



Imperial College Union – Board of Trustees

Meeting date: 08.07.2020

Agenda Item No.	18
Title	Deputy President (Clubs & Societies) – Reflections on the 2019/20 academic year
Author	Thomas Fernandez Debets (Deputy President – Clubs & Societies)
Executive summary	A reflection piece on my year as Deputy President (Clubs & Societies). This report revisits some key achievements and areas for improvement over the course of the 2019/20 academic year. Though a challenging year, it has presented many opportunities for professional growth and has proven to be the best graduate role on the job market.
Purpose	For discussion
Decision/action required	None

This report is my final update as Deputy President (Clubs & Societies) at Imperial College Union and serves as a review and reflection on the past 12 months in key areas of work. It is not easy to reflect on previous achievements and areas for improvement given everything is still moving very rapidly amidst the pandemic. Nonetheless, this year has proven to be a great learning opportunity and a steep learning curve which I reflect on very positively despite some undeniably difficult challenges to overcome.

General reflections

Imagine coming into your first job after finishing your degree at Imperial College London. A role like Deputy President (Clubs & Societies), especially given my previous involvement with clubs, is one that I was both apprehensive and excited for. My predecessor had set the bar very high and I had big shoes to fill, no doubt. Given my previous engagement with the Union as Lawn Tennis president, Sports Sector chair but also as bar staff, supervisor and eventually manager at Beit Bars, those around me showed confidence in my ability to deliver on the requirements of the role. By September, I felt I had started to get a handle of things.

Now imagine all the coordinators that help deliver CSP activities leaving their roles within a month of each other in September. Imagine not having a senior manager to liaise with ahead of Welcome. Imagine the bar's kitchens closing and the impact on an already difficult financial position. Imagine the unimaginable scenario where a global pandemic hits and forces students and staff to move home and study/work remotely.

These unexpected challenges have come hand in hand with opportunities to innovate and learn. Though it feels as though I have been working towards a moving target throughout this academic year, each challenge has been approached as a new learning opportunity and has consolidated the fact that I think this year has offered the best graduate job I could have found on the market.

Reflections on key areas of work...

When it comes to creating communities and support networks, Clubs, Societies & Projects (CSPs) come second only to academic cohorts (*as per the Student Experience Survey conducted during lockdown*). It is a defining responsibility of the role to support and empower CSPs to deliver the activities that shape the student experience at Imperial. Circumstances around staffing this year have resulted in a need for the DPCS to support more administrative tasks to ensure adequate services were delivered; more involvement in the delivery of activities during Welcome Week and Welcome Fair; and a substantial amount of time being invested to ensure the viability of large-scale staple events such as The Bhangra Showdown delivered by the Punjabi society in Birmingham. Two highlights of the works undertaken to support and empower CSPs are:

- **CSP Budgeting.** This year, the DPCS had oversight of CSP Grant allocation from A to Z. Overseeing the allocation of a £425k budget whilst rolling it out through a new process has been rewarding and honed my project management skills. Our CSPs' autonomy and expertise in their respective fields is invaluable to the Union and I have learnt much more from the network of dedicated volunteers than they have from me.
- **Volunteer Training.** This was a core element of my manifesto when running in the Leadership Elections 2019. The CSP Volunteer Strategy (*led by the Opportunities & Development manager and the OTs*) will hopefully recognise and empower those students who deliver a world class student experience at Imperial.

Recommendation: continue to empower the management group structure to deliver CSP activity and influence the work conducted by the Opportunities & Development team. Promote their achievements on social media and continue to celebrate their contributions to the Union.

I used to think I was my biggest critic. That was until I became a member of the staff team and critical Imperial students came at me left, right and centre. Their expectations are high and their logic and insights are particularly astute. Though not always easy, this has been a driving force for me throughout the year to go above and beyond to represent their interests and improve their experience. With the desire to develop a meaningful partnership model with senior volunteers, I have created an Events committee, committed to termly catch ups with the Head of Membership Services and key senior volunteers whilst also:

- Initiating senior student volunteer townhalls, where student leaders are updated on progress and involved from the onset with Union wide projects. These townhalls will guarantee buy-in from the wider student body, ensure we are relevant to today's students and make any consultation more effective.
- Reviewing the approach to the Student Experience Survey (SES) which is completed by 3,000+ students annually. This exercise will shape the departmental plans and ensure we reflect students' needs in our projects.

Recommendation: be honest and transparent with senior volunteers. Explaining the framework and circumstances under which any decision is taken will go a long way to get their buy-in.

Within my role, my work has focussed on areas internal to the Union rather than external. Beyond modelling CSP Grant in the context of the wider Union's budget as it stands, I have been involved in:

- The recruitment of 7 roles, from the Opportunities & Development coordinators to the managing director role. Having chaired 2 of the panels and reviewed applications for managerial positions has been hugely insightful and will hopefully be beneficial when applying for jobs myself. I also hope we have appointed the right people...
 - The recruitment and management of the change process for the Opportunities & Development team. Twice. Along with the wider change process the Union has undergone, this has highlighted opportunities for improvements, and I am excited to see where the Union goes in the near future.
- Recommendations: if you are not convinced your #1 candidate is appointable, don't appoint. Simple. Furthermore, ask questions and ask to be trained so you feel confident going into your first recruitment process. Getting the right people in will be part of your legacy as an officer trustee.*

When working with the College, I have continued a strong relationship with the Assistant Provost (Academic Planning) and laid the groundwork for the Union Concert Hall Redevelopment, involving relevant student volunteers in the project. I have also led:

- The consultation process with sports clubs regarding the sale of Imperial sports grounds at Heston. This was a positive experience, both for the students and the College, in terms of putting the "Students As Partners" model into practice and will hopefully be a good example to reflect on for further projects that affect students directly.
- The extra-curricular stream of the Education Strategy & Operations Group (ESOG) that looks at the wider student experience. An initial paper, highlighting the approach and principles to extra-curricular delivery in Autumn 2020, has been pulled together following consultation with students and relevant College stakeholders. This is attached alongside this report as "Approach and principles to delivery of extra-curricular activities in Autumn 2020".

Recommendation: there is potential for change on a large scale at those College meetings you sit on. Make the most of Sports Board and Arts Board. Speak to the relevant students who will have ideas for you to build on and present and, most importantly, remember College staff value your input as an elected student officer.

... which haven't been as straightforward as I've (sometimes) managed to hide

Though writing this reflective piece has reminded me of the positive outcomes throughout this academic year, there are a number of things and areas of work I would have liked to make more/better progress on.

- Project management is no easy task, especially when you are constantly changing between your elected officer hat, your Leadership hat and your trustee hat. It is especially difficult at the start but doesn't get any easier the further you get into the year because you'll be juggling between projects. *Recommendation: take the time to look at training opportunities within the College at the start of your year. Prince II is probably a good place to start.*
- Storage. Storage. Storage. CSP storage in the Union building is a project I focussed on too late and which got paused with lockdown. This has been on the Union's agenda for a number of years now and should have been addressed this year as a health and safety concern. *Recommendation: CSPs suffer greatly because of this so... just do it?*
- Communications haven't been at the forefront of my mind throughout my year. I wish I had dedicated more time to communicating to students what I had been getting up to and informing them of the changes they could expect. *Recommendation: put some time aside on a monthly basis to work on your officer page on the website. Stick to it. It will also help you reflect and remember what you have achieved when things get tough.*
- The sports hub was deprioritised in the Autumn term and did not make it back to the front of my priorities due to the pandemic. It is an exciting piece of work which will be a great legacy. *Recommendation: Ross, we get it, you like sports. Best of luck with this project, remember to challenge Move Imperial if you have any reservation and get feedback from the sports clubs and other members of the Clubs, Societies & Projects Board.*
- Coming into a role as versatile as an officer trustee role at a students' union is exciting and deceivingly time-consuming. Having opened the door to a number of projects, I was eager to take part without always taking the time to consider whether I was stretching myself too thin. Saying "no" is a skill that I wish I had identified earlier on in my time in the role. *Recommendation: repeat after me: "no". More seriously, talk to managers at the Union about your workload and your progress on key projects on a regular basis. This will help you sense check your work and ensure you are not taking on too much.*
- CSPB sub committees have not run to time this academic year. Though we will have completed all rounds of the three committees by the end of the academic year, timelines should have been updated to provide clarity to applicants. *Recommendation: sit down with the staff supporting you at the beginning of the year and set expectations and timelines to adhere to.*
- Though last on this list (and it was artificially cut short to make myself feel a little better), I wish I had taken more time off to look after myself. Life as a sabbatical officer has been a constant rollercoaster, with its thrills and its lows. It's easy to want to push through but burnouts are real and have meant it has taken me longer to recover than it would have been if I had regularly taken time off. *Recommendation: pre-plan your time off. There will always be something happening that could lead you to put annual leave off. If no one is going to die because you have taken time off, make the most of it.*

Conclusion

The role has been incredibly challenging yet undoubtedly more rewarding. I have grown professionally but have also developed personally. I am thankful to all those who have contributed to such an enriching year, from the students that have challenged me, the staff that have supported and me to those who have mentored me. I look forward to seeing how the Union progresses, from afar, and if there are opportunities to help or advise further down the line, I would love to be able to partake or am happy to answer a call.