

**Imperial College Union Governance Committee**

**18th November 2019**

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| **AGENDA ITEM NO.** | 11 |
| **TITLE** | Liberation Reform Update |
| **AUTHOR** | Deputy President (Welfare) – Shervin Sabeghi |
| **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY** | This is mostly a replica of the update paper brought to CWB on 15/10/19 giving a brief overview of Liberation at ICU, and updating on what I have been doing around reforming it. Currently, a working group is being set up with interested members of CWB to discuss how we go forward. A deadline has been set for January 21st to complete this work such that Union Council can vote on any changes to the bye-laws that a reform will require. |
| **PURPOSE** | To update Governance Committee about work to reform Liberation at ICU. |
| **DECISION/ACTION REQUIRED** | For report and discussion. |

**Intro**

A large part of the role of the DPW is around Equality, Diversity and Inclusion – both in terms of College work, and Union work. At the Union, the main thing we do is having eight Liberation and Community Officers (LCOs) who are directly responsible to the DPW. It is generally accepted that the LCOs aren’t set up to achieve what they want to achieve and don’t always feel supported in their roles. If we want to achieve genuine positive work in the EDI sphere, we must make sustainable structural changes to the current system.

**Aims**

I have identified three main aims:

* To make EDI a greater institutional focus of the Union
* To ensure that Liberation and Community Officers are fully supported to do their roles to the best of their abilities
* To make the building of communities and representation a greater part of the roles of Liberation and Community Officers

**Current structure**

* We have four Liberation Officers:
  + Black and Minority Ethnic (BME)
  + Disabilities
  + Gender Equality
  + LGBT+
* We have four Community Officers:
  + International
  + Interfaith
  + Mental Health
  + Ethics and Environment
* These Officers are directly responsible to the DPW and fit into no other structures in the Union. They are the only ‘Officers of the Union’ who do not have any rungs of volunteer below them.
* LCOs have voting seats on Union Council and CWB
* All Liberation Officers attend College committees:
  + EDI Forum – all four
  + Race Equality Charter Self-Assessment Team – BME Officer
  + Athena Swan Self-Assessment Team – Gender Equality Officer
  + Disability Action Committee – Disabilities Officer
* There are some societies that overlap completely with the remit of three LCOs
  + LGBT+ Officer: IQ (Imperial LGBT+ Society)
  + Mental Health Officer: Mentality
  + Ethics and Environment Officer: Environmental Society
* For the remaining five LCOs, there are a number of societies that fall under the remit of the LCO, but don’t directly/singly match the remits
  + BME Officer: historically Afro-Caribbean Society, but all cultural societies
  + Gender Equality Officer: Women in Science and Technology, FemSoc
  + International Officer: cultural societies
  + Interfaith Officer: faith societies
  + Disabilities Officer: Sign Language Society
* A number of LCOs have pre-established relationships with staff at College
  + Stephen Curry (Assistant Provost EDI) – all Liberation Officers
  + The Disability Advisory Service (DAS) – Disabilities Officer
  + The Chaplaincy – Interfaith Officer
  + The International Students Support Service – International Officer
  + EDI Centre (for Race Equality Charter and Athena Swan) – BME and Gender Equality Officers

**Liberation Review 2017**

In 2017, the Union commissioned a review of our Liberation efforts by an external consultancy. The results can be found here <https://www.imperialcollegeunion.org/sites/default/files/Lib%20Review%20Doc.pdf>

Whilst being far from perfect or fully cognisant of the context of Student Union Liberation, the review provided us with many recommendations about how we could improve what we do. These recommendations ranged from quick wins, to big changes. They were all broken down and a number were done quickly, but most larger changes fell to the wayside. This review will play a part in informing the reform of liberation – particularly parts about better embedding liberation in the operational work of the organisation.

**Research into other Unions**

I conducted some research into what other student union’s do about liberation to get a sense of what’s possible and where people are at. Naturally, it was found that there are many different systems used and no two unions do things exactly the same. There was a certain degree of variance over what groups had explicit representation. Many separated out a trans/non-binary officer from the LGBT+ officer, however many didn’t. It seems that ICU doesn’t miss out any large groups not covered by our LCOs.

A number of unions had full time sabbatical officers dedicated to liberation, and some even to specific liberation groups. Some didn’t have a dedicated sabbatical officer, but had, for example, ‘Welfare and Equal Opportunities’ Officers.

Some unions (Bristol SU, in particular) had student networks which seemed to operate in a similar way to CSPs at ICU. Students could join on the website much as they would a CSP, and there were committees for these networks chaired by the elected liberation officer. Their website say ‘*Networks are an exciting way for students to build communities and create change through collective action. They are representative bodies that can lead campaigns, hold forums and organise social events.*’

**What should change**

I have identified the following things that need to happen to improve the Union’s liberation work:

* Students need to be able to more easily join networks aligned to a liberation officer to which they identify/ally with
* The current workload of an LCO theoretically fulfilling all aspects of their role is very high, so it should be spread out amongst more volunteers
* To ensure that Liberation work is maintained year-on-year, the work should be operationalised and better embedded within the organisation making it less reliant on the work of an individual or two

One potential way of achieving the above would find a way to adapt the CSP model to ‘Liberation Networks’, similarly to how Bristol Student’s Union do it (as described above). Students would be able to join these networks on the Union website much as they can clubs and societies. These networks would have committees chaired by the LCOs, and the LCOs would retain the same responsibilities. Funds currently set aside for LCOs would be given to these networks as grants by the Union. The core remits of these networks would be peer support and signposting, campaigning, providing a safe space and event organisation. The representation aspect of the LCO roles would remain in the hands of the LCOs, but more of the event organisation and campaigning side will be spread amongst the committee.

Benefits include:

* Students would have an easier mechanism for being involved in a community at Imperial that they identify/ally with
* The current workload for an LCO will be spread out amongst the committee to allow more liberation work to be done by volunteers and to help LCOs feel more supported
* Students will be more able to volunteer in liberation roles without having to undertake the big responsibility of being an LCO

Things that need to be considered:

* There is an obvious issue that there are societies that currently exist that would overlap massively with these networks (namely IQ, Mentality and Environmental Soc) so it would need to be considered what happens with regards to this
* These networks would need to be set-up such that they are sufficiently distinct from CSPs, focussing more on campaigning and representation, as well as community building
* The way budget is assigned will need to be considered to make sure that the networks are funded to do their work without expending too much resource, or creating inequity between these networks and current CSPs
* The addition of extra committee roles will need to be done in a way to make sure that they are fully supported and trained to be effective
* Naturally, a change in structure doesn’t necessarily mean that everything will magically improve so this reform will need to be holistic in terms of what the Union does for liberation. This change of structure would be one (big) part of it.
* Some of the current 8 groups might not align perfectly with a student network – for example, a student is more likely to identify specifically with their own ethnicity rather than generally being an ethnic minority

**Going forward**

To ensure this is a student led approach, a Liberation Reform working group is being/has been set up following interest from CWB to investigate how to go forward. The final approach may not match the above suggestion at all. If substantiate changes are made to the structure of Liberation, these will need to be ratified by Council and at/before the meeting on 21st January to have any new roles elected in the Leadership Elections 2020. The membership of this working group will be interested members of CWB and relevant CSP committee members if they’re interested.

It is likely that this work will unravel that there is a lot that needs to change, and it may not be feasible to do this all properly by the 21st January deadline. A potential outcome of this year would be to generate a Union EDI Strategy (parallel to the new Union strategy) that looks at EDI at the Union holistically.