

Communities of practice: fostering a sense of community in complex organisations

(a What Works case study)

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Executive Summary

Background:

There are many higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK which are large, complex and decentralised, and suffer from siloed working practices. This has an impact, not only on the ability to work effectively and efficiently, but also on staff and student wellbeing. With the Good Practice Grant funding, we have produced an infographic that would appeal to professional services (PS) staff and academics in HEIs across the UK and possibly abroad, particularly those in management positions who are looking for solutions to engage staff, inspire innovative thinking, and foster cross-institutional working.

Our infographic showcases one of the Communities of Practice that has been developed here at University College London (UCL), in collaboration with our colleagues in HR and Organisational Development, and which aims to address these issues. This case study focuses on the Community of Practice for PS staff who support students and taught degree programmes.

A grassroots community of practice has been in existence for UCL programme administration staff for almost 12 years, with a well-attended annual Teaching Administrators' Conference, a lively online discussion forum, and most recently, an induction and training platform (InEDITA). This community includes more than 500 professional services staff in academic departments and central services, like Student and Registry Services and Digital Education. In the middle of 2019, we collaborated with HR and Organisational Development colleagues to launch the formal Programme Administration (Taught) Community of Practice, which already has a number of projects up and running. These projects focus on the induction and development of colleagues, efficient processes, and joined-up working practices. ([Please see Appendix 1: Our Community Charter](#)) Like all other Communities of Practice across UCL, we have high-level support in the form of senior sponsorship from the UCL Registrar, Ms Wendy Appleby.

The main aim of the infographic is to share the idea and benefits of the Community of Practice approach adopted at UCL with colleagues at other HEIs, to encourage colleagues at these HEIs to consider whether and how they might like to implement a similar approach. The infographic we have produced conveys the history of our Community of Practice and describes the benefits of this idea for other organisations. The webinar will allow us to explore the approach with colleagues from other HEIs and help them decide whether to adopt this methodology. During the webinar, we would be able to provide advice on next steps and implementation.

In 2019, the UCL Communities of Practice initiative won the Universities Human Resources (UHR) award for "Organisational development and culture change" which recognises initiatives that achieve transformational culture change, greater staff engagement or collaboration to enable the university to meet future challenges and uncertainty. The UCL webpages related to this initiative have shown high traffic rates.

For our case study, we see evidence of impact in the enthusiastic response to the launch of our Programme Administration (Taught) Community of Practice, where over 100 staff members, both from academic departments and central services, attended and their subsequent engagement with the project activities, with more than 50 members actively participating on an ongoing basis. The current activity builds on the legacy of the grassroots community that preceded it and it incorporates many of the established strands of engagement. For example, the annual Teaching Administrators' Conference, which has registrations of more than 150 colleagues from UCL and other London-based universities, helps to generate a feeling of belonging and empowerment, according to the formal feedback we receive.

Communication across organisational boundaries is a long-standing and complex issue for many organisations, not only HEIs. As recognised by UHR and the award UCL received, this type of work is both innovative and necessary. The concept of a community of practice, as described by Etienne Wenger (1998), is not new, but the manner in which it has been applied here at UCL is. We seek to address these systemic issues by adapting the methodology and using it to foster a sense of staff belonging and purpose.

For reference:

Wenger, Etienne (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Main UCL Communities of Practice website:

www.ucl.ac.uk/transforming-our-professionalservices/tops-projects/communities-practice

News of our launch:

www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/news/2020/jan/new-programme-administration-taught-community-practice-formally-launched

News of event:

www.ucl.ac.uk/transforming-our-professional-services/news/2020/may/celebrating-ucl-communities-practice

Dissemination:

The 5th of February 2021 was the anniversary of the official launch of the Programme Administration (Taught) Community of Practice. On this date, we wanted to disseminate the infographic internally at UCL, via the UCL Communities of Practice Sharepoint Hub and through our various MS Teams, but were stymied by the coronavirus pandemic. We plan a re-launch of our Community of Practice in early 2022, but will distribute this infographic and webcast internally once it has been published by Advance HE.

In our webcast, we talk about the background and development of our Community of Practice, and the projects that we've been focussing on. We hope to inspire other HEI staff with our work and help them design similar initiatives in their own institutions. There may even be the potential to link Communities of Practice across institutions, perhaps focusing on staff and student belonging or staff development, to create a well-connected network for sharing best practice and supporting one another.

Programme Administration (Taught) Community Charter

Key people and roles

Community name	Programme Administration (Taught)
Practice area and definition	This Community of Practice is for staff who collaborate with academic staff involved in taught degree programme delivery, including colleagues in central services who develop and apply regulations and processes, and all those who support students to enhance the quality of their UCL experience. You are likely to be based in academic departments or faculties and act as a first point of contact for education administration enquiries. Your main areas of activity are conducted through systems like Moodle, CMIS and Portico. You may also represent a wider team, department or faculty and you are interested in contributing and further developing the service delivery in this area.
Sponsor name	Wendy Appleby
Sponsor role	Provides top-level recognition for the community by ensuring exposure, support and strategic visibility.
Leaders' names	+ Ms Stefanie Anyadi - Teaching and Learning Team Manager, UCL Psychology and Language Sciences – local representation + Ms Leigh Kilpert, Head of Strategy Engagement, UCL Office of the Vice-Provost (Education and Student Affairs) – central representation + Dr Helen Matthews, Director of Academic Services, UCL Student and Registry Services – central representation + Mr Michael Wozniak, Academic Administration Manager, UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies – local representation
Leaders' role	Cultivate and support the development of the community. Leaders work to ensure the community's relevance and visibility to key stakeholders.
Target core members	Staff with substantive knowledge of practice area and who spend the majority of their core role working in the practice area.
Core members' role	Provide input to help guide the formation (or refocusing) of a community. This includes contributing to the vision of excellence, criteria for leadership and community charter.
Target members	Staff who have responsibilities directly within or related to practice area, who have a sense of professional alignment to the practice area and are enthusiastic about creating a more cohesive culture of collaboration that spans the breath of UCL.
Members' role	Active 'owners' of the community, members shape the boundaries, priorities and subsequent outputs and activities delivered by the community.
Other key people	Any other UCL members of staff who are interested in help to develop this service area, whether their work is directly or indirectly affected by it.

Purpose and focus

Purpose of the practice area (why does it exist?)	Purpose statement: ‘Enabling and shaping a world class teaching and learning experience through the specialist knowledge of a community of education administration professionals.’ This service area is part of every department and Faculty in UCL and affects every student’s experience. There already exist a grassroots version of this Community of Practice, in the form of the Teaching Administrators’ Forum, with the Teaching Administrators’ Conference as an annual event and InEDITA (Induction, Engagement and Development Initiative for Teaching Administrators) as its training platform. By formalising this Community of Practice and gaining the support of senior management, we will have broader and more inclusive reach, create better cross-UCL solutions to problems, encourage recognition for excellent work and inspiring practices, and support career development.
Values of community	+ Commitment to excellence and advancement on merit + Collegiality and community building + Openness + Fostering innovation and creativity
Vision for success	Empowered and enthusiastic professionals making outstanding education happen

Objectives of the community	Our objectives: + Creating better communication (discussion, support, knowledge-sharing) within and beyond our community. + Designing processes that facilitate a more consistent experience for both staff and students. + Creating opportunities to support one another and develop our careers. We have developed the following projects to address the objectives: Digital Architecture: This project will address the need to create a formalised, coherent, broad-reach, inclusive platform for sharing best practice and knowledge, facilitating discussions, and providing support. TA Toolkit: Because of the size of UCL, there are widely varying practices across the institution addressing similar issues. The objective of this project to create easily adaptable Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for our most common tasks and to share them on our CoP platform. This will create a more consistent experience for our students and reduce duplication and wasted effort for our staff. Induction: The aim of this project is to create a set induction for Programme Administrators across UCL, one that is easy to adapt to incorporate departmental differences, but which allows new staff to get all the information they need to settle into the role quickly. Buddy Scheme: This project is similar to a mentoring scheme, but not the same. We want to create opportunities for staff to pair up and support each other beyond their own departments. This scheme will allow staff to share ideas and to benefit from the advice of colleagues who have been through similar events and processes. Reflect and Refine: This project aims to develop an efficient feedback loop, where departmental staff can work closely with central services colleagues to improve processes and review progress. Teaching Administrators' Conference: This event has been running for 11 years and has been organised by (largely) the same group of people. We will be building up the TAC committee to incorporate new members, with a view to handing over the responsibility to a new team. This will allow new members of the community to benefit from the development opportunity.
Critical business issues	Formalising the networks, events, and practices that already exist. Developing a broader, more inclusive platform for sharing knowledge and advice. HR and Organisational Development links to avoid duplication.

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Resources	MS Teams, Sharepoint and online presence needs to be created in line with other Communities of Practice. Small budget for catering.
Measures of Success	+ More consistency in and improved student experience (better survey results) and improved staff satisfaction + Less duplication and wasted effort in dealing with common processes + Colleagues feeling heard, being better informed, and staying more connected + Staff being able to identify, participate in, and be recognised for career development opportunities



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