

**Imperial College Union**  
**Deputy President (Clubs & Societies) – Reflections on the 2020/21 academic year**  
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Thinking back to February 2020, I ran for this role with the expectation that it existed to enable as much student-led activity to happen as possible. I had frustrations as a volunteer with numerous areas across the Union, and I wanted to make a difference, and actively improve the student experience. The campaigning period was quite possibly the most stressful time over the last 18 months, but I was supported by an excellent team who were with me all the way through to election day. Results were in and I had one. But the celebratory day was filled with apprehension as I heard news that LSE were cancelling in-person summer exams, CSP activity was put on hold, and it turned out we were just over one week away from the PM announcing the first lockdown in the UK where we were ordered to “stay at home”.

This laid out the scene for the year ahead – a constantly changing landscape, with fluctuating restriction levels, and a student population scattered across the world. Some of these challenges were undeniably difficult to overcome but looking back I don’t think there’s any job I would have preferred to have been doing.

The year ahead will be a challenging one, hopefully more activity will resume, but I hope that some of these reflections may be useful to my successor.

**General reflections:**

- Effective consultation is difficult to get right, but when you do it works wonders. During my 5 years as a CSP committee member and management group chair, there was only one time in my memory where ICU or college had got student consultation correct – that was the sale of Heston sports ground. From implementing a new risk assessment policy, to reviewing the Union’s transport provision, this year has taught me that there is little harm in sharing details about the issues at hand. All relevant stakeholders appreciate the sharing of knowledge and thus are able to contribute to meaningful conversation.
- Talking to students matters, and getting comms correct can make or break a project. Marketing and Communications is often incorrectly seen as a one-way street with the Union telling our students information. Often, we also need to listen to our students, gain their insights on important decisions, and open a channel for two-way communication. Effective representation is only possible when students talk to the Union, and the Union should amplify student voices rather than let them shout into the abyss.
- Alongside effective comms, stakeholder management is one skill that I’ve come to appreciate this year. Having the ability to maintain good relationships with the people who have most impact on your work is vital to the success of any changes you want to implement. And alongside this, I learnt that people’s incentives matter. Generally, in areas where I work, the Union is treated as a partner (sport, music, etc.) but College staff often have strong financial reasons to do disagreeable things. It’s important to understand these motives, and establish common principles that are agreed by all parties.
- Change is possible. It goes without saying that the Union has gone through a change process, and there is still more work to be done as the staff team expands to pre-pandemic levels, but this year has shown me that change can be made. From

changing a simple policy, to ripping up and starting again with key Union processes, change can start small, but as more and more people get on board, the impact can be felt institutionally.

- Last year's DPCS advised me to learn to say "No". This is a mistake I had to make for myself and got a lot better at it as the year progressed. Having a leaving date focusses the mind, and enabled me to concentrate time and energy where it was needed.
- Enabling the Opportunities & Development team to make decisions without sabbatical input is hugely enabling. It frees up time to think strategically and removes the DPCS from operational queries. Mistakes will be made by the team along the way, but each mistake is a learning opportunity where coordinators better understand the student point of view.

### **Reflections on specific projects:**

#### **CSP, MG & CU Volunteer training:**

- The majority of my time at the start of this year went to answering/solving/giving an opinion on CSP problems & queries. The Opportunities and Development Team, the DPCS and I had all separately identified that volunteer training needed an overhaul. We decided to abandon programs like "Emerging leaders" and "IC XP" (cut our losses) and refocus staff time and energy to developing training that was readily available, and accessible by all volunteers. It's important to recognise the sunk cost fallacy and recognise where endeavours continually purely as a result of previously invested resources.
- More student co-creation is needed. The SOD Manager undertook a piece of work in 2019/20 to identify the learning needs of different volunteers in different roles. With an under resourced development team and no collaboration with rep training, it was difficult to make significant change. As a result, we have only been able to implement 3 deliverables this year: 1) review and correct eActivities training articles, 2) replace Officer Academy with a virtual Volunteer Training Week, and 3) introduce welcome booklets to all newly elected volunteers.
- More work is needed in this area, and more resource is required - I'd suggest starting again if possible. A holistic approach to volunteer training is required, and there needs to be much better collaboration between OTs and staff teams.
- What we've done this year made significant improvements and got us through but is still below the bar set by other SUs. The Union needs to learn lessons from the pandemic about virtual delivery, but remember the benefits of in-person training & workshops.

#### **Increase accessibility and inclusivity of our CSPs:**

- This is obviously an area of work that requires close collaboration between the DPCS and DPW to make any strides, especially when both elected officers include statements like this on their manifesto. Under the original project outlines I had set myself, my intention had been to pick this project up in January. As I started to work on this project it was clear that I was creating upset and causing tension with other OTs.
- This specific project taught me a lot about trusting teammates. When a teammate passionately wants to project manage, it's important to embrace that and empower them to do so.
- What I failed to do was to set mutual expectations between the DPW and DPCS for this project. As a result I haven't been involved in this project since the DPW became

project manager in February. I'm disappointed in myself that I was unable to contribute effectively to this project, but I've learnt a lot about prioritisation of work as a result.

Setting a long-term trajectory for CSP space and storage:

- Another delayed project due to the development of a new Union-wide strategy. This project has taught me a huge amount about stakeholder management.
- Getting buy-in and approval from CSP leaders was relatively simple this year as we were able to implement changes without significantly disrupting daily activity. This is likely to be a problem in the future when CSPs will want to access equipment, but the Union will need to do planned maintenance. It will be imperative to talk to all users of specific spaces to identify periods in the year where repairs and maintenance are least disruptive.
- CSP storage is an area of work where we've made transformations this year, and it wouldn't have been possible without SOD Coordinators dedicating long-hours to moving CSP equipment throughout the building. Storage space within the Union building will always be at a premium, and a lot of thought needs to go into this as the college expands to a truly multi-campus university.

Support our CSPs by reviewing the most broken processes:

- I'm really proud to have made significant strides in this area this year, and the 3-year CSP Development plan produced in October 2021, developed in conjunction with DPFS, SODM, and DoMS will go a long way to ensuring we get back to basics.
- We developed this early on in my time as DPCS, and I wish I'd put more time into student consultation. This plan's main weakness is that it wasn't co-created with students. Developed out of term time, and very quickly, I saw the elected student hat as an excuse not to consult and had a mindset that "I know what the most broken processes are". We should have surveyed, and focus-grouped this development plan as I'm sure students in different management groups would have identified areas of concern that needed rapid intervention that we did not spot.
- With that being said, we have solved a number of issues that historically took up significant staff time.

### **Reflections on solving Sport:**

It probably comes as no surprise that I mention sport in these reflections, and more explicitly – student run sport. This exercise of reflection has given the opportunity to reflect on the progress we've made with Imperial Athletes this year, and identify some major issues that need fundamental fixes.

Delivering student sport at Imperial has been problematic for many years. Given the transitional period we find ourselves in coming out of the pandemic, and with greater roll out of Imperial Athletes, I have concerns that the current way of operating does not work well, and a reassessment of roles and responsibilities within sport at Imperial would be beneficial. It is time to consider a change to create a sustainable, satisfactory offer of sport to Imperial College students.

The current situation where two bodies are attempting to deliver one service is inefficient; it is clear from recent surveys that students are not satisfied, and opinions published in Felix and online forums express concerns by students.

Running sport from two bodies leads to various issues:

- Lack of student decision-making regarding student sport
- Lack of student influence over decisions
- Lack of transparency of decision-making processes and financial structure
- Lack of communication between the bodies
- Slow communications to students to solve problems
- Lack of signposting for inquiries to solve problems
- Lack of prioritising student sport issues
- Lack of student communication leading to large oversupply of transport provision. Leading to excessive cost on the Imperial Athletes account by personnel who don't hold the budget
- Re-invention of Union processes by Move Imperial staff (ie. Event plans)
- Staff-student conflict in regard to social media content
- Lack of transparency and student ownership with regard to Sports Awards
- Lack of student influence over Varsity

Given that the students are the end-user to the student sport offer, it is my opinion that Imperial Athletes must fix these issues to be a success, otherwise it will be a pointless exercise.

It is clear that students want control over the decisions made regarding sport and thus far in the Imperial Athletes process, this hasn't been prioritised enough.

My suggestions to solve these issues are not particularly radical but will have a huge impact on the student body.

#### One place/One team

- Imperial Athletes has created a brand for a fresh start, but behind the scenes nothing has really changed.
- Increase speed of communication between our two parties when resolving club issues, especially when students are involved face-to-face
- One joint team for the students to hold accountable, there will be no finger-pointing possible when it comes to problems.

#### Student-led

- Student opinion is that there is no way to make effective change with sport as it lies outside of their normal governance structure.
- Move Imperial as a college department have limited accountability to students
- Students want to be able to have final say on decisions that will affect them, and they need an effective forum for their voice to be heard and decisions to be acted upon.
- Funding and budgeting policies written explicitly and approved by student body to refer to will increase transparency and student satisfaction

#### In the Union office

- Club sport relies heavily on union services and support from the Student Opportunities & Development Team/DPFS/DPCS:
  - Transport
  - Room bookings
  - Risk assessments
  - Training
  - Eactivities
  - All club financial processes
  - Constituions, elections & governance
  - Disciplinarys
  - Code of Conducts
- If we want to create a "one-stop shop" for all things sport, this is where it should be.

I am not precious over who line manages whom, where budgets lie, where responsibilities ultimately lie between College and the Union. If we follow through with the three suggestions above we will radically reform student opinion of our commitment to improving sport and garner a huge buy-in to the sports strategy, whilst also tackling the problems that have caused friction in the past.

On the student side, this needs the governance of the Sports Exec sorting out. In my opinion it needs to do the following:

- Create a student-led Athletics Board where questions/issues can be submitted anonymously and all students involved in sport are explicitly invited and any student can attend
- Chaired by a Sports Chair who is elected by all members of all sports clubs
- Meets twice a term
- All questions are circulated before the meeting so decisions can be justified
- Does not only allow for students to hold staff and sabbs to account, but for staff to hold student groups to account also.
- This board could have a Varsity subcommittee, a Sports Awards subcommittee, all elected by the students to improve engagement.

On the staff side, meetings would be required after each Athletics Board meeting to implement actions arising from the student-led discussion and to discuss sports strategy progress.

This governance structure would:

- Increase the efficiency of staff meetings as problems would already have been presented and discussed in time.
- Allow a face-to-face, student-led environment to ensure staff and students can hold each other to account on their expectations.
- We can create a policy to explicitly state what the expectations are of students to staff and staff to students.

In terms of student buy-in, we have the Imperial Athletes brand, we just need to show students how sport will be different. One joint team will enable the delivery of sport efficiently and smoothly with students getting involved in how the Athletics Board would function, with students helping write new policies on funding; then we launch a new sports strategy. This is possible to achieve next year given that we have extended the sports strategy until the end of next academic year, and a new sports strategy will be developed next year.

## **Beyond sport**

The main principle of decisions being student-led is fundamental to the Union and must be implemented in other areas. Effective partnerships need to be expanded on across other management groups:

- In Arts with the Blyth Centre,
- In Faith with the Chaplaincy,
- In Expeditions with the IC Exploration Board
- In Community with the Outreach team
- In Careers with the careers team
- Academically with faculties and departments
- And the list goes on...

College departments are critical to the delivery of our programs and students have so little say in how they're run. In my opinion this needs to change.

## **Conclusion**

I have developed personally and professionally a huge amount this year and I'm grateful to all those who I have worked with, to the staff that have supported me, those that have mentored me, and to those who have contributed to such a fulfilling year. I hope no future DPCS ever has to cancel all in-person activity, and I wish all OTs, those remaining and incoming all the best for the future – the Union is in an exciting time of growth and you all have the ability to shape it's success.