

The Union's Submission of Evidence to the Residential Experience Review

Presented by Deputy President (Welfare) Marissa Lewis

Introduction

Imperial College Union believes that the residential system maintained by College plays a vital role in supporting and enabling our world-class educational and research community.

We are lucky to have an enviable legacy of both physical estate and institutional experience in supplying highly-regarded and well-located accommodation for our new undergraduates, complemented with established wardening, pastoral and social networks. These are facilities and traditions that many other universities take great efforts to emulate. However, we recognise that there is always room for improvement and development, and welcome any proposal to review and develop our accommodation provision in a holistic manner.

Strategic plans from a wide range of College's departments and institutions have a recurring theme: the importance of fostering and developing a diverse, global and talented student community, served by excellent pastoral care and transition through academic life. This common thread runs through all four key themes of College's Education & Student Strategy and of 'Our Plan', the Union's own set of strategic objectives. Relevant excerpts include:

ESS 1.6: *Continually enhance the 'Welcome' experience for all new students*

ESS 1.7: *Develop a programme to support the 'transition' for new students*

Our Plan SC3: *Work in partnership with College to review and improve the 'Welcome Week' provision through a review of the Union's activities and advising the College on how to improve their own arrangements*

Each of these objectives, and several others found throughout the strategy, implicitly rely on a high-quality, well-supported residential system that is sensitive to the individual and communal needs of students and that is designed in support of College's higher objectives: excellence in teaching, learning, and research.

Given the importance of the residential system to College and its students, Imperial College Union proposes that the ongoing Residential Experience Review aims to produce a new long-term vision for our residences. We present our vision in this document.

Scope of the submission

We have split our evidence up into three broad sections: 'Undergraduate Halls', 'Postgraduate Halls' and 'Beyond Halls'. Each section has a list of beliefs and each belief has key themes that will be discussed in the document.

Undergraduate Halls

We believe that our first year accommodation offer has the following purposes:

1. To provide a safe environment to students who may be living away from home for the first time and ensuring students' well-being through the provision of pastoral and wellbeing support
 - i. Pastoral and wellbeing support (wardening principles 1)

- ii. Behaviour, discipline and harmonious environment (wardening principles 2)
 - iii. Physical security (role of security)
 - iv. Hygienic and robust with adequate service provision (cleaning, building state, kitchens, general H&S, washing machines etc...)
2. To bring a diverse mix of students together, to provide social opportunities for students and build a sense of community.
 - i. Arrival, first impressions and transitions
 - ii. Opportunities for a range of inclusive and appropriate social opportunities (+ feedback when it doesn't happen)
 - iii. Vertical integration (seniors, their importance and recruitment, team building)
 - iv. Hall committees (governance, principles, elections)
 - v. Amenities fund (clarity of purpose, transparency of accounts)
 - vi. That there are options for delivering a safe environment (wardening arrangements)
3. To ensure that finding suitable accommodation close to their place of study is not a barrier to students' access to Imperial College.
 - i. Role of accommodation in choice of university
 - ii. Provisions for new undergraduates living out of halls
 - iii. Locations, portfolio mix and costs (Acton, cost data and its presentation)
 - iv. Communication of options and application/offer process (dodgy web content)
 - v. Summer hall accommodation
 - vi. College associated management (licences, credit control)

Postgraduate Halls

ICU believes the aims of postgraduate student accommodation should be:

1. To provide a safe environment with an appropriate level of pastoral and wellbeing support for the clientele
 - i. Reception arrangements - security and wellbeing support?
 - ii. Pastoral system - noting that at Silwood there are wardening arrangements
 - iii. How is the welcome managed
2. To bring postgraduate students together and build a sense of community
 - i. Social space provision
 - ii. Community building
 - iii. The current community model of other campuses is not necessarily a good one
3. To provide the option of affordable College operated accommodation within a reasonable distance of students' places of study
 - i. GradPad (rent comparisons to PhD stipends, local rents)
 - ii. Contact arrangements and management for GradPad
 - iii. Appropriateness of academic sanctions for non-academic debt

Beyond Halls

1. That social bonding and the development of friendships between students is important to their happiness and mental wellbeing when searching for and living in private accommodation.
 - i. Importance of developing friendships (halls, depts., clubs etc.)

2. That advice regarding seeking private accommodation and ensuring its suitability is important and can prevent significant adverse consequences for students.
 - i. Vacancy advertising, including landlord accreditation
 - ii. Contact checking service (or lack of)
 - iii. External and private halls
 - iv. Other advice via accommodation office
3. Rent Guarantor Scheme – *expanded on below*
4. Occasionally unfortunate circumstances occur relating to private accommodation and support mechanisms are important to assist in managing their repercussions
 - i. Housemate issues
 - ii. Implementation of Deposit Guarantee Scheme
 - iii. Eviction and departing by choice

Important points

Hall Committee/Amenity Fund

We are making several suggestions around the role and governance of the Hall Committee (an elected body of representatives from each Hall who decide social events and other Hall matters) as well as the role of the amenity fund. Every student who takes up a place in Halls contributes to the amenity fund as a cost added on to their rent – the amenity fund is then used to provide social events for those students in Halls. In recent years, concerns have been raised over who controls this fund, the uses of the fund and its very purpose.

We suggest the principles of the Halls Committees should be:

- Representing the views of the students of their Hall to the relevant authority, be it to the wardening team, the hall manager or the Union
- Deciding which events students would appreciate in that hall and controlling how the amenities fund is spent.
- To liaise with the Student's Union to ensure adequate communication of events, support services and advice to the incoming cohort of students.

We offer some suggestion about how best to facilitate and support Halls Committees and their use of the amenity fund. One suggestion is that each Hall operates as a Union Society, using our pre-existing systems. This could be achieved by the Hall Committee positions falling into our CSP framework where a committee is elected through an AGM. Given the timing of the new intake of students, we suggest we hold this AGM through our voting platform in the October elections. Doing so has several benefits:

- It ensures that students have control over the amenities fund
- It ensures the Committee will be required to undergo financial training
- It facilitates good communication between the Union and the Halls Committee as we will know who they are
- It holds the Committee to account as financial records for the Society will be accessible through eActivities.

There are a couple of forms such a society could take:

Mandatory membership

When a student enters a Hall of Residence they are automatically enrolled in the Hall Society. The amenity fund remains a component of the students' rent and the job of the Halls Committee is to decide how that money is spent.

- This provides incentive for Halls Committees to provide inclusive events as accounts will be viewable to their members and so they will be able to see how their money is being spent
- Rents will remain relatively unchanged

Opt-in membership

Students contribute to the amenity fund by purchasing Hall Society membership. This would remove the amenity fund as a component for rent in Halls.

- If only certain students purchase membership, the incentive on the Halls Committee to provide inclusive events may be diminished. Alternatively, it may encourage the Committee to promote inclusive events to attract more membership, if they are given proper training.
- Rent for each student is likely to decrease.

Vacancy advertising

One suggestion we will be submitting to College will be around the properties we advertise for students looking for housing in the private sector. Currently, College provides a searchable database of accommodation called Imperial Home Solutions but landlords who advertise to students through this platform undergo no vetting – they just have to pay £35 a year per property. We will be suggesting that Imperial adopts a landlord accreditation scheme, there are two models currently used in the sector:

- Creating a university-specific accreditation e.g. University of London – this is where universities develop their own code of practice and only allow advertising from landlords who sign up to this code
- Using existing accreditations e.g. UCL – this is where universities give preferential advertising to landlords who have accreditation from agencies such as UKLAP and denote which landlords have the accreditation on their databases

Rent guarantor scheme

Another suggestion will be that College adopts a Rent Guarantor Scheme. Currently, students who lack a UK-based guarantor have to pay 6-12 months' rent upfront when renting in the private sector or in GradPad – given the high rent prices in the area; this can be a significant financial burden. A proposal for such a scheme is attached as Appendix 1.

Matters for discussion/decision:

1. Does the committee agree with the scope of our evidence?
2. Does the committee have any thoughts on the 'Important Points' section?
3. Will the committee mandate the Deputy President (Welfare) to write this document on behalf of Imperial College Union?

Appendix 1: Proposal for Rent Guarantor Scheme

This document is Imperial College Union's proposal for the implementation of a Rent Guarantor Scheme that will allow for Imperial College to act as a guarantor for students who lack a UK-based guarantor in order to prevent them from paying high down-payments when renting in the private sector.

This scheme is modelled on similar programmes at University College London (UCL), Kent University and York University, and proposals from the London School of Economics (LSE).

Current situation for Imperial Students

- Imperial's accommodation offer only extends to first year undergraduate students, although a limited number of students in older years may apply to stay in Halls for subsequent years of study, usually as hall seniors or subwardens.
- 97.7% of first year undergraduates take up a place in Halls, which, in 2013/14 left 241 students in their first year living out (1).
- 48.6% of Imperial students are not from the UK, so the potential impact of such a scheme is significant (2).
- Imperial owns part of GradPad which provides postgraduate student accommodation. Students without a UK-based guarantor are required to pay, in advance, all 51 weeks of rent.
- Imperial is located in one of the most expensive boroughs in London – rents for a 2 bedroom apartment in Kensington and Chelsea average at £620/week, compared with the median of £315/week for the Greater London area (3). This means down-payments on flats for those lacking a UK-based guarantor can be extremely high and impractical to pay on top of high tuition and visa fees.
- In a Union-run survey of International Students, 29% stated they already had problems renting privately and many cited paying 6-12 months' rent in advance as a barrier to renting in the private sector (4).
- Given that UCL has run a rent guarantor scheme and LSE are planning on implementing such a scheme in the near future, Imperial needs to follow suit in order to remain competitive, especially in the international market.

Potential models

Other institutions who have implemented schemes based on UCL's model state that students who default on their rent will be held accountable by preventing these students from registering for subsequent years of study or graduating.

In light of the recent OFT investigation into academic sanctions for non-academic debts and Imperial College Union's stance against this practice, this is not the model we recommend as it may not be sustainable in the long term.

Instead, we propose that College investigates the possibility of purchasing corporate rent guarantor insurance, with the cost of the insurance recouped from the administration cost of students taking up Imperial's rent guarantor scheme. If this is done successfully, this should create a cost-neutral program. Students who default on their rent, in this case, should be treated like students who

default on payments for undergraduate accommodation payments and can therefore be threatened with legal action for failure to repay College.

Mitigating risk

It is worth prefacing this section by saying that students defaulting on this scheme at other institutions is very low – since introduction at UCL, there have only been two cases of students defaulting on their rent. On both occasions, the students dropped out of university entirely. Risk of implementing this policy can be mitigated by either limiting the scope of the scheme or the maximum liability any one student could incur.

Scope limitations:

In order to recoup the cost of the insurance, limiting student numbers too harshly could be a risk in itself; however there are moderate measures that could be put in place to limit the possibility of students misusing this scheme.

- Multiple occupancy – some institutions state that they only guarantee properties where all occupants are members of the university. Although this would lower risk, it could be particularly restrictive to certain students e.g. international postgraduates, who may not have the contacts at Imperial to live in an Imperial-only flat but also not have the expense to live in a single-occupancy property.

Maximum liability limitations:

- Cap guarantee – the College should decide a cap of weekly rent that would be covered by the scheme. LSE's proposed cap is £180/week.
- Subsidiary cover – we would not recommend that utility bills or council tax be covered by the scheme
- Service charge – a single-issue payment should be required for use of the service. In the sector, payments tend to range between £30-50

One major advantage of paying rent in instalments rather than upfront is that students have more bargaining power should anything go wrong with the flat e.g. a landlord refusing to carry out repairs or a property being repossessed. However, if offering a rent guarantor scheme, this provides the College with the additional risk of a student intentionally withholding rent. In order to avoid this occurring, the following measures could be put in place:

- Landlord accreditation – starting a landlord accreditation service could allow the College to restrict this scheme to properties owned by approved landlords
- Contract-checking – this is currently offered by the Student Hub and the Union's Advice Centre but could become a mandatory requirement as part for any student wanting to participate in the scheme.

Debt Collection

The rent guarantor scheme will require a signed Agreement from the student signing up to the scheme. In cases of multiple occupants, the Agreement will be between the College and each student in residence.

The Agreement will lay out a student's responsibilities in the scheme, including the following requirements:

- To observe the conditions outlined in the tenancy agreement between the landlord and tenants
- To notify the Accommodation Office of any intention to terminate the Agreement before the date stated in the Agreement
- To reimburse the College in the event of the College incurring any expenditure or loss as a consequence of acting as guarantor
- To inform the Accommodation Office if the College is required to pay rent on the student's behalf. This should be done in writing, stating the amount due, the due date and the reasons for non-payment, so that the College can pay in a timely manner
- To pay the administration fee of signing up to the scheme
- To, under no circumstances, withhold rent without first consulting the Union's Advice Centre. In cases of disputes between the landlord and tenant, the Advice Centre will act as a mediator.
- The Agreement would also state that the Accommodation Office will invoice the student for any fees occurred whilst the College acts as guarantor for that student and state that the student can be subject to Imperial College disciplinary procedures and/or legal proceedings if they fail to comply with the terms of the Agreement.

Summary

- Implementing a Rent Guarantor Scheme would allow Imperial students who lack a UK-based guarantor to spread their rental costs over a year, rather than pay 6-12 months' rent in advance. As it stands, this is a significant financial barrier to study at Imperial.
- In light of other institutions adopting a scheme such as this, it is essential Imperial follows suit in order to remain competitive, especially to International Students
- Outlined above is a potential mechanism for implementing such a scheme at Imperial – this needs investigation with the Accommodation Office and College Management to decide the risk, feasibility and implementation of the scheme

References

1. Swaby, K. - *Imperial Hub's Annual Report to the Student Welfare Committee* (2013)
2. Imperial College Union *Strategic Plan* (2013). Available at: <https://www.imperialcollegeunion.org/sites/default/files/Our%20Plan%20FINAL%20SPREADS.pdf>
3. Greater London Authority – London Rent Map. Available at: <http://www.london.gov.uk/rents/> [Accessed on: 20/01/2014]
4. Lewis, M. - *Union Stance on the Immigration Bill*. (2013) Accessible at: <https://www.imperialcollegeunion.org/your-union/policies/87>