

Imperial College Union
Summer Ball 2011 Debrief
A note by the DPFS – Michael Foster

Planning

Planning for the Summer Ball started in early December 2010. The Operations Manager met with the Knightsbridge Association, an organization that promotes the interests of residents, businesses and visitors of the Knightsbridge neighbourhood, who were happy with the intentions for the Ball. These changes included using more of the campus (Princes Gardens), starting much earlier and not hosting a formal dinner. The decision not to host a dinner was made when looking at the number of students buying dinner tickets in previous years – it had fallen from 650 in 2007 to 150 in 2010. These changes were all reported to Union Council in December 2010. The DPFS was mandated to construct a Summer Ball working group formed of at least four students. The Summer Ball working group was created, as mandated by Council. It was formed of the Ents Committee, a group elected by campus-wide ballot. All the format changes were discussed and agreed by this working group.

Due to illness, the DPFS was unable to attend the next meeting of Council in January. In his report to Council in February, he noted that the Summer Ball would be held on 18 June, and that College departments were happy with this. They also agreed with the intentions to use Princes Gardens and start the Ball earlier, in order to maximise value for money for students who felt they couldn't stay late for exam reasons. It was reported that the following weekend was not feasible, as acts, staging equipment and logistics would have been tied up with Glastonbury. The report also noted that other Students' Unions were being considered as partners.

The Operations Manager submitted the budget to the Executive Committee for approval on 18 April 2011. The DPFS was on leave, so did not attend this meeting. The budget predicted an attendance of almost 4,000 students from the three institutions (us, King's and Goldsmiths). This was more than double the attendance in any of the previous three years, and the number of people attending the Summer Ball has been steadily declining in previous years. Imperial College Union took on all financial responsibility of the event, with no formal commitment from the other Unions on what they would provide.

In April, the DPFS blogged about the changes to the Summer Ball format, the reasons for the changes and the way those decisions had been made. He described that the most positive feedback from previous events had related to the live acts, so this was identified as an area of focus for the 2011 Ball. It was also stated that the stage was under-utilized considering the hire cost, being in use for only four hours. These two factors suggested that the stage times should be extended to allow for more live acts. As our licence prohibited any music outside after midnight, the only reasonable option was to start the acts earlier, and to add the Princes Gardens Stage. As this would dramatically increase our costs and capacity, partnerships were formed with King's and Goldsmiths. The black tie dress code was removed, as it was thought to be unreasonable to expect students to stay in formal dress from noon to midnight in the height of summer. The After Party was made a ticketed event in order to control numbers, as the Union's capacity is 1200 people. As there could be no music outside after midnight, the Union was the only feasible venue for the After Party.

The Event

Due to prior negative publicity and the poor weather, ticket sales were much lower than expected, and lower than in previous years. Drinks sales on the day were up, but a higher cost of sales (of the product) meant actual income was down on previous years.

Aftermath

Based on actuals (the real figures, not the predicted budgeted figures), we would have had to have three times as many people attending. This takes into account the increased drinks sales with the higher attendance. We have never had that many people attending a Summer Ball at Imperial.

While a big part of the expenditure, the actual cost of the acts was not too different (proportionally) to the budgeted cost. The biggest differences were in the cost of Portaloos, what College charged for parking, riders for the acts, staff costs and meals and various costs for the tech of the event. This all said, keeping to the budgeted expenditure would not have helped the figures much – the losses were mostly caused by the much lower-than-expected income, not a greater-than-budgeted expenditure.

Survey

In the weeks following the Summer Ball, I wrote a survey to gauge student opinion after the event. This was sent out on the all-student email and published on our website and Facebook page. We received 323 responses. The highest number of responses came from first years, with the numbers decreasing with increasing years. 61% of respondents attended the ball, and 47% had attended in the past.

The biggest reason given for non-attendance was the price of the tickets (61% of non-attenders), followed by not liking the acts (44%). 20% of respondents said the weather put them off. In the free-text responses 21% of respondents cited the format change in some way, with typical responses saying it wasn't a ball and that the move to a festival format put them off.

The Queen's Lawn and the Great Hall were the most-visited areas, with 97% and 85% of respondents visiting them, respectively. 51% of respondents visited Princes Gardens. When asked which area was their favourite, opinion was split between the Queen's Lawn and Great Hall. The best-liked acts on the Queen's Lawn were Laura Marling (51%) and Labrinth (41%). In the Great Hall, Chase & Status (69%) and Nero (61%) were top.

When asked about value for money, respondents rated the After Party ticket, drinks and food as fair value for money, and the Ball ticket as poor value. This was on a five-point scale, with excellent being the top and very poor being the bottom:

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Very Poor
Summer Ball ticket	2.6%	9.5%	29.6%	37.0%	21.2%
After Party ticket	10.6%	32.3%	34.4%	14.8%	7.9%
Drinks	4.8%	27.0%	40.7%	18.0%	9.5%
Food	2.6%	19.0%	39.7%	25.9%	12.7%

There were many opportunities to provide free-text answers, and these responses cover 34 pages. It isn't possible to analyse these objectively, but a subjective appraisal seems to indicate that many people weren't happy with the change in format to what was seen as a festival – that probably won't surprise anyone. There is some mention of the weather and the dress code, as well as the lack of a formal dinner. Positive responses mostly mentioned the Great Hall, the funfair and the After Party. I am happy to provide these responses to people requesting them, if they would like to do a more detailed analysis.

The final question was on whether or not a Summer Ball should be run in 2012; 93% of respondents said there should be one.

Comment

Through discussion with the previous Executive Committee, the finance team and the commercial services managers, as well as through seeing the student response, it is my opinion that the main reason for the large loss incurred by the Summer Ball 2011 was a wholly unrealistic prediction of attendance. These high predictions grossly exaggerated the budgeted income, and so the budgeted expenditure was too high for the number of students that would realistically have come. The negative reaction to the changes to the format and the weather on the day also impacted on ticket sales. However, I am not of the opinion that a nice summer's day and a more positive reaction to the changes would have taken us to a break-even position, let alone a profit position. Considering the declining attendances over the previous three years, to have assumed such a high attendance was irresponsible. I don't believe that the absence of the DPFS at the meeting of the Executive Committee where the budget was passed had an adverse effect on the proceedings, as he would have been involved in planning the event and putting the budget together from the beginning of the process.

As for the way the changes were made and communicated, I feel that they were adequately reported, and in enough time for changes to be made. The DPFS reported them to Council in December 2010, and again in February. Council mandated the DPFS to form a working group formed from at least four students – he approached the Ents Committee to fill these positions. These students were originally elected in campus-wide ballots, and would therefore have been the best candidates to represent the students' views. I reject the claim from (last year's) Council saying there was not enough transparency and consultation – changes were communicated from back in December, and there was ample time for Council to question the changes before it was too late. The only change that might not have been as strongly communicated was the change in dress code. Students were involved throughout the process in the way that Council mandated, and it was their input that set the vision for the Summer Ball.

I share the opinion that it is inappropriate to subsidize dinner tickets with other tickets. In practice, this would mean that dinner tickets would be more expensive. Considering the observed yearly decline in dinner ticket sales, I cannot see how there would be enough interest in a dinner to make it feasible. Even once the decision not to have a dinner was publicized, a survey was created to see if there was enough interest in a dinner to put it on at late notice. There was not.

I should make clear that, at this point, no decisions have been made regarding the Summer Ball. When planning the event, I may choose to do things differently. I have some ideas for gathering

Council
31st October 2011

Agenda Item:

wider student feedback in the early stages of planning the Ball, and we will be sure to make a realistic budget with predictions based on previous experience. Mistakes were made, perhaps, but none were made with malice, and at all times the goal of putting on a great Summer Ball was at the forefront of everyone's minds. I am sure there is a wealth of knowledge and experience in those who put last year's Ball together, and I intend on drawing on it. As a Union, we acknowledge that we make mistakes, but we also strive to learn from them, and to build on them for the benefit of our members.

On a personal note, as one of those attending the Ball, I had a great time, despite the weather. I rather liked the less formal dress code: I'm not sure I could have managed in black tie through the inclement weather, but plenty of people did. Naturally, the opinion of one student is nothing to base a whole Summer Ball on, but there are plenty of positives to take from last year's Ball along with the lessons learned.