

ual:

Summary report

Material Circularity at UAL

camberwell college of arts | central saint martins | chelsea college of arts | london college of communication | london college of fashion | wimbledon college of arts



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Purpose of report

This report is the summary of a Social Purpose Lab research project undertaken from December 2023 to October 2024, examining the state of play around the topics of material reuse and circularity across UAL.

This pilot project was sponsored by Polly Mackenzie in her leadership role as UAL’s Chief Social Purpose Officer and delivered in the Social Purpose Lab by the Project Manager for Materials Re-use and Circularity, Ellie Meure.

This summary report was authored by Ellie Meure and Jenny Haigh, Head of Policy for Fashion and Textiles, UAL.

This report sets out:

- The project’s background, context, goals and approach.
- The learnings gained during the discovery stage, which provide insight into the current materials landscape at course and College level.
- Recommendations for next steps that could inform a whole-UAL approach to material circularity.

This report also explores the barriers – structural, behavioural, cultural, and logistical - that are currently inhibiting circular principles and approaches from being incorporated more systemically across the university’s teaching and practice.

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Context

In 2022 UAL launched its new 10-year strategy, which sets out the university’s explicit intention to build our university around the notion of social purpose, so we can better serve our staff, students and the world.

By committing to becoming purpose-driven, we are saying we will not ignore the bigger picture, and we will not wait for governments or industries to get it right for us. We will lead within our sphere of influence to create a world that is more fair and just. We will change ourselves and educate our students to create a world where everyone can thrive.

How our university uses, thinks about and manages its material flows is an important part of this. Making is at the very essence of UAL’s being, and at the heart of our teaching and research: consequently, many of our courses rely on procuring and using physical, tangible resources – such as product design, footwear and jewellery, architecture and interior design, fashion, fine art, theatre, and textiles. Through undertaking this pilot project, UAL is making a commitment to address how we approach materials on our courses with social purpose in mind.

The use of virgin materials on these courses and others is problematic in several ways. It drives up the cost of study for students, making a creative education in these subjects less accessible for those who are not well-off, and potentially puts students who cannot afford to spend money on new materials at an academic disadvantage. It also increases waste and normalises over-consumption, contributing to the university’s carbon footprint and global deforestation and pollution. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it normalises a set of extractive behaviours and mindsets – that new is best, and that waste is an acceptable and even necessary cost of creating – that our students may subconsciously carry into their careers in the creative industries and beyond.

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Project brief and goals

The Materials Reuse and Circularity Project is at its core inquiring about current processes and examining how material circularity may be more strategically formulated – and more effectively implemented - across the university at course and College level. UAL’s ultimate ambition is to transform into a university where all aspects of its activities are driven by its social purpose: reforming how the university handles waste across the entire estate is a key component of the work we need to do to deliver on this.

The Material Reuse and Circularity project centred around conducting the groundwork that would enable UAL to consider the strategic and targeted action needed to meet these institution-wide aims. The project sought to:

- Build relationships with key stakeholders across the UAL community to establish an overview of current materials systems and processes across the university.
- Map these flows through the institution, including the extent to which they follow a linear model with the endpoint being disposal.
- Understand both where there are current active mechanisms that redirect materials from a waste flow into initiatives that follow circular economic principles and identify where organisational or cultural barriers may be preventing this from happening.
- Identify the key sites within which waste is generated, understand how it is generated and establish the logistical feasibility of obtaining baseline estimates.
- Champion areas of pre-existing good practice.
- Identify opportunities and trial pilot projects that would enable UAL to further redirect materials from waste flows into initiatives that follow circular economy principles.

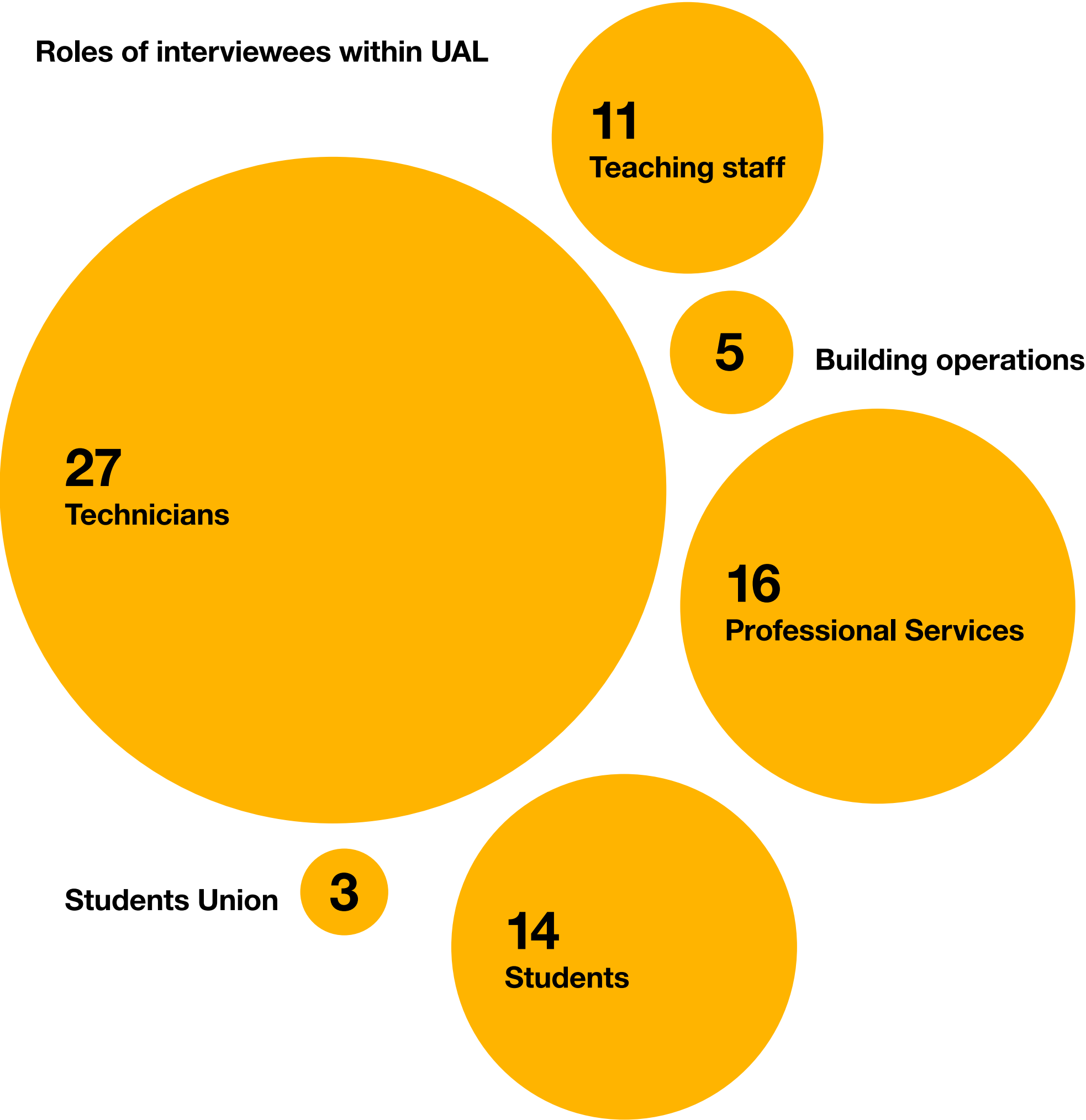
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Methodology

The research style for the project consisted of 70+ open ended interviews and site visits with stakeholders who were selected due to their interest and practice in circularity and/or materials, or their relationship to relevant workspaces or processes within the university ecosystem.

Views were sought from a wide cross section of the UAL community including both staff and students, with a particular focus on technical staff who are at the heart of our relationship with materials.

Roles of interviewees within UAL



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Study design

We took a pragmatic approach to this work, employing a combination of observational and interview-based methods to collecting qualitative data to build a rich picture of the materials landscape at UAL, including the flows of materials and waste through the systems, and the relationships and initiatives involved.

Data collection

We collected observational reflections about the way materials and waste were managed across the UAL estate through a combination of planned site visits and the iin the moment’ use of other ‘ad hoc’ opportunities such college tours and events such as the technician’s conference and Climate Emergency Network x Citizens UK Assembly.

We also conducted informal in-depth open-ended interviews with over 70 individuals across the UAL estate. Our sample included individuals across college technical staff, college teaching staff, Estates, Retail and Catering, Student Union, and Student Advocates. Individuals were identified through a combination of researching organisational staff charts, direct and indirect referrals through stakeholders in the project, ‘snowballing’ where interviewees would suggest further contacts, and interested individuals self-referring into the project. Interviews were recorded on Microsoft Teams or on a mobile recording device and extensive notes were made of these conversations prior to analysis.

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Limitations to approach

The project took a pragmatic approach to collecting information that would allow us to understand material flows across UAL that considered the capacity of the team and of our colleagues across the UAL community. However, there were some limitations to this approach.

Firstly, we were reliant on individuals that we contacted having both the good will and the capacity to be able to talk with us during the discovery process. Coordinating interviews with busy individuals without being extractive of their time presented some logistical and time considerations. Although we were able to speak to a good range of people from across the UAL community (see [roles of interviewees](#)), naturally we were unable to speak to every single person we may have wanted to. This may have resulted in inadvertent and unknown gaps in our knowledge base.

Due primarily to logistical and institutional barriers, we also struggled to access quantitative data in the form of key metrics around the cost and volume of waste that pass through UAL annually, as a whole or segregated into different waste streams. This meant we were unable to apply a data-driven lens to the project, focusing instead on qualitative data and insights.

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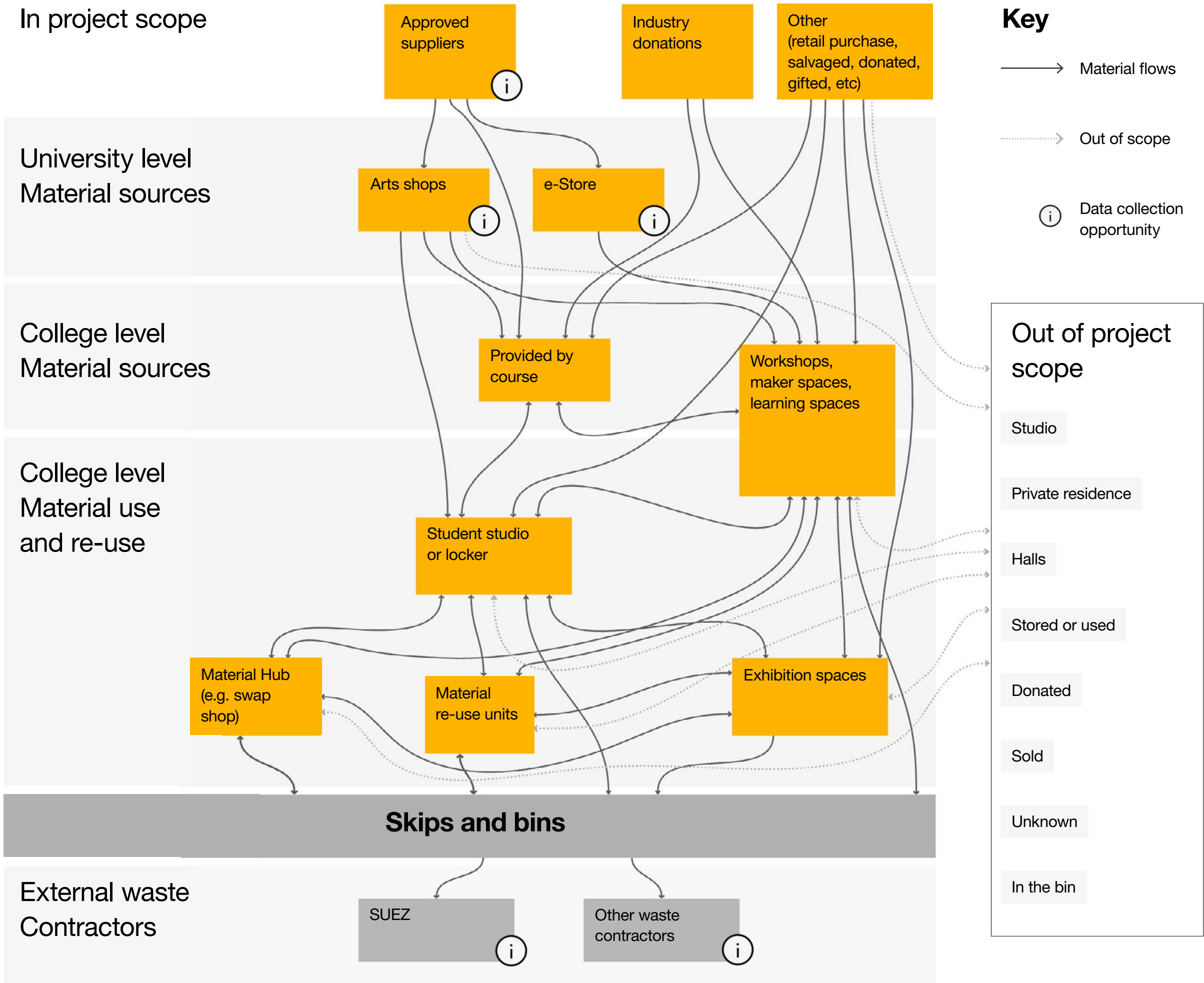
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The story so far

The project’s initial work to map the material and waste flows across UAL revealed a complex set of systems with numerous avenues through which materials and waste moves into, through and out of the UAL estate.

Numerous individuals, teams, groups, services and ad-hoc arrangements are involved leading to a complex picture that is difficult to untangle, but looks something like this:

Material flows across UAL



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Our waste expenditure is high and largely unmonitored, without much specificity or accountability. There is a pervasive culture of buy new rather than re-use. The skips are often full of usable materials, which technicians are known to rescue when possible. The cost of disposal is effectively out of mind for the disposer, but the repercussions are large for the estates or college budget holders.

Several points in this system potentially hold useful data around UAL’s material usage and waste production. At a bare minimum, it would have been beneficial to obtain metrics on the volumes of material entering and leaving the UAL ecosystem, with some indication of the predominant avenues through which these materials enter and leave. However, various institutional and logistical issues have made it difficult to obtain consistent raw data on how much material our university buys, uses, recycles, or throws away.

Donations received from industry or from other staff-initiated sources are an obvious potential data source, but these are not logged in any consistent or central database. As they often enter the UAL ecosystem in an ad-hoc way through individual relationships with external companies looking to donate materials, it would be difficult to ascertain their proportion of UAL’s overall materials inflow. The e-store (where students can buy materials sourced by technicians) and the Arts Shops may also hold data on materials, but these are a very small piece of the overall picture. There is also no data available for materials that are purchased independently off-site – mostly by students.

Most material leaves the UAL ecosystem via external contractors, the largest being Suez. The waste UAL pays Suez to take away consists of two main streams – general non-hazardous waste, which is sent to a waste-to-energy (WTE) incinerator, and dry mixed recycling. There are additional less frequent collections of mixed WEEE (small electrical items), hazardous waste, and confidential paper waste for shredding. The general non-hazardous waste and dry mixed recycling streams are currently operating as a catch-all for the majority of course generated material waste, affording little visibility into the true picture of what we pay for to be sent away. This could also be a critical point in the system for data collection around UAL’s waste volumes, but currently there is no system in place to receive any detailed metrics from Suez.

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Environmental Policy Statement, Waste Reduction and Recycling commitments
Feb 2023, V.10

- To continue to send zero waste to landfill and refresh general waste and mixed recycling internal bins.
- To minimise the adverse environmental impacts of the decommissioning and disposal of University assets.
- To increase the rate of recycling of all appropriate materials based on life-cycle principles.
- To implement sustainable resource management practices, based on reduce, reuse and recycle principles.
- Waste generated to be captured via the UAL Carbon Dashboard and on the UAL website.

Climate Action Plan > Change the way we operate > Waste, recycling and sustainable food

Recirculating materials and minimising waste are embedded across our operations and within our teaching and learning. For example:

- We encourage students to use sustainable materials in their projects.
- We champion the use of recycled materials and degree shows should design according to the principle of ‘building for deconstruction’ so the materials can be reused.
- We have been piloting an environmental assessment framework in our technical workshops which includes the recirculation of waste within our workshop spaces.
- Students have access to re-use units to encourage waste reduction and material reuse.
- Materials can be re-used, re-purposed or repaired at the Central Saint Martins Swap Shop.
- Camberwell College of Arts have launched a Repair Café to foster a culture of repair.
- Sustainability has also been at the heart of our Grayson’s Robes competitions.

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