



Imperial College Union Board of Trustees
8th July 2020

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| AGENDA ITEM NO. | 20 |
| TITLE | President Report – Reflections on the 2019-20 Academic Year |
| AUTHOR | Abhijay Sood, Union President |
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | Some overall reflections on the year – the penultimate “lessons learnt” section provides a reasonable summary. |
| PURPOSE | Information |
| DECISION/ACTION REQUIRED | None |

Reflections on the 2019-20 Academic Year

Though the formal academic year is drawing to a close, 2019-20 is beginning to feel like the year that never ended. The usual (always limited) summer lull that follows the end of assessment has failed to materialise, with those of us involved in planning for the next academic year working frantically to ensure we provide an appealing, fair offer to students, both incoming and returning. Both within and beyond internal Union business, work is not slowing, and our summer handover is beginning to resemble a sprint relay somewhat more so than usual. Despite this, and perhaps in part because of it, now is a useful moment to share reflections and a summary of business from this academic year, and some thoughts on the year to come.

Before the beginning

I entered this role in an extremely fortunate position. I had been involved with the Union as a rep since 2015, and as a member of Union Council since 2016; I even recall supporting Nas' run for Union President in 2016! By the time I took the reins as President, I had already been a club chair, a Faculty academic representative, and a member of the Board of Trustees. This meant I had a good degree of knowledge of the Union, an awareness of the contemporary issues we were facing, and strong working relationships (or at least some personal familiarity) with a wide array of College stakeholders.

With this in mind, I felt I had a reasonably good idea of what the role was to entail and set goals accordingly. My manifesto was less a long list of promises, and more a statement of principle about how I would approach the relationship with the College, with a few achievable specifics thrown in for good measure. On top of a strategic review and at least two major negotiations with College already in the offing, I knew that the role was likely to entail curveballs and plenty of reactive business. In a splendid example of Hofstadter's law in action, I had grossly underestimated the extent to which this was going to be the case.

From Crisis to Crisis

That there was an issue with management in this organisation was an open secret from day 0. The level of turnover (~fortnightly leaving drinks), the distance between many key staff members from our constituents (and the occasional disdain that was exhibited by some of these members), and that plenty of what we heard over our induction and initial meetings was coloured more by personal agenda than by the best interest of the organisation was clear evidence of this. Welcome was especially tough, from downright lies about our predecessors' involvement in planning the affair to last-minute interventions and poor planning from some greatly intensifying the workload on others (Thomas in particular). More macroscopically, the organisation lacked any strong sense of strategy, or a meaningful plan for remedying the 2018-19 deficit going forward.

Nonetheless, it came as something of a shock at the end of October when it became clear the Managing Director was to move on. While a necessary step to address issues within the Union, this put the officers in an extremely difficult position, and created a baseline level of tension for me that wasn't relieved for several months. This was exacerbated by:

- My involvement in Rep Training, which Shervin had to organise and I helped deliver due to an inability/unwillingness among staff to see it through.
- Negotiations with the College over the price of rent in Halls, which led to many a tense conversation. These negotiations ended up spanning several months, sucking up lots of Shervin's time and mine, and while our efforts did lead to a material reduction to the rent students would have paid in halls, the conversations were left on an uncomfortable

disagreement (although the resolution and our subsequent planned campaign have been somewhat invalidated by the pandemic).

- Difficult conversations with the College to initiate a conversation regarding socially responsible investment, in response to standing Union policy, the Divest Imperial campaign, and various manifesto commitments (including my own). By overcoming the initially hostile response and getting buy-in from College Council, I was able to set up a working group to examine this, resulting in the most meaningful practical step forward we've ever made on this issue. My thanks to Fifi and Francesca (our Ethics & Environment Officer) for their support in this.
- The closure of the kitchens due to (frankly) long term negligence, and pressure and work that resulted from it in terms of comms, rectifying health and safety issues, and reopening the facilities.
- Picking up work that had been dropped by my predecessors some time ago to push to improve refugee access to education at Imperial.
- A lack of collaboration (and at times downright unprofessionalism) from certain key staff members over the winter months.

All of this took place between mid-October and the end of January, and I hope the stress we were experiencing throughout this period (I haven't even touched on most of the work Thomas and Fifi were undertaking) comes through in reading the list.

Credit where credit is due

It's important to note that this isn't a wholly negative picture. In fact, in spite of the circumstances, in some ways we were able to achieve much more for students over these months than many of our predecessors. We stood up to the university, respectively and firmly, and that made a difference. We made a real effort to communicate with our stakeholders through social media and *Felix*, more so than I've ever seen before. For the first time in almost a decade, we had begun to unpick some of the longstanding structural problems within the Union. None of this was perfect – we could have been more active in the negotiations, moved more quickly on our internal issues, and done a better job at comms and engagement from the bottom up. That being said, in retrospect there's very little I would have done differently with the information available at the time.

A big part of our strength through these difficult times came from the Officer Team. In spite of an initial collective mutual trepidation, I think the team has come together fantastically well this year. The officer trustees have by and large been driven, skilled, and thoughtful about student needs, comparing favourably to their predecessors in almost all cases. The range of experience in the team was extremely useful to draw from: it meant that we were harder to mislead and better able to get stuff done. In brief: Fifi was able to protect the Summer Ball, and while circumstances prevented its going ahead, her organisation has left the event in a much stronger position going forward; Thomas' dedication and knowledge meant clubs were well served through Welcome and then shielded from the worst effects of an Activities team bereft of coordinators; Ashley ensured the PG voice wasn't forgotten; Shervin worked with me in all the toughest conversations with College this year, and strengthened our central representative function as a Union. I'm extremely grateful to the team for this and more, and I'm not sure things could have gone much better under the circumstances.

I'm also very grateful to the trustees, and in particular Jill, for recognising the need to act this year and not delaying. Though I was somewhat nervous when this all began, I'm glad change has taken place this year, and I'm confident students at Imperial will be served better by their Union as a result.

Picking up the Pieces

In February, things returned to something of an even keel. The kitchens reopened, the negotiations over SRI and rent drew to a close, and Graham was appointed Interim Managing Director. This was an extremely difficult decision for us, and without wanting to inflate his already substantial ego, we (the officers, Jill, and others) have felt extremely vindicated in having chosen him in the months since. Not only did Graham coming in reset the tone at leadership, but it took some work and a larger amount of pressure off my plate. The modest restructure he initiated soon after commencing, while difficult, has certainly been a step in the right direction for ICU.

It was only natural to seek a new source of stress since some had subsided, and seeking re-election achieved just that. Preparing to campaign this year was more difficult, emotionally and practically, than in the previous year, and I'm very grateful to the support I received from many of those around the table at the time (including my campaign manager, chief propagandist, and 'person who will respond to your emails'). I'm also glad I wasn't the only officer seeking re-election. Though results night was something of a mixed bag, I found my own result and the level of support extremely heartening. I interpret this, as well as the language and positioning adopted by my main opponent, as evidence that the things I wax lyrical about (more student control over decision making, making the Union work for students, adopting a living wage etc.) have some resonance within the student body.

"Unprecedented Times"

One working day after the elections drew to a close, we were all sent home due to COVID-19. This period has been challenging for all of us, and one of the consequences is that the time off I was envisioning taking after the elections never really came to fruition. Besides a few days over College closure in Easter, it's been full steam ahead since then with various meetings around Education (discussed in the joint OT item), managing comms to students, and planning within the Union.

The Union has managed the transition fairly well, and we have been able to exert meaningful influence over College Education policy – in particular successfully lobbying for a safety net which we believe resulted in a good (perhaps 'minimally bad') solution to managing assessment under COVID. While the Faculty Academic Reps and I played a role in this, it simply wouldn't have moved forward where it not for Shervin, who has also been able to help shape the terms of the conversations with College in education since.

The only major challenge to flag outside education thus far has been furlough, which was tricky to navigate but generally well understood and accepted. I hope the items we discuss at the meeting attest to the fact that we are continuing to do meaningful work under these circumstances.

Lessons Learnt

In spite of all its exceptional circumstances, my experiences this year have mostly reinforced or refined views I held a year ago. These have been my chief conclusions:

- **You can make change in an organisation**

Whenever one talks about change, be it in politics, academia, or in a private firm, one is invariably met by naysayers who think doing anything different is impossible, or that anything positive is “a nice idea in theory, but it’ll never work in practice.”

Our work with and against the College, and the changes we have made and continue to make within the Union, serve as compelling evidence to the contrary.

Reactive rejection is intellectually lazy: believing that you can do something about a problem is crucial if you want to solve it.

- **You can productively challenge the university**

On a similar vein, it’s possible to say “no” to the university without losing respect or burning bridges. If anything, we’ve built stronger relationships with College Council members, campus services, and key senior staff both academic and managerial as a result of the principled stances we’ve taken this year.

- **People’s incentives matter**

Challenging the university along these veins has its limits. In areas where the Union isn’t yet treated as a full partner (i.e. anywhere outside education and perhaps sport/music), staff members in the College might have strong financial or quasi-political reasons to do whatever disagreeable thing they’re doing, and kind words aren’t necessarily going to change that. This was something that I was very aware of on entering the role, and something I hope to start embedding in the student consciousness at Imperial over the next year.

- **Collaborating with stakeholders is important**

Contrasting the sale of St Mary’s, which was sprung on the medical students this year, with the sale of the Heston playing field, where a conversation with Thomas led to broad consultation with the relevant student groups before a final decision, and one can see the positive effects of consulting with stakeholders quite clearly. The latter decision, while smaller in scope, led to much less friction with the relevant stakeholders, a better understanding of the additional needs that will need to be met as a result of the sale, and a much greater belief that the proceeds from the sale will benefit students. Broadly speaking, with respect to St Mary’s, the relevant students believe none of this. If the College played things a little bit less “close to the chest” and shared issues more with relevant stakeholders (be they academic staff, internal College departments, or indeed students) we’d all be much better off.

Overall, our view is that the ‘professional’ operations of the university could move closer to the model in education, which (though imperfect) does entail problems being shared with the relevant stakeholders and solutions sought in the spirit of partnership, for which I’m very grateful. There have been some encouraging signs here, as over the course of the year we have developed a stronger relationship with Campus Services, and people from all corners of the university are involved in the Education Strategy and Operations Group. We hope this trend continues when the crisis is over, and that the aspiration expressed in so much of the College’s literature to align decision-making across all aspects of student life – considering the “holistic student experience” – becomes a reality.

- **...from the head down**

Organisations with poor leadership suffer. Organisations with poor leadership for a long time suffer a lot. I imagine all the officers in this year's team will hold future managers to an even higher standard than they otherwise might have, and (to be crude) "hire slow, fire fast" is likely to be a phrase we all take seriously in future.

- **Talking to students matters**

Students have a right to know about the decisions being made on their behalf, and that two way communication can be much more productively fed through the Union as a representative body, rather than having a Union that doesn't talk and students left to voice their concerns into the abyss. We have begun more proactively communicating this year and aim to do more in the coming year.

Closing thoughts

Everything seems in flux this summer. While the College transitions to hybrid study in the new academic year, the Union will be going through its own transition. Each of these are beset with their own challenges, and officers of the Union are involved in both. Under these circumstances, I feel vindicated in having sought re-election. I'm glad that Shervin will be continuing alongside me, and together I hope we are able to offer some stability crossing over into the new year. While I regret what we're losing over this period, I welcome the new skills and experience we're gaining from the incoming officers. We will work hard between now and the end of July to set them up well and capture whatever we can from those they are replacing.

I ran for this role, and sought re-election, because I wanted things to change at Imperial. I didn't feel the Union was truly doing its job, our leadership was not necessarily strongly advocating for students, and the College certainly wasn't serving them to the best of its ability. I appreciate that change can take time, but in a year from now I hope the Union is in a stronger position, well aligned behind a clear common goal, and that the College is moving in the right direction. That seems very possible now, and I'm very optimistic about the shape of things to come.