

uk news

UCL academics resist expansion

Academics at University College London have hit out at the university management's plans to spend £1.25 billion on the university's expansion, a move they claim is restricting spending on research and teaching.

Senior academics have complained to Research Fortnight that the university is using too much of its resource for funding its expansion plans, and that they have not been properly consulted. UCL's expansion project includes building a £483-million campus at the Olympic Park in Stratford, called UCL East, and expanding its Bartlett School of Architecture in Bloomsbury.

It emerged last week that Terence Etherton, who as UCL visitor oversees the administration of the institution and is one of the most senior judges in the UK, has asked a barrister called Charles Bourne for advice on a complaint about the university's governance process.

The complaint was lodged by a UCL scholar who claimed the expansion was being done without proper consultation with the university's governing council and academic board.

Research Fortnight has now learned that Ven Balakrishnan, a member of UCL's governing council with a background in finance, resigned six months before his term was due to end. Multiple sources said they believed he held concerns about UCL East. Balakrishnan declined to comment.

More than 100 researchers discussed their concerns at an extraordinary meeting of the academic board held on 7 February and chaired by the Conservative peer David Young. The attendees, summoned by dissatisfied UCL professors, voted in favour of a motion of no-confidence in how the university is being run. The academics are now waiting for Etherton to come to a conclusion before taking further action.

"I don't think we were properly consulted about UCL East," one researcher in the sciences said. "I've never spoken to anyone who thought [UCL East] was a good idea. Every spare penny we have will go to this project. Departments have been told they must run a 5.5 per cent to 5.6 per cent surplus." They said the surplus was to help fund UCL East, "which is not going to support all disciplines".

A spokesman for UCL said that the academic case for UCL East and its location was supported in two separate votes by the "vast majority" of the 300 professors who attended a previous meeting in October 2017. A "clear majority" backed the financial case, he said.

But a professor who attended both meetings claimed that there were many abstentions. The time allocated to discussion, up to 20 minutes, was insufficient and forced academics to gather again in February, he said.

The spokesman said that the university's level of

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surplus and capital spending were in line with that of similar UK universities. UCL's spending on UCL East would amount to £250m of its £1.25bn capital budget, he said. That and the university's range of research projects and investments in staff "contradict the claim that all spare money is being spent on UCL East".

Claims that discretionary money for academics—funding built up through academic prizes, for example—has been diverted to UCL East are "patently wrong", the spokesman said. "The only change that was made was that they were asked by their deans to budget on an annual basis rather than just spend without any advance warning to the institution about what they are going to spend and why. That money is still available to academics for projects."

One concern shared by many academics who spoke to Research Fortnight was that the student population at UCL has ballooned without a corresponding increase in numbers of staff or infrastructure. "One course had 30 students when we launched it three years ago—next year we'll probably have 100, but we haven't been given more lecturers, staff or space," a scientist said. "It's like we're expanding at a breakneck speed." The total number of UCL students has more than doubled from about 20,000 in 2007-8 to more than 41,000 in 2017-18.

"In my department, undergraduate student numbers doubled in three years, but staff numbers increased by only 25 per cent," said a social sciences professor.

A lack of space for activities was a common gripe, and many academics say they are often forced to rent conference facilities in hotels and in other universities such as Birkbeck. The university argues that this limited space is the reason why a new campus is needed. UCL East will house research space, student accommodation, and labs for experimental engineering, disability innovation and applied finance. Construction of the first phase is set to begin this year.

"When I first heard about UCL East I thought it was a good idea because space here is so limited," one archaeologist said. "Archaeologists have no labs. I have all of my artefacts right under the desk in my office." But the campus "seems to have transformed into an innovation centre," they said.

According to the spokesman, UCL's student-to-staff ratio this academic year is the second best in Britain, at 10.4 students for every staff member, and UCL has never had a hiring freeze. "We are also not aware of a department doubling undergraduate numbers in three years, but it is the case that some faculties have sought to recruit undergraduates where previously they had few or none."