

**Imperial College Union
DPE Reflections
Board of Trustees / 14th July 2021**

Author(s): Michaela Flegrova (Deputy President (Education))

Purpose: To share the DPE reflections on the year

Decision(s): To note

1. Introduction

When we were running for our roles back in March 2020, I don't think anyone expected to spend the year in lockdown. The election results night happened on the same day as the announcement that all teaching and exams would move online for the rest of the year, and back then the pandemic still seemed like something that would be over quickly. The fact that the whole year would be so affected was not obvious even when we started, and I don't think it was until October that we realised that things wouldn't get to normal any time soon and we were destined to spend our sabbatical year on Teams.

2. At the beginning

Even though I came into the role as qualified as I possibly could've been – after having spent all my four undergraduate years as a rep and three years on council – the first couple of months felt quite hard and were all about finding my footing. For many weeks I felt like I didn't have a lot of useful stuff to contribute in College meetings, didn't know and hadn't met almost anyone I was working with, and struggled staying productive while working on my own from home. This was not made easier by the fact that Shervin and Abhijay stayed on and seemed to have College representation covered between the two of them - I almost felt redundant, like ICU was used to functioning without a DPE just fine!

Feeling a bit lost and useless is something I always experience whenever I start a new role, so I knew it would pass eventually (it did), but I think more could've been done to prepare us for the roles better. It seems almost unbelievable that we had no induction whatsoever; the only actual introduction sessions were about our role on the Board. Even as an experienced rep, I certainly would have benefitted from sessions covering the functioning and structure of the College, better intro into the Union, and some proper skills sessions. This would've been especially important this year since, despite it being the middle of summer when we started, everything was in full swing and I found myself in important College meetings from day one. Of course, the handover itself did not help...

We certainly suffered from not being on campus at all at the start, even though the government regulations would have technically allowed it in August; proper teambuilding cannot really be done online. We were perhaps being overly cautious, and I think it is really good that we are planning for an in-person handover this year.

3. Some things that went well / key achievements

3.1 Rep engagement

From the very beginning of my role I wanted to make sure reps were appropriately supported and engaged. I think I did a good job (especially at the start) at engaging the UG dep reps and faculty reps and making sure they know what we will expect from them and when they should contact me or someone else.

While engagement dropped off during the year (both on the reps' side and on mine) I definitely felt that I built a good working relationship with many of the reps, not only at UG but also PG level which helped support their development in their roles. Despite no staff support in the team, Shervin

and I still managed to regularly keep in touch with all of the reps, and while I think the majority did not really care that much, initiatives like the rep of the month award kept a good number of students engaged and helped them feel connected with the Union.

3.2 NSS Response

Coming into the role I had already had experience looking at the NSS data and helping with the NSS response in previous years, so I had the advantage of knowing which parts worked well and which I wanted to see changed.

Working with the Dep Reps was a major part of the NSS response this year. It helped us engage the reps from the very start, allowed them to take ownership of the NSS recommendations (they were their own, after all!) and ensure all data was properly analysed, giving us an overview of some of the major issues in different departments. I received many compliments on this approach from people in the College, who appreciated the in-depth analysis of the results that was made possible by having 20 volunteers read through the data.

I believe our approach to the College-wide NSS response was also better this year, as we finally stopped following a nonsensical template of recommending for every NSS category when student experience is so much more than that. In a normal year, this would've given us a strong framework for some proper lobbying during the year.

3.3 Digital Education Recording Policy

Admittedly, this one initially fell into my lap. The College decided it was a good time to finally write a policy about digital recordings, and I ended up on the working group that was putting it together. One of the biggest outcomes of this group, at least for students, was that the new policy dictates that all lectures should be recorded in the future. This might not seem too relevant now, but once covid is over it will significantly improve parity across departments and make a huge difference to the education of students in departments where lecture recordings didn't use to be the standard.

Not having to initiate this conversation myself was definitely a big bonus, and I don't think we would've been able to achieve the same outcome if the College wasn't already heading in that direction. However, I am certain that without my significant contributions the outcome of the group would've been much less favourable, and if there was a weaker DPE this year we would not have achieved this. Lecture recordings for everyone was a non-negotiable outcome for me, which I made clear throughout the duration of the conversations, and I made sure it was backed up by data from student surveys. I've been told that this convinced the Provost and consequently the Provost's Board that it was a policy worth backing, despite some protests from other members of the group.

I also think we did the comms on this really well. I wrote a couple of blog posts about it, which were all linked to in very clear emails, and almost clickbaity subject lines made sure students read those. This meant that the participation rate in a survey we ran to support the work in November was great, and students were also aware of the outcome once the policy passed. After sending out the final email I had several students approach me to congratulate me on the work on the policy and tell me how glad they were it passed.

3.4 Package of No Detriment measures

While the College and the rest of the sector made it clear that there would be no safety net this year, I think we were quite successful at negotiating extra measures for students to ensure they are not disadvantaged this year. Some of the things that would not have happened without our continuous lobbying included:

- i. Making sure students in different timezones don't have to take exams in the middle of the night
- ii. Resit opportunities for all students, including PGT students

- iii. Cohort-wide “safety net” guarantee that this year’s students would not do worse than students in the past

This was the first time we actually properly disagreed with the College this year, but I think it was important to stand our ground and insist on some of these things. Overall, I don’t think it damaged our collaborative relationship; I think everyone understood that while we are happy to work together, we also need to stand up for what the students want.

3.5 PG representation

GSU issues aside, I think I really managed to bring (some of) PG representation to life this year, as well as integrate it better into ICU. The new Academic Rep Forums meant that PG students were explicitly invited to contribute, and we had many show up – a massive change from poor ERB attendance in previous years! I think it was beneficial to divide the forums into Research and Taught, because most PGT issues were so similar to UG problems, while PGR discussion items were usually quite different.

The GSU issues meant that I had to supervise the Research AWOs myself from day one. Together with the ARF meetings it meant that I was much more informed about the issues PhD students were most worried about – such a huge advantage in College meetings when PGR matters are being discussed! I also believe this helped the reps be more integrated in the Union and actually know what is going on and when to approach us with problems.

We’ve managed to do some great stuff for PGR students this year as well – for example, we convinced the College to introduce covid impact statements for PhD theses, worked with them on stipend extensions, or kickstarted some work on outreach recognition. We also had much more PG students participate in space discussions, resulting in improvements to some departmental PhD spaces.

3.6 The team

There were ups and downs but I think the OT team was really great this year. Overall we worked well as a team, all of us were mostly pulling our weight and there wasn’t anyone who ended up being excluded. I don’t think I could’ve wished for a better team!

4. Some things that could’ve been better

4.1 Staff support

We entered the year with just the equivalent of one full-time coordinator for the whole rep team, and Shervin and I were left entirely on our own since the beginning of December. It definitely felt like we were seriously under supported the whole year. From the very beginning, we had to do the majority of admin tasks ourselves, support and engage all of the reps without any help from anyone, as well as having to work on our own goals and objectives without any support.

It also often felt that the organisation did not really understand or care about the work the representation team was doing. While CSPs and bars and everything related to finances is very internal, right under your nose and therefore difficult not to know or care about, representation is mostly College-facing, and with no staff on the team it easily becomes just a thing some of the OTs get on with and do on their own, without anyone having to care.

I definitely felt that the extent to which others supported us was often reduced to “We really think representation is important, it’s such a core part of what we do, now go and write a blog post about it or something while we don’t do anything that could actually make your job easier.”

4.2 Rep support & engagement

While I worked with the reps quite a bit at the start, engagement dropped off during the year and I failed to do more to keep it up. Ideally, I would have had more individual contact with the departmental reps – not just the few most engaged ones – and tried more to encourage them to engage with the Union. I also think I could have done more to engage and support some of the PG reps. Our database was incomplete because of the way the reps were elected and staff

changeover in October, which meant that we were not even aware of many PG reps in various departments, making it impossible to support and engage them.

4.3 Training

Coming into my role, improving rep training was one of my goals for the year. While we did make some changes to the format, we unfortunately did not end up implementing the improvements to training I would have liked to see. Training kept being kind of forgotten about as other things were prioritised, and with no rep coordinator to support the work we just didn't end up developing the training program we originally hoped for. This is one of my main regrets in the role, as I believe a good and early training for reps is really important and can make a real difference in their roles.

4.4 Better support for PGT reps

While I set up regular meetings with the Research AWOs in the summer, the Taught ones only got elected in October and ended up not getting as much support as the other faculty reps. All of them were actually brilliant this year, so it is a shame I didn't end up supporting them properly – it would've been useful both for them and for me.

4.5 NSS response follow-up

While we did write a good NSS response, we did not end up following up on it properly. This meant that a good number of the College-wide recommendations never got implemented in the way we would've hoped, and I also had no idea if the dep reps had any success with their own departmental recommendations. It's a shame, because I'm sure they would've made a real difference if they actually happened.

Maybe it is a good thing though that we did not sink a lot of time into trying to push a lot of the recommendations through. Most college staff were busy with the whole pandemic situation this year, so even if we pushed hard it is likely there would not be the capacity to implement most of the things we were hoping for anyway, or some other areas of student experience would have suffered as a consequence.

4.6 Meeting deadlines for reports

Something I have not mastered yet and still need to work on. My time management has not been great this year, and it's definitely something I should've tried to improve very early on instead of putting it off all year.

5. Conclusion

Overall, I feel like I did a lot of important work this year, but often don't have a lot to show for it. Many hours were sunk into operational stuff and responding to the whole pandemic situation, which meant that many of the things I wanted to do in the role did not end up happening. It's a shame that I didn't manage to achieve a good number of my goals for the year, and I certainly have some regrets about that.

Of course I would have liked to have a normal year instead. It would've been nice to have more time and support to do the things I originally hoped to do, achieve some real change in the role, do everything in person, be able to go to Singapore and have all of the free food in College meetings. But at the end of the day, I didn't sign up to do this job for my own pleasure and to have a good time. I wanted to help improve students' education and use my knowledge and rep experience to represent students where and when it is most important. It almost doesn't matter if I had the year I wanted; all that matters is if the students had the DPE they needed this year, and I think it was good that it ended up being me.