Board of Trustees
One-Page Summary

AGENDA ITEM NO:	11
TITLE	Advice Review
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	After the staffing changes of 2015, the next step of developing our advice services are explored; these include expanding headcount, improving our processes via quality assurance, changing our marketing, and beginning continuous processes of engaging with College and our members.
PURPOSE	To provide a framework for the future development of our advice services
RISK IMPLICATIONS	None
FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS	None not already approved by Board
LEGAL REVIEW REQUIRED?	No
DECISION/ACTION REQUIRED	To provide input and observations

Advice Review

Angela Urasala, Advice Services Manager
Andrew Keenan, Education & Welfare Manager

1.0 Preface – *Andrew Keenan, Education & Welfare Manager*

1.1 The second strategic aim in *Our Plan 2013-16* promises that "*By 2016 the Union will have played a demonstrable role in providing the educational and non-academic experience of our members through effective campaigning, lobbying and research*". The Plan also committed us to '*review[ing] the advice provision available to students on campus, including our own Advice Centre service and make recommendations to the College and the Union's Board of Trustees*', as well as other goals and aims touching upon advice as a core service we provide.

1.2 In recent years, management and governance identified considerable weaknesses in our advice provision that required a change management process to solve. In 2015, I undertook a restructure of our advice staffing, which resulted in the discontinuation of the existing Student Adviser role and the creation of a new Advice Services Manager post. Angela Urasala was appointed in October 2015, coming from the advice centre at KCLSU with previous experience at the Citizens' Advice Bureau.

1.3 These staffing changes were always intended to be the beginning of a wider and more fundamental review of the provision of advice to our members. In broad terms, these changes were expected to include an increase in headcount to meet projected demand, improved working relationships with student campaigners and the staff that support them, and renewed marketing of the services to students.

1.4 In recent months, additional priorities have been identified, such as the necessity of reviewing our processes (such as data protection) and changing our online content. One of the unexpected lessons, learnt during the interim period in which I was acting as Student Adviser, is that our caseload (modest compared to peer services) is already unmanageable for one person if that person is also responsible for service development and management. Therefore, the expansion of the service to include a caseworker was brought forward as a matter of urgency; recruitment is underway, with interviews planned to take place on Monday 11 January 2016.

1.5 Since her appointment as Advice Services Manager in October 2015, Angela Urasala has been undertaking this review; her observations and recommendations are given below.

2.0 Key observations with actions – *Angela Urasala, Advice Services Manager*

2.1 The review of the advice service and the changes suggested will allow the service to effectively support students individually, build up a database of information that will form the basis of campaigns and actions for change, challenge the College with tangible evidence to support our arguments and build a link with other unions to

influence change on a national scale. Below, observations and actions – some of which are newly generated within the last three months – are explored.

2.2 *Developing our processes*

Legislation, best practice and our own aspirations regarding excellent service and campaigning all require the AC to have reliable and clearly defined working processes and tools. This will necessitate some temporary changes and permanent developments to how the service is administered and delivered.

2.2.1   The interim period from August to October 2015 demonstrated the need for extra headcount to enable service development, and also to allow specialisation in topics such as housing. In the long term, this expansion will increase our capacity for supporting campaigns by growing our in-house expertise in a range of important areas.

Action: Recruitment is underway for a second member of staff, an Advice Caseworker specialising in housing and money; the intended start date is late February. Non-academic advice has been suspended until this appointment is made. An induction plan for the new roleholder is being prepared.

2.2.2   One of the original drivers of the advice restructure was our belief that the existing caseload was not proportional to the demand expected from a membership of our size. This has been borne out both by comparison to peer services, and by an increase in number of cases recorded once the restructure began. During the interim period (7 Aug – 16 October, with an acting Adviser) all students who contacted the service from 1 Jan 2015 were re-contacted and had their cases reviewed. After this process, the calendar year 2015 showed 333 cases, compared to 220 for the calendar year 2014. In terms of academic years, we have recorded 147 so far in 2015/16, compared to 74 by the same date in 2014/15 and 63 in 2013/14.

2.2.3   We have identified a number of causes for underuse of our advice services, many of which are addressed by the actions contained in this paper. These include low awareness and/or confidence in the service amongst College academic and support staff, and lack of clear student-facing campaigns on key issues such as housing law or academic appeals.

2.2.4   We do not currently have an Advice Manual, which sets out for staff how cases and clients are managed.

Action: An ICU Advice Manual will be completed for March 2016.

2.2.5   Regular quality monitoring is important for service provision and staff development; previously, only minimal quality control was enacted and many cases were only viewed by one member of staff without oversight. New quality monitoring and control procedures will be introduced, and

standards such as response times will be set and enforced.

Action: Once the new roleholder has begun, monthly case checks will be introduced, including sampling of cases. Casework meetings between advice staff will begin, including caseload monitoring; this will be supported by eActivities.

2.2.6   Communication within the Education & Welfare team will change to support the proposal and selection of campaigns from AC data.

2.2.7   Client communication and feedback will be improved through supplementing our current feedback form with the recording of informal feedback received in verbally and in writing; when appropriate, clients will be asked for a brief statement about their impressions of the service at the end of consultations.

2.3 *Understanding our members' needs*
Students are our audience and key stakeholder; therefore it is crucial that we understand and predict their needs in order to provide the service they require. Developing a sophisticated understanding of emerging trends in student demand can be done in a number of ways, some of which are new to ICU:

- Engaging with College staff at multiple levels, such as Senior Tutors, Departmental and administrative staff
- Engaging with our membership directly, with particular reference to Academic Representatives and Liberation Officers
- Discussing trends and issues with College services on a frequent basis
- Reviewing cases and analysing the data we have on our members

2.3.1   Direct consultation is not the most efficient way to find out what students need. If students are questioned about this on an ad hoc basis they will mention a particular problem they are experiencing or they won't really know what help they need or if there are other services who can already help. We should recognise that consultation with members is only a small part of understanding their needs and preparing for them, and develop other ways to understand user need.

Action: A method statement summarising how user needs and demands will be analysed and predicted will be completed by February 2016 and reviewed annually.

2.3.2   An effective way of doing this is collecting accurate data of the enquiries that come through the advice service and record when we help students and when we refer them on to someone else. When we meet students within the AC it is important to listen to what they say and keep an accurate record of what they mention. They will bring up a host of

problems during appointments and not just the initial issue they contacted the service about.

Action: Create a brief, in consultation with Systems team, by March 2016 for developing the online existing casework management software to enable more granular capture of information, in turn enabling more detailed trend analysis.

2.3.3   Students often go to personal tutors or to other departmental staff for help, rather than College or ICU services directly, so it is important to start a conversation with these members of the College to find out what support students need. This is explored further below in the *Relationship with College* section.

Action: Engage directly with members of the Personal Tutoring Network, focusing on departmental Senior Tutors, to develop understanding of cases and issues in their areas. This is ongoing and the aim is to have all Senior Tutors contacted and the majority met in person by March 2016.

2.3.4   Different students will have different needs and the AC needs to cater for all students. The AC needs to identify cohorts of students, beginning with UG, PGR, PGT, international students, and departments, and ensure they all feel they can get help from the AC.

Action: Design engagement and research methods to ensure that the diversity of our membership is reflected, and reflect this in the method statement.

2.3.5   Reports are being produced at the end of each month and a yearly report will be produced at the end of each academic year. We will also request more detailed information from services within College, particularly Registry statistics regarding appeals, complaints, and misconduct.

Action: Reports will be produced monthly and annually, containing observations and recommendations for developing the service and addressing new trends.

2.3.6   In the long term, gaining a quality mark for the service will help boost stakeholder confidence and enhance the value of the service.

Action: Within the current academic year, we will write a business case that explores the possibility of applying for a quality mark for the service.

2.4 *Relationship with College*
A constructive relationship with College is crucial to ensuring the effectiveness of our service and our ability to provide advice. This is important on the individual level (improving the experience and outcomes for our clients) and organisationally; by having a good relationship with the College, the AC is also able to challenge

procedures and regulations when necessary to improve the student experience overall.

2.4.1   We have identified that College's regulations can be quite vague and allow departments to handle situations as they see fit; this may be due to varying levels of Faculty and Department independence and individuality. This creates confusion and inconsistency in the way students are dealt with. As some procedures are not formalised, students might not be referred on for support or might be unaware of the procedure that is being followed.

Action: Engage with staff at departmental level, and influence College processes such as the Academic Standards Framework and regulation reviews, to ensure equitable experiences and processes for our members and identify student cohorts at risk of not being treated according to regulation.

2.4.2   Productive working relationships with College support services must be established and maintained to enable communication outside of infrequent formal meetings, and to improve understanding of the AC's role. Members of these teams will change frequently so it is important to maintain contact throughout the year. These services should all have a copy of the AC leaflets and if appropriate, our guides. Data (about usage trends rather than individual cases) should be shared between services when appropriate.

Action: Establish regular communication with key staff, and launch a promotional campaign to support services as well as departments to reinforce understanding of the AC's role in advance of the 2016/17 academic year.

2.4.3   As mentioned above, new communication with personal tutors must be initiated, to improve mutual understanding of roles, regulations and trends. Until present there has been no direct communication between advice staff and members of the personal tutoring system. We will also communicate directly with tutors in advance of periods of expected demand for advice, such as during exams, to remind them of our services.

Action: Advice Services Manager has begun meeting Senior Tutors; we will also consider newsletters and regular communication with STs in order to 'lead the agenda' on these matters.

2.4.4   We will continue to engage with College's *Future Student Services* review of their own support provision.

2.4.5   External collaboration is also beneficial to understanding trends and developing best practice. We have received free direct consultation from

AdviceUK, and are working with KCLSU on setting up a working group for advice services to share knowledge.

Action: Engage with any London-based network for advice centres, including proposing and hosting meetings, and host a meeting within the current academic year.

2.5 *Marketing the service*

The advice service should be widely recognisable and easy to approach in times of needs. Students will only pay attention to the service when they need help, so information has to be clear and easy to follow as students will already be in a stressful situation when looking for advice.

2.5.1   In order to manage demand it is important to have guides to procedures and regulations that students can follow on their own, without having to approach the service directly. This will also allow students so access information when the service is closed.

Action: Policies that are communicated to each client, such as confidentiality, have been reviewed and relaunched. The first guides for students on specific issues will be completed in February.

2.5.2   The advice section of our website had a high number of pages but with little content, and was at risk of becoming inaccurate over a short period of time.

Action: Much of imperialcollegeunion.org/advice has been deactivated, to be reviewed once recruitment is complete and our case management processes improved; new online content will be generated and published by April 2016.

3.0 Summary of action

3.1

Engage with College quality enhancement processes relating to regulations and appeal processes	Ongoing	AU
Meet College support service heads	Ongoing	AU
Begin disseminating monthly reports, identifying trends and making recommendations	January 2016	AU
Complete method statement for understanding user need	February 2016	AU
Draft induction plan for new Caseworker	February 2016	AU
Recruit Advice Caseworker	February 2016	AU

Launch first student guides	February 2016	AU
Agree brief for developing eActivities Advice functions	March 2016	AU/PS
Complete Advice Manual	March 2016	AU
Initiate monthly case checks and quality control processes	March 2016	AU
Contact Senior Tutors to promote service	March 2016	AU
Relaunch advice website with updated content and content management plan	April 2016	AU
Host a meeting of London advisers	June 2016	AU
Plan promotional campaign and service 'relaunch' for 2016/17 academic year	June 2016	AU/AK
Write business case for Quality Mark	June 2016	AK

4.0 Conclusion

4.1 The Board is asked to note the changes to advice services in the context of the relevant sections of Our Plan 2013-16 and the restructure plans generated in 2015.

4.2 In particular, the Board is asked to note:

4.2.1 The expansion of the service to 2 FTE
4.2.2 The focus placed on assuring and then developing the quality of our processes, ahead of offering a wide range of advice
4.2.3 The evolution of our engagement with members into more advanced methods of predicting and understanding demand
4.2.4 The observations regarding College's regulations and our engagement with change processes related to them
4.2.5 The additional focus on communicating widely with the Personal Tutoring Network as well as College support services as part of efforts to increase mutual understanding and ensure students are aware of the service