

Response to the College's Draft Strategy

2015-20

Introduction

Imperial College Union warmly welcomes the opportunity to engage in the formation of the College Strategy 2015-20. We are proud to be recognised as key partners of the College, and have invested our efforts in a thorough response to the College's strategy. We have used our unique position as an independent yet closely-linked organisation, as well as our experience in building a student community and amplifying the student voice, to provide constructive feedback on the current draft of the College Strategy.

This is an exciting time for the College community. At Imperial College Union, we are halfway through our 2013-16 strategic and financial cycle, which means we are starting to plan for the subsequent three years. We continually engage with our members to guide us in our task of delivering the best student experience at Imperial, and we publish annual Impact Reports describing our achievements and progress towards that mission. The recurring messages we receive from our members were key to formulating the propositions we outline in this response, and we would not be fulfilling our duties to our members if we did not insist that they become



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vital elements of our shared vision for the Imperial community. Students are Imperial's largest stakeholders and it is Imperial College Union and Imperial College London's joint responsibility to continually demonstrate our commitment to the student body.

At the Union, we are also turning our attention to our own next strategic cycle. We are looking forward to seeing the finalised College Strategy, and continuing to work towards our joint ambition of enhancing the student experience at Imperial so that it is the best that it can be.



Read more about Our Plan, the Union's Strategy until 2016, online at:

imperialcollegeunion.org/strategy

Supporting the wider learning experiences of our students

Imperial College Union supports the commitment, in the draft strategy, to a **“supportive, considerate and highly motivated community across all disciplines, functions and activities”**.

An important part of maintaining a supportive College community is the provision of welfare and support services, through academic departments, dedicated support services, the wardening system and the Students’ Union. At their best these systems provide effective support where necessary but they lack cohesion and consistency across the College – the Union believes that the College should commit to excellence in the field of student support and welfare and should underpin this by a fundamental review during the strategic period. **Ensuring the mental well-being of the student body is a moral imperative and a prerequisite of academic success** and the College should commit to this at the highest level of the strategy.

Other fundamental elements of the College community are the support networks and

wider skills that are related to non-academic activity. More than half of the student body (including postgraduates) join a Union Club, Society or Project in any given academic year. The experiences and skills gained through this involvement may be specific (theatre lighting or a deep-sea diving qualification), or widely applicable (financial management or negotiation skills).

However, involvement in Student Activities has its biggest impact on the College community by engendering a sense of belonging and a connection to like-minded colleagues who provide friendship and support throughout a students’ College journey and beyond, **and play a fundamental part in the College’s recruitment and retention of the most talented students**. Students involved in Clubs, Societies & Projects are more likely to exhibit a high sense of belonging to the College. Student Activities also provide opportunities for students to meet students from other disciplines, creating informal opportunities for collaboration and innovation.

Students who don't belong to such networks cannot reach their full potential. The Union strongly believes that an overt reference to supporting and developing the non-academic student experience in the top-level strategic plan is essential in order to underline the importance of these activities and to ensure that **space to support Student Activities, both physical and temporal, is included in the College's planning decisions.**

Evidence and Examples

- ▲ 54.9% of Imperial students are involved in a Union Club, Society, Project, or Volunteering initiative. (As of 27 March 2015)
- ▲ 79% of Imperial students agree that involvement in Union activities enhances their employability. (Union Survey 2014)
- ▲ 88% agree that the Union plays a fundamental role in creating a positive student community at Imperial. (Union Survey 2014)

Potential Success Measures

- ▲ The College's student support services to be rated in the top quartile in the sector.
- ▲ Involvement in non-academic activity embedded into curricula where possible and formally recognised by the College through investment and involvement in the Union's Imperial Plus scheme.

Proposition 1

The College Strategy should commit to excellence in the field of student support and welfare, underpinned by a fundamental review during the strategic period.

Proposition 2

The College Strategy should explicitly commit to the support and development of the non-academic student experience at Imperial.

Listening and responding to the student voice

The draft strategy speaks of the importance of treating students as partners in the delivery of their education; indeed this was also the subject of this year's Education Day. Imperial College Union believes that **students must to be included in the making of key decisions that affect the student experience at Imperial** and feels there must be a commitment to recognise students as important stakeholders of the organisation whose opinions are given appropriate weight in decision making processes. The impact of decisions can be best judged by involving those directly affected.

Effective consultation inherently leads to better decisions, decisions that are influenced, understood, and often supported, by the student body. The Union President being consulted on the College's approach

to the pricing of its accommodation portfolio and subsequent discussion at Union Council is an example of such practice. There are also correlations between the departments that effectively engage their students on decisions that affect them and high National Student Survey results, particularly in Earth Science and Engineering.

A student body that is engaged with the College and the decisions that it makes will inevitably leave with a more positive view of Imperial, a feeling that will stay with them as alumni.

The Union believes that a commitment to engaging students with the academic and non-academic decisions that affect their time at the College needs to be included in the College's new strategy.

Evidence and Examples

- ▲ The decision to make multiple changes to the College's accommodation portfolio without effective consultation caused the student body and the Union to organise campaigns such as #AgainstActon and ICaProblem.
- ▲ Despite the positive work by Sport Imperial to purchase a superb facility at Heston for the student body, the poor consultation around the closure of Teddington Sports Ground caused the student reaction to the whole process to be very negative.

Potential Success Measures

- ▲ An increase in student satisfaction in the National Student Survey.
- ▲ Quantitative and qualitative data from surveys on the student experience at the College.

Proposition 3

The College Strategy should state the College's commitment to engaging students in the academic and non-academic decisions that affect their time at Imperial.

Proposition 4

The College Strategy should recognise students as an important stakeholder of the organisation and commit to ensuring their perspective is given the appropriate weight in decision making.

World-leading assessment and feedback as a crucial component of educational quality

Imperial College Union welcomes the commitment to establishing “timely and useful assessment and feedback [as] a central part of our approach to teaching”. **The talent and abilities of our students cannot be nurtured to their full potential without meaningful, detailed and personalised feedback on their progress, coursework and examinations.** Our Academic Representation Network has focused on improving feedback quality as its highest priority in recent years, in response to the concerning findings of surveys, conferences and debates within the student community.

We are supportive of the concept of embedding education in the research environment by pursuing a research-led curriculum, and by exposing Undergraduates and taught Postgraduates to world-class researchers. We also believe that educational quality is maintained only when curricula are agile and responsive to the most recent

research findings and best practice in teaching and learning methods. **It is our belief that the best researchers are those who balance the production of high-impact papers and findings with their role in the development and mentoring of the next generation of academics and scientists.** Specialisation in either teaching or research is beneficial to scientific progress and to the maintenance of teaching standards, but if teaching is to be research-led, a deep and damaging dichotomy of skill sets between researchers and teachers must not be allowed to develop.

The provision of quality and timely feedback is highly sensitive to innovation and our openness to technical advances and change. Feedback & assessment is often given in small groups or individually, and it is a responsibility of a significant percentage of the academic community; the adoption of new techniques must be widespread and given clear leadership, not restricted to a few early adopters.

Proposition 5

The College Strategy should contain a commitment to achieving high-quality feedback and assessment for all study types through innovation and skills development across all academic staff.

Feedback & assessment are also not only Undergraduate issues. **The supervisor-supervisee relationship is of critical personal importance to our thousands of PhD students, and our Master's students are as reliant on timely feedback as our Undergraduates.** We believe that the conscious development of supervisory skills, and student input into the quality and development of taught Postgraduate courses, should be an organisational priorities.

Evidence and Examples

- ▲ Assessment & feedback scores are our weakest area of the National Student Survey, with approval ratings for timeliness & usefulness varying widely and dropping as low as only 22% (Biomedical Sciences, 2014).
- ▲ Despite increases in approval ratings over the past three years, we are still below the Russell Group and national averages for this measure.
- ▲ The theme of the Union's NSS Response and Academic Representation Conference was "Quality Feedback" - this is an issue of great significance to our members.

Potential Success Measures

- ▲ The College achieves a top-decile place in the UK for student satisfaction regarding feedback & assessment, in the National Student Survey, and Postgraduate Taught/ Research Experience Surveys.
- ▲ The College makes a clear statement that skills in teaching, assessment, feedback and supervision are central to continuous professional development for all academics.

Proposition 6

The College Strategy should commit to embedding feedback and assessment skills in the core CPD for all academics.

Proposition 7

The College Strategy should commit to establishing a supervisory skills framework, which outlines the qualities expected of world-leading supervisors.

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