result, staff voice mechanisms must be flexible enough to work across diverse settings, while still contributing to a coherent institutional framework. Tools like templates, guidance, and optional protocols were seen as helpful ways to strike this balance.

### Recognition is powerful—and currently uneven

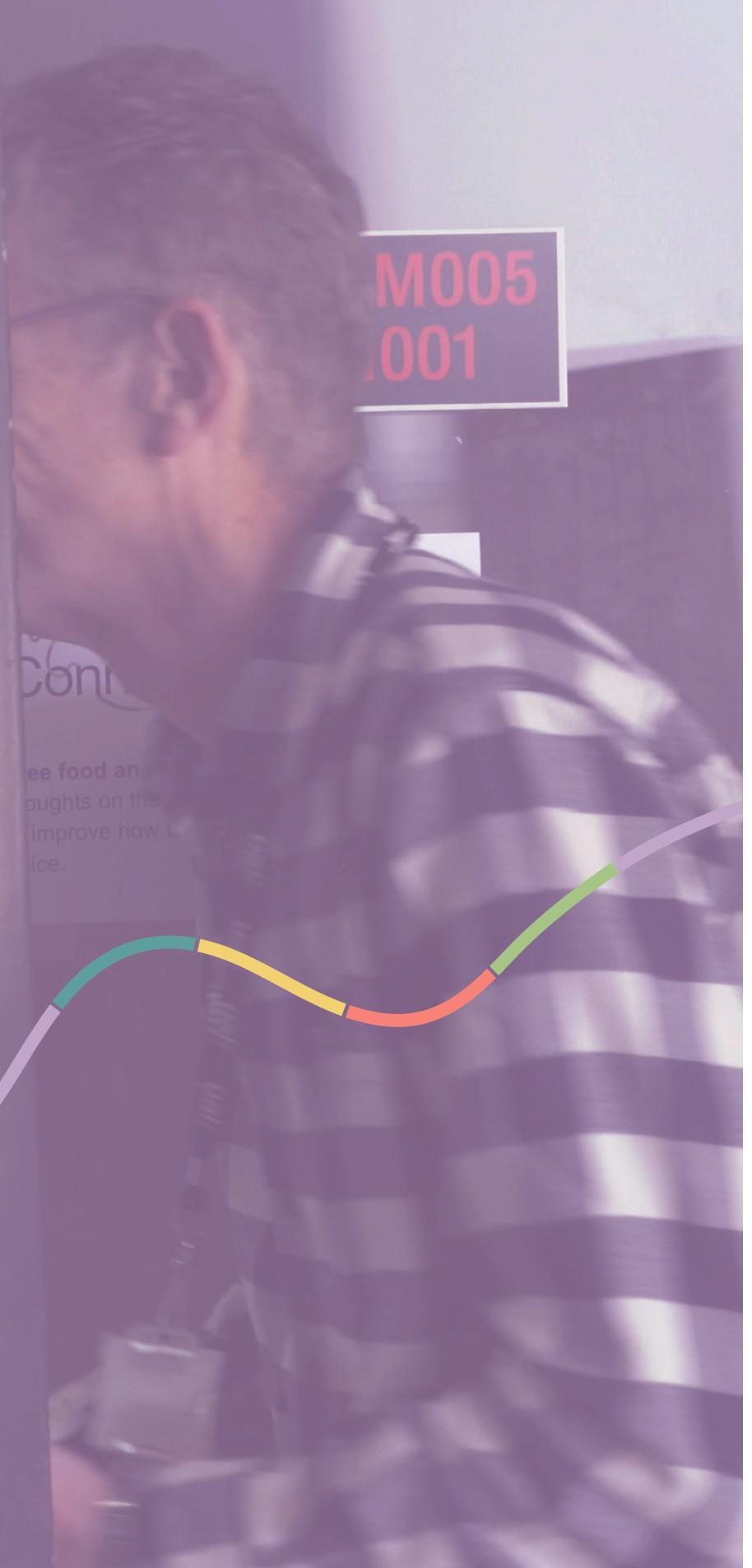
Many participants shared that their contributions to social purpose initiatives, forums, or networks often go unacknowledged. While financial reward isn't always expected, there is strong interest in being recognised, whether through visibility, appreciation, or integration into career development pathways. Extending recognition to non-academic staff and grassroots efforts was seen as both necessary and overdue.

### Good ideas are not enough—delivery matters

Finally, while staff appreciated the concepts presented, there was also clear caution. Past experiences of top-down changes that failed to materialise have left many understandably wary. For change to be embraced, it must be transparent, well-communicated, and followed through. Staff are ready to participate, but only if the process feels reciprocal and results in action.

The Design Phase confirmed that staff at UAL care deeply about shaping a more inclusive and values-led institution. What's needed now is not just more ideas, but visible, supported steps that show the university is listening, and ready to act.





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## Limitations

As with any time-bound project working within a large, complex institution, this work unfolded within certain practical and structural constraints. Recognising these limitations helps clarify the scope of what was achieved and highlights areas where further work will be necessary.

### Time and Resourcing

The project was delivered within a limited number of days. Three of the four core team members are academic staff with ongoing teaching and research responsibilities, while the fourth, a member of the Social Purpose Lab, was also balancing this project alongside other ongoing commitments. Coordinating across different schedules, roles, and office contexts required flexibility and careful planning. Much of the work was undertaken on non-teaching days or fitted around existing responsibilities.

While we worked closely as a team to maximise our time and focus, these constraints inevitably affected the pace and depth of some activities. As a result, certain threads particularly those that would have benefited from further engagement or iteration could not be explored as fully as we had hoped. We **prioritised breadth of participation, clarity of communication, and actionable outputs to maintain momentum**, though the project would have benefited from additional time and resourcing to follow emerging opportunities more deeply.

### Participation and Representation

Participation across interviews, workshops, and testing was voluntary and self-selecting. While we made a conscious effort to include a diverse range of roles, identities, and job families, we recognise that some perspectives particularly those of more **time-stretched or disengaged staff may**

**be underrepresented.** We also note that some voices within the institution are more marginalised, and engagement requires longer-term relational work.

## Institutional Complexity

UAL's decentralised structure, with varied governance practices across colleges and central functions, means that no single solution will fit all contexts. While our research and concepts accounted for this complexity where possible, further adaptation will be needed to make ideas work meaningfully in local settings.

## From Design to Implementation

The remit of this project was to generate insights, design concepts, and test potential approaches not to deliver implementation. Many of the proposals developed will require further work to embed structurally, secure leadership sponsorship, and allocate appropriate resource. There is a risk that without this continued commitment, promising ideas could stall at the concept stage.

## Trust and Emotional Dynamics

Because this work touches on questions of power, belonging, and institutional change, it naturally brought up emotion and complexity for participants and for the project team. While we did our best to create spaces of openness and care, we acknowledge that trust is a long-term process. For some, past experiences may have made it difficult to engage fully or hopefully with the work.

**These limitations do not undermine the value of what was achieved they simply mark the boundaries of what was possible in this phase. They also point clearly toward where attention must go next: building on this foundation with continued investment, broader engagement, and sustained leadership support.**

## Next Steps and Implementation

The next step for this project is to **further develop the concepts that emerged from the co-design sessions**. A set of work packages will be developed and progressed over the next academic year. This will require the Social Purpose Lab working in close partnership with the People and Culture department, the Strategy, Planning and Risk department, the Internal Communications department, and the equivalent functions in colleges.

The work packages will be clustered in **four themes: governance and structures, leadership, engagement, and reward and recognition**.

### 01 Governance and Structures

To address the concerns raised by participants on the decision-making processes in UAL, an **effective decision-making framework and supporting tools are required**.

To address the concerns raised by participants on the decision-making processes in UAL, an effective decision-making framework and supporting tools are required. This would need to include formal and informal structures that reflect the diversity of UAL, each with Terms of References and roles and responsibilities; visual representation of how the decision-making processes work and visibility of key meetings; communication of decisions from the relevant bodies to members and staff; and a repository to store papers, decisions, meeting minutes, policies and other documents for reference.

Decision-making bodies should have mandated inclusion across roles and grades, helping create more grounded, equitable decisions and valuing everyday staff experiences. This creates the opportunity for committees and networks to review and reshape their formal structures, creating clarity and transparency. To support these structures, Terms of Reference and roles and responsibilities need to be reviewed and amended to guide and support the committees and networks to meet their objectives and commitments to members.

The mechanics of how these bodies work together need to be articulated so that **“complex decision-making processes can be translated into clear, visual explanations”**.

This would help to improve the way committees work and will ensure they are inclusive and effective. One of the co-designed concepts proposes **“a shared calendar that highlights key decision-making dates throughout the**

academic year. Integrated into daily tools like Canvas, it helps staff see when and how they can contribute to upcoming decisions.” This could be co-created and maintained by the committees and forums.

To achieve greater transparency around the decision-making process, one of the co-designed concepts proposed “an online platform where staff can explore key decisions, see who made them, and understand why.”

This tool could include “decision logs and visuals to enhance transparency and engagement with institutional governance.”

A **communication framework** would support the flow of information and decisions up, down and across the organisation, “ensuring that staff who give input into decisions receive timely updates about the outcomes, rationale, and next steps, by closing the feedback loop and fostering trust in the process”.

## 02 Leadership

To ensure the mechanisms above work well, people in **leadership positions need to be clear about their role**, and the actions and behaviours needed to support it.

Members of the Executive Board, EDI Committee members and EDI leads, network leads and forum champions need to understand their roles, how they relate to each other and what support they need to execute them well. A strong coalition of leaders with aligned structures, responsibilities, and inclusive dialogue will create greater opportunity for involvement and engagement of staff.

By aligning activities with personal development goals, managers could enable staff to participate in relevant networks and forums. UAL already offers learning modules on Inclusive

Management in the Art of Management programme. This material can be refreshed and signposted to managers more actively in support of this work.

**The project makes clear that managers and leaders need to see inclusive engagement as part of their role.**

Future pilots can focus on small, safe opportunities for participatory decision-making, helping managers build confidence before tackling larger or more complex topics. If **formal training is accompanied by learning-by-doing**, then inclusive engagement will become a standard leadership behaviour at UAL.

## 03 Engagement

Findings show staff want their input to matter in daily decision-making. This calls for broader cultural work exploring mentorship schemes, communities of practice, or greater recognition for collaborative leadership.

The co-designed concept proposes “**a practical guide outlining what effective consultation looks like at UAL**. It includes standards, training, and case studies to support leaders in conducting inclusive, transparent, and consistent engagement processes with staff.” Such initiatives create the environment for clarity, trust, and reciprocity.

The research confirmed the **power of personal, face-to-face invitations to participate** and examples of this across the university demonstrates the appetite for this relational dimension. This could be done through management cascades, informal lunches, and cross-college conversations, ensuring that engagement feels authentic and human-centred.

## 04 Recognition and Reward

Rather than creating separate mechanisms, there is potential to influence existing reward and progression systems. As the university reviews academic career pathways and analyses data from Planning and Review Conversations (PRCs), this is a timely moment to ensure contributions to staff voice, EDI, and sustainability are valued at an institutional level.

The two days allowed for staff volunteering could also be opened up to allow staff to use this time to pursue creative projects, or to be given additional days in recognition of their overall contribution to UAL.

An **inclusive recognition scheme** would be one that celebrates contributions across academic and professional services roles, focuses on values-led initiatives like EDI and sustainability, and boosts visibility of often-overlooked work.

## Reflection

Delivering a values-led project inside a large, complex institution required us not only to apply design tools but to carefully design how we worked. Our principles, **inclusivity, transparency, simplicity, alignment with purpose, adaptability, and reciprocity**, were used as **operational drivers, not just theoretical commitments**.

This reflection focuses on the behind-the-scenes decisions and working practices that enabled the project to unfold as it did.

### Starting with Structure, Not Just Strategy

Rather than jumping straight into solution-making, we began by investing time in building the structure and scaffolding of the project:

- We created clear working rhythms (e.g., weekly team meetings, shared communication templates, asynchronous reviews) to ensure coordination across multiple contributors and contexts.
- We mapped the institutional landscape early on, including governance layers, stakeholder groups, and informal influence channels to anticipate complexity and plan meaningful engagement.

This gave us a holistic view of the system we were working within and helped us sequence activities more realistically.

## Framing the Work as Embedded, not External

From the start, we made a deliberate choice to position ourselves not as external consultants, but as internal colleagues conducting research. This shaped how we approached every interaction:

- We built on existing relationships and knowledge of UAL's culture and rhythms.
- We used direct, authentic language, avoiding abstract jargon to invite genuine dialogue and avoid triggering defensiveness.
- We were mindful of internal pressures, such as busy academic calendars and ongoing change fatigue, adjusting timelines and engagement strategies accordingly.

**This positioning helped build trust, but it also required continuous reflection on our own roles and positionality.**

## Planning with Purpose, Flexibility, and Foresight

Each stage of the project was pre-planned with clear intent, but always with room to adapt:

- Workshops were designed with both structure and spaciousness, this setup allowing for unexpected conversation and emergent ideas while keeping to time and focus.
- Co-design materials were prototyped and tested in advance to reduce friction and encourage participation.
- Time was built in for pause, reflection, and realignment, not just delivery.

**This balance of preparation and adaptability was key to navigating the inevitable complexity and uncertainty of a project of this kind.**

## Working in the Open, With Limits

Transparency was central to our process:

- We published working documents, shared draft ideas, and reported back to leadership groups in real time.
- We offered visibility into how feedback was shaping our thinking at each stage.

However, we also learned that working in the open has limits:

- Some colleagues preferred to contribute anonymously or behind closed doors, especially when trust in institutional change was fragile.
- At times, full transparency had to be balanced with psychological safety and care for individual contributors.

**Navigating these tensions was part of our practice.**

## Embedding Reflection as a Method, Not a Wrap-Up

Reflection wasn't left until the end, it was built into each phase as a method:

- We regularly asked, "What are we learning about how we're working?", not just what we were learning from participants.
- We kept live documentation of decisions, prioritisation, and moments of friction, using this as material for collective sense-making.
- We treated feedback as data, not as failure, in helping us stay grounded in humility and openness.

**This reflexivity allowed us to keep course-correcting, even midstream.**

## Looking Ahead

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**The success of this project was not just in the ideas generated, but in how we worked: embedded, intentional, caring, and accountable.**

Delivering on our values was a constant process of translation, from principle to decision, from decision to practice, from practice to reflection.

**This mode of working doesn't end with the project. We hope it sets a tone for how staff voice work at UAL can continue, with clarity, care, and shared ownership.**

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# Biographies

## (Project Researchers)



### Prof Silvia Grimaldi

PROFESSOR  
 Service Design and Transformation,  
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 Service Futures Lab,  
 London College of Communication,  
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Silvia is a leading researcher and educator in service design, with a particular focus on participatory and inclusive approaches to institutional change. As Co-founder of the Service Futures Lab and Professor at London College of Communication (UAL), her work bridges design practice and organisational strategy. Silvia has led numerous interdisciplinary research projects exploring governance, public service innovation, and design justice. Her academic practice combines deep theoretical insight with applied co-design methods, and she is widely recognised for championing collaborative, values-led approaches to systems change.



### Veron WK Lai

SENIOR LECTURER,  
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Veron is a design leader and educator with 20 years of experience in service design and product design. She has worked extensively across the public and private sectors, with a particular focus on healthcare, education, and sustainability. In addition to her academic role, Veron has led design teams in both startup and scale-up environments, and has consulted for a range of global and national organisations. She is known for her applied research and leadership in service design, with a strength in translating complex organisational challenges into collaborative, systems-focused design interventions.



## Jeff Doruff

STAGE LEADER AND LECTURER,  
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Jeff is a researcher, product designer, and educator with a background in engineering and project management. He is Stage Leader and Lecturer on BA Product and Industrial Design at Central Saint Martins and a member of the Design Against Crime Research Lab since 2018. His work centres on collaborative design with diverse stakeholders to foster co-creation, innovation, and equitable engagement.



## Loretta (Jiayi) Mao

SERVICE DESIGNER,  
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Loretta is a Service Designer at UAL, where she applies a human-centred design lens to improve staff and student experiences. Her international experience includes co-designing refugee support programmes in the UK and Indonesia, and leading user experience design projects in Canada. Loretta combines human-centred research, cross-cultural collaboration, and strategic design to deliver innovative, inclusive, and socially impactful solutions across diverse contexts.

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