

Union's Stance on College's Decision to Close Weeks Hall

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Secunder: Robin Saaristo (Aeronautics, UG), W&W Hall Committee Member

1. The Union Notes:

1.1. On Feb 10th, the Union Council voted in favour of point 4a of the paper "Transparency within First-Year Halls of Residence" : *The Union accepts the need to close Weeks hall and to convert this space for non-accommodation use to improve the provision of both academic and non-academic space.* Neither the hall committee nor the wardening team were informed about College's decision to close Weeks Hall or the proposed Union paper regarding this decision. No precise statement was given by the College on the reasons for the closure, nor its timeline.

1.2. According to the non-binding Consultation Framework signed by the College and ICU, the closure of an old hall of residence constitutes a Major Impact, category RED. The Consultation Framework sets out the following methods to follow before a decision is made:

- Engage affected students in advance of the proposed change with a route for reply
- Work with student reps to devise appropriate questions to ask users
- Work with student reps to gather student opinion
- Officially present and seek opinion at a relevant Union committee or Union Council
- Seek the opinion of the Union President or one of the Deputy Presidents

None of these have been followed by College in the case of the proposed closure of Weeks Hall.

1.3. In the Partnership Agreement, a binding framework, between College and ICU, the following is agreed:

- 2.4.1 Full, open, regular communication on relevant issues, in particular issues likely to have an impact on the other party, the student population and/or other joint stakeholders.
- 3.1 The College will ensure that students are consulted in the development of its strategic plans through engagement with the Union

1.1. Weeks Hall is a valuable contribution to Imperial's accommodation portfolio because:

- Welfare students: Without Weeks hall, students with disabilities may find themselves in Acton or Paddington due to financial constraints, away from the health centre and support services on campus, putting their well-being at risk.
- Weeks could provide a middle ground for Under-18s with regards to living on campus in relatively cheap accommodation.
- The social space of Weeks Hall is shared with Wilkinson and Gabor, the student-run cafe Bonkies and the common room are used for most of the big joint events by a total of 376 students.
- Weeks will help to counteract the polarization of rents for on and off campus accommodation.

- Weeks is most suitable as a student hall of residence, since this is what it was purpose-built for.

2. The Union Believes:

- 2.1. The decision about Weeks Hall has not been made in a transparent manner, and has not been communicated well by the College. The decision-making process concerning issues affecting students directly has to improve.
- 2.2. The College has put the Union in a very difficult position by informing it about the planned closure of Weeks Hall only after the decision had been made, and created the impression that the decision was taken by the Union. Currently, a lot of criticism around the closure of Weeks Hall has been directed towards the Union (as the news broke from a Union Council meeting). These reactions should be directed towards the College for not being transparent.
- 2.3. The College did not inform the wardening team, the residents of the hall or the student body. The Union should push for the College to be transparent with the whole community, and ensure that the College assumes responsibility for informing those affected by its decisions, as opposed to relying on the Union to be the only channel of communication.
- 2.4. The paper "Transparency within First -Year Halls of Residence" addressed many big decisions and changes around Imperial's accommodation portfolio, with very little background information on these decisions. The Union has not been given sufficient information by the College about the reasons for closing Weeks hall and its future use to be able to make an informed decision. A democratic body like the Union Council should not be making decisions with so little information available. The Union should be pushing the College for more information and transparency.
- 2.5. The College has not respected the Partnership Agreement with ICU when taking the decision to close Weeks Hall. The College did not follow the consultation framework that it had agreed to. The Union should be pushing back on the College to postpone any decision until the agreed consultation has been carried out.
- 2.6. The Union should assess how the closure of Weeks Hall and change in hall rents would affect students with disabilities requiring them to live on campus.
- 2.7. The Union should lobby College to maximise affordable accommodation in walking distance to the main campus.
- 2.8. The Union should not compromise, but lobby on every issue it believes is important to the students. The Union should represent the interests of all of their students, including the 64 potential residents of Weeks Hall.

3. The Union Resolves:

- 3.1. To oppose College's decision to close Weeks Hall.
- 3.2. To ask College to delay the closure of Weeks Hall and the decision on the future purpose of Weeks Hall until a full transparent consultation has been conducted.
- 3.3. To support the campaign *#ICaProblem* to address the lack of consultation, communication and transparency that College displayed towards its students in important decision-making processes that affect student's experience at Imperial.

Appendix: #ICaProblem

The Campaign aims to address:

- **Consultation:** The College should take student's views into account for decisions affecting the student body. When student's opinions have been voiced, either through campaigns, through the Union, or via direct consultation of students, they have been largely ignored by College in significant decision-making processes.
- **Communication:** It should be the College's duty to inform the students and staff about the long-term decisions that may affect them – before they are irreversible, before they have been implemented, and at a time of the academic year where they can respond.
- **Transparency:** Through consultation and communication a higher degree of transparency can be achieved. Justified and well-communicated decisions will build the trust and support between College and the student community. The decisions, their impact and their outcomes would be better and more transparent.

Student's Input on Accommodation and Rent: As part of the "First Year Guarantee", College promises to provide comfortable, safe, fairly priced accommodation *within reasonable commuting distance* of the South Kensington campus for all first year undergraduates. College's restructuring plan of Imperial's UG accommodation portfolio has effectively reduced affordable accommodation within walking distance of the South Kensington campus. For several existing halls a huge 9% or 10% rent increase on average will occur next year. Average hall rent has remained the same at £166 per week whilst the quality of the overall accommodation portfolio has gone down with more students now having to commute further. College respected the student's decision of the redistribution of rents, but what should have been discussed is the fixed average rent of £166. College should bear the costs for the unpopular North Acton plan, and not the students.

Motivation of the campaign

There is at this point a considerable track-record of College disregarding student views on topics that significantly affect the student experience. Examples include: North Acton, closure of Garden Hall, planned closures of Evelyn Gardens' Halls, Pembridge Hall and Weeks Hall, the replacement of the Holland Club by h-bar, the replacement of the Teddington sports grounds by Heston, the cuts of Life Sciences etc. Students feel increasingly powerless and become more disengaged, thereby leading College to ignore them more. We need to break this cycle.

The announced closure of Weeks Hall is the latest example of the lack of consultation, lack of communication and lack of transparency which has characterised several decisions made by College recently.

Goals the Campaign hopes to achieve:

- Delay the decision on the time of closure and future purpose of Weeks Hall until a full transparent consultation has been conducted. College should justify its reasons for closing Weeks Hall.
- Hold the College to account for not holding a consultation on the closure of Garden Hall despite promising to do so. Ensure the huge space of Garden Hall is used productively for College or else refurbished and re-opened as a student hall.
- Conduct the consultations that have been promised, and hold the individuals/committees accountable that have dismissed existing promises and agreements.
- Communicate information on the masterplan for the North side of Prince's Gardens.
- Communicate the current situation of Evelyn Gardens and the response of the Wellcome Trust with respect to its lease.
- College should be made aware of the fact that low student satisfaction will ultimately have an impact on Imperial College via NSS results, student intake, and endowment levels.
- Communicate to representatives of the decision-making bodies at Imperial College the detrimental effects on students of some of the decisions that have been taken, and discuss how these effects may be counteracted.
- Increase student representation on committees and boards that are involved in decision-making, particularly with regard to decisions that have a long-term impact on the student experience: there should be a student representative on the College Cabinet and the Provost Board.
- Accommodation and Rent: The average rent price should go down since the overall quality of accommodation has decreased for students. College should consider subsidising halls of residence, possibly with the profit made from halls during the summer holidays. Another option would be subsidising travel cards for students living in Acton. Revaluation of rent prices, in particular the extortionate increases in Princes Gardens to effectively subsidise Acton. Give students the possibility to swap rooms after they have been allocated. The Union should push the College for an agreement not to increase rents by more than the inflation rate.
- Make a detailed breakdown of average rent (per hall of residence) available, including how capital, wardening and "other" costs are calculated. The breakdown seen by the Union is very brief.