

Imperial College Union
Council Chair Report
A note by the Council Chair – Michael Foster

Appointment of Trustees

Council unanimously resolved to re-appoint Professor Dame Julia Higgins, Janet Rogan and George Palos to the Trustee Board. Dr Andy Heeps and Colin Kerr were appointed as new trustees. Simon Maddison and Stephen Brown were thanked for their service.

Translation Studies Unit

A group of students from the Translation Studies Unit (TSU), which has been marked for closure by the College, presented a paper to Council asking the Union to support a campaign against the closure. Council noted that, although the TSU was profitable for the College, College felt it did not fit with their overall strategy. College is making arrangements for students still on the course, with many of the TSU's activities to be provided by UCL. TSU representatives said students wanted 'a clear plan of the potential closure' with information on the effect it will have on the students, both with teaching and facilities; they also wanted more detail on the reasoning behind the closure. Council resolved to support the student-run campaign against the closure, and to request more reasoning for the closure and plans to mitigate its effect.

Access to Medicines Policy

Having rejected a previous proposal to sign up to the Global Access Licensing Framework (GALF), Council was petitioned again to accept it. Although it was noted that it would be unlikely for the College to sign up to GALF, especially considering the unknown financial impact it would have on College, it was felt that resolving to campaign on the issue would highlight the need for College to adopt some kind of ethical framework regarding licensing of medicines. Council therefore resolved to accept the policy, which also included an action to campaign on education of neglected tropical diseases.

Postgraduates

Council received many papers concerning postgraduate issues in the last few meetings. Firstly, it received a motion on the writing-up period for research postgraduate students. The proposal argued that the writing-up period should be extended from six months to one year – this would not have a negligible effect on the College, but it would significantly benefit students as they worked to complete their PhD. The resolution to lobby the College on the issue was passed unanimously.

Fees for taught postgraduate (PGT) courses were also discussed. The discussion was on a background of an NUS campaign for a new funding model for PGT courses, which would limit the fee and place a cap on student numbers. It was felt that the campaign didn't suit Imperial courses, as many were already above the proposed fee limit, by virtue of being STEM subjects. However, there were aspects of the campaign that Council felt would be important issues to take up, especially concerning the way students fund themselves on PGT courses. A fairer and more accessible tuition fee loan was the main focus, as well as the opportunity to contribute to any PGT fees strategy that the College will be creating.

The final postgraduate issue was the sudden and arbitrary withdrawal by Imperial College Health Centre (IHC) of healthcare provision for postgraduate students living outside of the immediate environs of Imperial College. IHC has previously accepted students in an expanded catchment area as patients, but in an apparent cost-saving measure, they have removed this provision from PG students, while still allowing undergraduates to benefit.

During the discussion, many issues surrounding the quality of healthcare provision by IHC emerged. Points were also raised concerning the legal obligation for GPs to treat anyone in their catchment area, regardless of their registration status. It was noted that this was not a College decision, and they are also concerned about this development. Council therefore directed the Deputy President (Welfare) to work with the College in examining the current memorandum of understanding between College and IHC, and to lobby a reversal of the new provision policy.

Unpaid Internships

A wide-ranging discussion was had on unpaid internships, and whether the Union should support them. Opinions ranged from outright rejection to limited acceptance (in the voluntary and start-up sectors). Large companies were criticised for their use of unpaid internships. It was felt that they were exclusive opportunities, with many not being able to support themselves financially during a period of unpaid work. A paper will come to a future Council meeting attempting to summarise the views of members into a Council policy.

Felix Update

Council requested and received a report from the Felix Editor on the state of their finances. Concerns were raised by the Executive Committee regarding the lack of advertising income, causing a significant deficit on Felix's balance sheet. The Editor explained that this was a result of a failure to invoice customers, rather than a lack of sales. Significant strides have since been made by Felix to invoice all their customers, and their financial status is more reassuring now. Council debated how this problem could be avoided in future, including questions on whether advertising sales responsibility should be passed on to a permanent member of the sales and marketing team.

This issue, along with the complaint about the election for next year's Felix Editor, has meant discussions on an editorial policy for Felix have stalled. However, it now provides an opportunity to involve the Editor-elect in the formation of an editorial policy, which can become a part of the handover process. I look forward to resuming this work, once exam pressures on all parties have eased.

Other Business

A variety of other papers have either been noted or accepted, including an updated Representation Policy and Awards Policy, responses to College Management Board and to the Education and Strategy Green Paper, and noting the new Code of Practice and Service Level Agreement with College.

Michael Foster
24 May 2013