

Imperial College Union

Deputy President (Welfare) 2021 Reflections

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Introduction

I don't really know where to start, so I guess I'll start by saying 'Boy, I have no clue where to start!'. Tomorrow will mark 2 years since I started at the Union and it's been quite the personal, organisational, and global whirlwind. The phrase 'unprecedented times' has been thrown around a lot over the last year, and that's been quite relatable in this role even before the pandemic. Only about the first 3 of 24 months in this role are what you might call precedented times. Since then, it's gone: MD departure, restructure 1, lockdown 1, restructure 2, lockdown 2, lockdown 3, restructure 3. Slightly tumultuous, but, of course, circumstances that many found themselves in this year, including to different extents everyone who's worked at ICU in that time.

In general, I'm happy with the way I've responded to the challenges over the last couple years and think the organisation is generally on a better track now than what it was before. Both personally and organisationally, there is a lot that could have gone better and still needs improvement. For my reflections, I've looked at the good side, and the side that needs improvement for both separately. I apologise if these reflections are quite rambling, but it's more natural and authentic if it's a bit of a raw internal dialogue, right?

Personal/DPW Reflections

What went well:

- Representation wins for students: probably my proudest area of achievement has been the various successes in representing students over the last two years. I feel I've played an instrumental part in a lot of the wins the Union has had for students:
 - Getting the £3m reduction in hall rent from negotiations.
 - Securing (and personally half writing) the safety net for students for their remote exams last year after putting together a survey that got 7,000 responses.
 - Securing automatic rent waivers for students during the second lockdown.
 - Various ongoing smaller successes with COVID related challenges.
 - More recently getting support for improving the financial support for MBBS students in their final two years.

I'm aware that a lot of these successes wouldn't have happened the same way without my proactive involvement and, particularly with the safety net, students have explicitly said the impact these have had/will have on them which makes me feel like I'm doing exactly what these roles are meant to do.

- College relationships: I don't think I realised before starting this role that I've got quite a knack for, essentially, getting people to like me. I'm happy with the relationships with people at the College and in the student body I've been able to forge and the credibility this gives to the Union. A big thing to come out of this was the creation of the ESOG – Student Experience group to talk about wider student experience matters when these were being neglected in the early days of the pandemic. It was honestly quite shocking but quite flattering to be invited to co-chair this with the Vice-Dean of Engineering. I reflect very positively on this whole experience, and really enjoyed being co-chair of

this College wide committee for the last 14 months; it's forced me to operate at a different level than I ever did before which has been a good learning experience.

- Some project success: this will feature more in the more negative reflections, but I would like to also reflect positively on some project work. The Liberation Reform work in 2020, though not implemented as fully as I would have liked, has laid the groundwork for a lot of positive work going forward. The long-term work on Discipline and Harassment has yielded results and, if all that has been recommended is implemented, the Union will be so much better placed to deal with these issues (and prevent them from happening).
- Working Class Students Network: sometimes OTs come in with a bit of an agenda they want to push that might not represent a wide student want. I have to admit, this was a bit of one of those for me. Twice as a student, I was part of unsuccessful efforts to introduce this representation at the Union, and as the DPW I used my position and confidence from student reps to do this. I introduced a new Working Class Officer with associated network and, despite some controversy, I'm very glad I did. I can't take full credit for the success – Grace Fisher, who has taken on the role is owed all the credit – but it's amazing to see what results from policy change and the impact of student-led advocacy and representation.
- Keeping things afloat: as will be talked about later, I've been left to plug a lot of gaps in staff support. This is mainly a bad thing, but I'm quite proud of the way I've managed to keep some things afloat and, if I'm trying to look at the positive, it's given me a lot of experience of being a regular staff member in an organisation like this (as well as an OT). Be it writing the fortnightly rep newsletters, doing the halls of residence admin, writing half of the weekly all-student newsletters, or organising rep recognition events, I've done a lot of things that I'm not elected to do, but are still important and would not be done by anyone else if I hadn't picked them up.
- Personal and professional development: I feel like I have developed in a number of areas personally and professionally over the last couple of years. I think I'm generally a lot more self-aware than I was and able to approach things in a far more constructive manner – two areas where I believe (on reflection) I needed to grow when I started. I believe I let small things get to me a lot less than I used to, which has made room for making more constructive professional relationships. Writing these reflections aside (it may or may not be 2am as I type...), I've got a far healthier relationship to work than I used to. Long gone are 7am-7pm days, with work on most weekends too. Maybe this is because I just haven't been as motivated as I used to be, but I think I've also developed a much-needed ability to accept that you can't do everything and some things will always get left undone.
- Casework: something that has ramped up over the last year has been dealing with individual student matters. This isn't really directly in my job description, but I recognise the role I have in this and have embraced it. In the strangest of ways, I've enjoyed dealing with difficult issues students have faced and feeling like I was having a direct 121 impact. In a similar vein, I was glad to have done the club disciplinary case a number of months ago and learned a lot from the process.

What could have gone better:

- Objectives (nearly) all unmet: this is a fact I need to face head-on. For both years, I set myself achievable objectives and have nearly exclusively not met them. That's not to say I didn't achieve anything, but not the things I set out to achieve. There is a plethora of reasons for this. The objectives were probably realistic but not in the circumstances we were in during either year; being reactive and putting out fires took over in so many cases. I undoubtedly needed to prioritise better, say no to more things, and be more productive with my time. Also, undoubtedly I needed more support to achieve them. The problem with there being no staff support for OTs is, not only do they not receive support to do their objectives, they lose a lot of time that they could spend working on the objectives solo instead picking up the work that's been left by absent staff. I reckon, over the last 2 years, about 25% of my time has been spent doing work that is explicitly a permanent staff member's job, and that's probably been closer to 35% over the last 6 months. The opportunity cost is, resultingly, massive.
- Losing touch with students/volunteers: in my reflections last year, I talked about having lost touch with the student body and the volunteers directly under me and wanted to ensure that improved going forward. Unfortunately, I'd say this has gotten worse over the last year. Naturally, it's been a bit partly a product of the pandemic where keeping in touch with anyone has been very difficult. It's also a product of not having time, but, regardless of why, it's disappointing that it's happened again. When we've done surveys to bring us more in touch with students, we've seldom had time to then look over the results properly to make the most of it. I've not spent much time interacting with the senior volunteers under me and that's a shame because so many of them have been amazing this year and deserved so much more support from me to be able to do great things they had a lot of potential to do.
- Wellbeing Representation Network: I've spent 2 years saying I'll review the WBRN. It ain't happened. This is a big personal failing (one of the unmet objectives) and, given it was on the agenda for 2 years, I don't think I can blame anything else apart from myself here. Sure, it would have been good to have some staff support to do this, but I was also the best placed person at Imperial to do it. Particularly with a lot of experienced reps leaving the university, there will be a massive knowledge gap going forward so I'm going to do my best to hand things over as much as possible.
- Stewing in negative corner: I can't deny that this calendar year has taken its toll and I have found myself stewing in negativity at various moments over the past few months. I hate it when this happens more than anyone else, but it's a bit of a downward spiral that's difficult to get out of when things don't improve despite asking for help. The feeling of 'we're all in this together' has kind of passed, and the disparity in attention different areas of the Union has received over the last year has been difficult to deal with. It used to feel like we were all in the same boat, but now it feels like there are people in shiny motorboats – the kind rich people ride on holiday – whereas others are desperately paddling in their own battered canoes. All of that said, I wish I was more able to rise above it all and stay more positive. Even writing this, I feel like I'm being dramatic and it's not really that bad. I want to work on being able to spin things more positively. I maintain that I'm a very optimistic person – I always believe things can, should, and will be better. However, I want to be able to be so in a more positive way, because my optimism often comes out as frustration that things aren't better.

- Liberation & Community: another one of the unmet objectives was developing the Liberation & Community networks. I made a good start; there now exist policy that didn't before and structure that didn't before. And it's had spotty success – particularly with the Working Class Network as I talked about above. However, I wish I paid a lot more attention to developing and embedding this over the last year. My impression is that our Liberation efforts fall far behind those of other SUs. I will be doing all I can over handover to ensure that the progress made doesn't die with me and it gets developed further like I hoped it would.
- Continuing Professional Development: working at Imperial College has a lot of perks, one of which is the opportunities for CPD that are available. I regret not engaging in more (or any) of this whilst I've worked here. As well as helping me do my role here, it undoubtedly would have better equipped me going forward. This is a mistake I intend not to make again!

Reflections for ICU

The good:

- Hopefully back on track: there's been so much change in the organisation over the last 2 years and I'm quite hopeful that things are getting back on track. I like our new strategy – I think 'back to basics' is exactly what we need now. Students don't have grandiose expectations of us, they just want us to deliver consistently and make their lives easier rather than harder. And I think we're putting the things in place needed to make this happen, and I really like to think the Union will be so much closer to where it needs to be to start the 2022 academic year. Our block grant increase will make a massive difference, and I'm hoping recent hires will live up to how impressive they've been during recruitment to help take the organisation there. We also have a lot of existing staff members who are great and will be instrumental to getting the Union to where it should be. We've got all we need to make it a success – it's now or never!
- COVID response: I don't know how other SUs have responded, but I feel like we've done well. The representation successes aside, we've done what we can to support CSPs continue activity both in-person and online, still delivered on a lot of big annual projects, kept the bars open and functioning as much as physically possible, and still managed to have a fair amount of fun along the way. I feel like, despite the pandemic, we've done more, as an entire organisation, to serve students over the last year than we did the previous one. I'm hoping students have felt this and build some affinity to the Union over the last year.
- Culture: working here 18 months ago felt so much different than it does now. It was a lot more toxic, and I often felt simply uncomfortable. I also always felt like I had to be on around people and play a game to get by. This has reduced significantly and it's a lot more relaxed, people seem to like each other more, and people are more collaborative. It also feels like more people are working here for the right reasons and want to do what they can to positively impact students. With so much recruiting happening, we need to actively work out how we capitalise on the positive and help it perpetuate through the evolving staff team!

Things that went less well/need improving:

(Note, in this section, I recognise the role I may have played in things that have gone wrong, or could have played to improve things. Nonetheless, we are where we are, and I think these are still issues the Board should be aware of)

- Poor OT support: for two years in a row now, OTs have been left to sink or swim. The structures for OT support are informal at best and close to nothing that was planned out at the beginning of the year for how we'd be supported to deliver our objectives has been followed through. In this way, too, we're being failed as employees of the Union and basic expectations of an employer (e.g. 121s with managers, objective tracking, performance reviews etc) have not been met. We're given a false sense of empowerment: we are able to be (over)involved (and often have the final say) in many operational decisions which makes it seem like we're valued, but we're not empowered to meet our objectives and do the things we were elected to do. It feels very much like there's the stuff 'the Union' does, and stuff 'the OTs' do, and these aren't seen as one which is deeply problematic in an SU. I have appreciated continuous offers for help, but I've not even known what I would ask for help with or where I could even start. I don't know what good OT support should look like, as I've never had it. I don't know what support to ask for. I think as a result of a lot of this I've regressed in my ability to communicate what I'm up to and what I need support in, and this is something I need to work on later.
- Chronic undervaluing of representation: when I first started at the Union in July 2019, we had the leaving do for the previous permanent role holder of the Representation Manager. The next role holder began her post on 1st June 2021. Furthermore, this was following a 6.5 month period of there also being no coordinators in this team. That's to say, Michaela and I spent over half this academic year without a single staff member supporting us. I've spoken already about the personal impact this has had, but organisationally it is also very damaging. Fundamentally, we're here to represent students yet this has received no attention for a long period of time. It's disproportionately deteriorated compared to other areas of the organisation, many of which have grown and developed over the last year. As a result, we have one stagnant Academic Representation Network, one unfocused and confused Wellbeing Representation Network, one not-fit-for-purpose PG Representation Network, and Liberation & Community Networks that are struggling to find their feet and not doing much. We've not supported our reps, we've not safeguarded our reps, we've not appreciated our reps, however they are generally committed and competent so have gotten away with this. Many other people have expressed a belief that representation is extremely important, however there has been a lot of talk and very little action to match this. It is exciting that the team is now building back up, and we appointed a coordinator last week that I'm very confident about. However, the cultural undervaluing of this area won't go so easily.
- Equality, diversity and inclusion: I'm becoming increasingly worried about this in the organisation. Following the appointment of the SOD manager, I did a little back of the envelope tot-up and discovered how we have 14 permanent staff members on pay scale 3 and above, none of whom identify as BAME. Furthermore, just 5 were female. Of the 10 staff members on grades 2 and below, half are BAME and 6 are female. As well as a general lack of racial diversity, we seem to have a problem where BAME and female staff members are mainly within the lower grades. The College also has the

same problems, but to a far far lesser extent. This issue was raised strongly by the staff team 6 months ago, but no measures have been taken since. We are putting money behind creating an organisational EDI strategy next year, but this very well may be too little too late since we will be doing a lot of recruitment very quickly. It's not acceptable to say that 'that's just the way the chips fell' with the different recruitments and 'the candidate pool isn't diverse'. We will never solve our internal problems with such an attitude, and instead we perpetuate the wider societal problem. This isn't to say that a) any individual hiring decision was incorrect, b) we were better served by the (far more diverse) staff team we had a year ago, or c) that any individual in the system is racist and/or sexist. However, given the position we're in, we need to accept that our system **is** racist and/or sexist. Without accepting this non-defensively, we won't improve. I see a lot of parallels here with university student recruitment, and the same way we advocate for extreme positive action to improve that, we need to do the same. I am quite uncomfortable that this has happened over the course of my two years on the Board and, if it might be too late to do anything myself, I'd at least like to implore that Board have greater oversight over this going forward. We can't serve our members if we have a staff team that looks nothing like them.

- Culture: yes, this featured on the good side too. The EDI issues talked about above aside, I think we have some cultural issues that need addressing. I think a culture of underperforming has been allowed to brew and positive performance management is non-existent. This isn't to say that the staff members we have are doing bad, I just think we need to improve the way we track, support and challenge performance. I also think furlough (though 100% necessary) has had the unfortunate consequence of damaging some people's work ethic and there doesn't seem to have been the active support to counter this. I also think we're becoming more hierarchical which is, naturally, needed to an extent but in a small organisation we want to absolutely avoid an 'us and them' culture. As we grow, we need to take active steps to avoid a toxic culture breeding again and measures for this need to be in place before we expand.

Conclusion

I leave ICU with mixed feelings. I do not even slightly regret running for this role, or running again. I'm happy I've worked here over the last two years, happy to have met a lot of great people, happy about some of the impact I've had, and will take a lot of experiences forward with me in later life. I am also sure I will miss this place after I leave. However, I am exhausted. It's been emotionally draining and the general feeling of not being supported and being isolated has taken a toll over the last couple months especially. I am aware of the personal and professional development getting through difficult times has afforded me, however it would have been nice to get more of this through less painful means. I am also concerned that I have spent next to no time in a regularly functioning team/organisation and going into (what I hope) will be one next is a bit daunting.

For anyone who's got this far in the reflections paper and is curious, I'll be moving on the work at King's College London as their Academic Support Officer (Transitions) in their Student Success team. I've had a taste for work in HE and student support, and I liked it!

I'd like to end these reflections by shouting out to Michaela without whom this year would have been abjectly miserable. There isn't anyone else I would have wanted to have had by my side to get through this year.