

**Imperial College Union  
Board of Trustees / 14 July 2021**

**Union President Reflections**

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Purpose: To share reflections on two years in office.

Somewhat unusually for Imperial College Union Officers, Shervin and I sought re-election to the same roles last year. As such, some quite likeminded and intelligent people wrote our reflections at the end of last year.

Rather than retread old ground, I would direct you to [the reflections which were written at that point](#). They discuss the challenges we faced throughout last year, including:

- How I came to be involved with ICU
- The challenges we faced managing various crises and compensating for staff underperformance, against the backdrop of a (Board-initiated) changing of the guard.
  - This included pre-COVID kitchen closures and Leadership challenges.
- Managing tense negotiations with the College on rent and responsible investment
- Appointing an interim managing director
- Absorbing the initial shock from COVID.

What follows will pick up from where that paper concluded.

**The next lap of the relay race**

Historically, and perhaps erroneously considering our large postgraduate population, ICU business has slowed considerably in the summer months. In 2020, the usual hiatus in student activity and College meetings did not come to pass because of COVID, and between that fact and our vulnerable staffing position this time last year, new full-time officers did not enjoy the benefit of a robust, gentle, induction process. There are benefits to “learning on the job”, but I certainly think this absence, exacerbated by the social distance imposed by COVID, adversely affected the year.

The work, as far as Shervin, Michaela, and I were concerned, largely entailed an intense series of university-facing meetings on a range of challenging and nuanced matters from education to finance to the broader student experience; managing the consequences of the A-level U-turn and how the delivery of teaching would have to change under COVID. At around the same time, I was interviewed by a QC regarding the bullying allegations, which I will elaborate on further later in this document. The major restructuring within the Union happened concurrently, as did Tom Flynn’s full-time start.

Although in some areas, the workload had eased once the academic year was in swing, the intensity of College-facing meetings did not slow for many months. This took the place of other work in those areas not relating to firefighting. It is also one of the main reasons why there wasn’t a natural moment for me to take an extended break until this Easter (though we did get some time off at Christmas, punctuated by a couple of meetings). Protracted working this year was deleterious to productivity, and would not have been my first choice, but I also do not believe it was evitable given the circumstances.

## **Working remote or remotely working?**

The Summer, and all the time since, has been characterised by an “in, out, in, out, shake it all about” inconsistent experience with in-person work. However, even when restrictions have been at their loosest, many meetings which ordinarily would have occurred in person have been relegated to Teams.

This has had two small positive, and two large negative consequences. The former relates mainly to time efficiency and accessibility; more people can attend more easily. However, the online meetings have also:

- Adversely affected team morale and cohesiveness, as people have become more distant and naturally less empathetic to two-dimensional faces on the screen;
- Reduced dynamism and scope for soft influencing, since only one person may talk at a time, it is harder to convince people when they're on the other side of a screen (freezing power relations), and “corridor conversations” have largely died.

Another important consequence of the move to remote working is that the vast majority of conversations have required scheduling in advance, further reducing team cohesiveness while also filling everyone's calendars. This contributed to fatigue and caused other work to be deprioritised. In addition, many of our services have moved wholly online, while club activity and our plans in the venues have often been frustrated by changes to guidance or individual self-isolation.

It is easy to feel demoralised under these circumstances (recalling them is demoralising enough!). However, it is important to acknowledge the following:

- We have been in an incredibly privileged position to have worked from the office as much as we have this year.
- Given the constraints imposed on us, we have been able to offer a decent provision of services to our students, who have welcomed the opportunity to e.g. use the bar. This has been predicated on both careful planning and flexible management.
- We have adapted to the crisis relatively smoothly, which should not be taken for granted given the experience of some in other parts of the sector. Our prior experience with MS Teams was inordinately helpful to this end.

On top of this, our relations with the university have continued to be extremely productive. Perversely, the crisis and the scandal investigation have meant that our day-to-day relations with the university have actually been more positive than last year. We have benefited from the dividends our past principled stances paid, in terms of both reputation and respect. Meanwhile, external dynamics have meant more often than not key actors in the College have been partners addressing shared problems, rather than opponents. This is not uniformly the case of course, but has felt (to me at least) much more true in this year than the last.

## **Governance failures and gross misconduct**

For much of the past twelve months, the College has been wracked by scandal, and I've been in the thick of it. While initially responding positively by calling for a comprehensive investigation, those who lead the College have since responded remarkably ineffectively, perhaps because the investigation elicited an outcome they were not expecting.

At first, those stewarding this process tried to bury the story and give those culpable a mere slap on the wrist. They then responded incredibly poorly when the story entered the public sphere, with statements that alternately confused and vexed students and staff. They have

failed to take decisive action, in spite of their own process upholding allegations of gross misconduct. They also failed to keep Council in the loop.

Council has not seen the investigation report, which was published eleven months ago. Council was not apprised of the outcomes of the process before the College were compelled to release these publicly. The Chair's strategy of revealing the minimum possible amount of information led to the story lasting far longer than it otherwise might have, as the College was cornered into making repeated statements in drips and drabs. Even setting aside an evaluation of the process or outcomes, Council has not even deliberated on "lessons learnt" from all of this; it took six months for any meeting to be called to discuss it, and this only took place at all at my behest. The only real concrete action – a task group under the Provost's aegis which is looking at how we can "Work Together" better – has an extremely limited remit, and was set into motion without Council's awareness.

Their failure to act – the hyperreality doing so engendered – has precipitated a significant wave of staff departures; talented staff members, who otherwise may not have left, have done so. Entire sections where the internal dysfunction was worst are being hollowed out. Beyond bullying and harassment, simple lack of coordination, recognition, reward, and sharing of the burden have led a significant number of key staff to feel undervalued and underutilised. These people are talented enough to find work elsewhere, and are doing so.

This process was eminently avoidable. Council members have chosen not to challenge the issue – not even to raise it – at several different junctures. Whether they feel uncomfortable doing so because of the pervading culture, or because it simply does not occur to them, the fact of the matter is that the College Council is at present not doing its job. This applies to most members, internal and external. Changes are being made now to expand the Council further, but these are unlikely to fundamentally alter our poor trajectory, though they will improve its demographic diversity slightly.

Governance has fallen short at Imperial, diminishing or reinforcing already low trust levels among staff and students. The one key positive I've drawn from it – aside from the value of having been involved in something of this magnitude – is that our Board is comparably well-functioning. Last year, our external members recognised performance issues in the organisation, and acted on them decisively. We work together better, and we challenge what is put in front of us more than our counterparts in the College. This deserves recognition – perhaps we should consider offering some seminars.

As a last note here – this issue is not closed. The College is currently under investigation by the OfS, though this is seldom discussed at Council. If they adhere to their own written strictures (which I feel is unlikely) they will have to ask the College to remove the President and Chief Financial Officer. Whether or not this occurs, this situation is and will continue to be quite embarrassing: an evitable stain, unbecoming of a university of our stature.

### **Review and Responsible Investment**

Beyond this malaise, the aforementioned reactive business, and Board-related work I've collaborated with Tom Flynn on, two key areas of project work have been noteworthy this year.

The first is socially responsible investment, where the work I initiated last year to prepare a policy has been followed by work on an implementation plan for the policy this year. This has involved a plethora of meetings and research, with stakeholders internal and external. The group tasked with writing the implementation plan had a broad spectrum of views. Here I must recognise Geoff Maitland, who chaired this body in such a way that our deliberations remained constructive, and engendered a positive spirit of compromise. Our recommendations are

going to President's Board, and I believe form a strong basis for taking this work forward beyond this academic year.

The second key area concerns *Felix*, where the Editor's underperformance has led to two key interventions. First, in the Spring term, we set mutual expectations to rebuild burnt bridges between the Editor and his committee. We then initiated a review of *Felix*, consulting with students and capturing valuable practice, while also recommending some financial savings be made, reallocating responsibilities between the Union and *Felix*, and resetting the support we offer them. This intervention was somewhat successful, but this success did not last. By June, the Editor's performance had diminished to the extent that removal from the role was justified, precipitating a second intervention. We discussed this as a team, and found most Council members in agreement with us. On presenting this news to Calum, he chose to resign.

This was a challenging process to manage, but it has given us a blueprint to a) review a key service and b) manage the underperformance of a key student postholder. We are applying this to the GSU presently, and have set an important precedent that ICU recognises these issues and will take action when they arise. The Union in the future is likely to be on the case to a greater extent when full-time officers underperform. New OTs – you have been warned.

On top of this, I have been steadily progressing work on refugee scholarships, which we are now very close to realising in practice. This is something the Union was actioned to take up in 2017, so better late than never!

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### **Key Takeaways – A Qualified Success**

At the end of last year, I wrote that I hoped the Union would be in a stronger position, well-aligned behind a clear goal, and that the College would be moving in the right direction. Against this threshold, I would argue this year has been a qualified success.

The Union is in an objectively stronger position, having recovered from quite a fragile moment. We have better staff, a good strategy, and we are in a financial position which would have been near-unimaginable at the beginning of the pandemic. These circumstances will catalyse the work which has already commenced to reorient and rebalance ourselves internally, discussed further below.

With the College, the picture is slightly more mixed. When it comes to the delivery of education (given practical constraints), productive staff-student partnerships, responsible investment, bursaries and scholarships, work on widening participation, and acknowledging the College's murky history, our institution is unquestionably moving in the right direction. The progress isn't always as rapid as we would like, but the positive trajectory is clear. However, this is tempered by the following:

- A lack of strategic thinking around expansion; growing because we can, not considering whether we should.
- A related lack of principle when it comes to those areas which generate revenue for the College, from fleecing students with GradPad to introducing master's application fees.
- A failure of accountability at the top, and consequent failure to take remedial action which will rectify these problems in the longer term.

While I do believe the positives outweigh the negatives, the College is at an extremely delicate moment. "The fish rots from the head down"; issues at the top could trickle down, overruling progress made elsewhere. Current circumstances – the crisis and the scandal – have given Imperial an opportunity to rectify this, or to cement current issues. The College seems to be

leaning towards the latter, and it will take concentrated effort from new College leaders, including the incoming OTs, to nudge things the other way.

In the same way as last year, I wanted to share some key takeaways for the year beyond this overview. Most of these are a bit more forward looking than those which I wrote last time.

1. We must **make representation a higher priority**.

Student representation has been neglected in the Union historically. It has been largely left to individual officers and student volunteers, with little support or interest from ICU centrally. Past interventions from staff have actually at times even been counterproductive.

The resources committed to this area are welcome and needed, as are the efforts of the new manager. However, rebalancing things in the Union will take more than just hiring new roles. We need to work to embed a culture where:

- a. More staff understand the day-to-day experiences of students at Imperial.
- b. There is some institutional memory among staff of major decisions the College has made.
- c. Staff are capable of offering useful, tailored advice to officers and students in a representative capacity.
- d. There is an understanding among staff of how different academic departments work.

Perhaps most crucially, we must recognise that student representation is our main avenue to positively influence the vast majority of our constituents, including those who otherwise do not engage with us whatsoever. It is also the single area where the Union has exclusive competitive advantage; only an entity like ours can perform this role, whereas other areas could hypothetically be run by the university.

2. We need to **work on continuity**.

One area I regret us not having spent more time on is working to ensure we have good people ready to follow us. Work which will help fill a future vacuum while naturally always take a backseat to work with more immediate returns, especially in a crisis period. However, neglecting the long-term will eventually leave us bereft of experienced volunteers and officers in key roles.

Any efforts we have made here this year have been severely held back by the pandemic, which has prejudiced many students' ability to engage and has led to burnout among many current postholders. The incoming OTs, as well as key staff, will have to do a lot of community-building work to compensate for this. Demonstrating that the Union will go to bat for students, that we prioritise things they care about, and that we offer services they want, will also help.

Continuity would also be aided by the development of institutional knowledge among staff, particularly on matters relating to the College, as discussed in the previous point.

3. We **must not get sloppy**.

We have surmounted incredible challenges over the past 24 months, navigating tricky financial compromises and staffing restructures. It would be easy at this stage, with COVID guidance relaxing, competent staff members in place, and a huge uplift in our funding, it

would be easy for us to rest on our laurels. I would strongly caution against this; doing so would only serve to return us to some version of the mess we faced before 2019. Instead, we need to stay lean, remain ambitious, and find a way to preserve the momentum we've had over this period without putting so much undue pressure on key individual staff and officers.

4. We must not **lose momentum with the College.**

The crisis has also thrust us into certain key decision-making fora in the university, expanding our role in education representation and even at times into areas with broad operational or financial ramifications. We would be foolish to allow things to regress to the mean, and should instead take advantage of this opportunity to get more involved in decision-making within and beyond education at the College-wide level.

While I can't offer a complete blueprint for doing so, continuously making the case for student representation, or failing that observer status, or failing that the ability to come and speak for specific items, in key College meetings, is likely crucial. Making this case alongside staff who see things the way we do, including the current Vice Provost (Education), is likely to improve the efficacy of such tactics. Fundamentally, we have been effective critical friends to the university for two years now, and it's right that some rewards be reaped from that work.

5. We should work to foster **coordination in the College.**

One of the key weaknesses of the university is its devolution. While this has its positives in terms of independent departmental identities, and insulating students from dysfunction at the College's core, it also means a huge amount of potential is wasted as different parts of the College fail to collaborate and fail to act in an aligned fashion.

Two key areas come to mind here. The financial and operational engine of the College has been quite far removed from the academic heart for some years. While the crisis has mitigated against this somewhat, it would be easy for old habits to reappear. Meanwhile, leaders across different departments and faculties seldom advocate for the university as a whole, preferring to parochially prioritise the interests of their fiefdoms over those of our entire institution. This means resources, such as academic space, are used inefficiently on a campus with already stretched resources.

To mitigate against this, the Union should work with likeminded individuals in the College to a) ensure the academics and professional staff keep talking to each other, and to expand areas where this is the case, and b) work with student representatives to overcome this "beggar thy neighbour" mentality within different parts of the College. We can play a role in reshaping this mentality at Imperial, and doing so would be to the benefit of all in the long-term.

The common thread here is the **incredible positive potential** of roles in students' unions in general, and ICU in particular. Students can achieve a lot if they believe doing so is possible, and raise their heads above the parapet. We have the right ingredients here – funding, structure, a delicate moment in time where everything is in flux – to realise this potential. Whether those who will still be here next year do so is up to them.

**Goodbye, Farewell and Amen**

In closing, I wanted to recognise two areas of personal significance the last two years in this role have provided.

First, professional development. From staff restructure and recruitment, to complex negotiations with varied stakeholders, to QC investigations, this role has exposed me to some quite serious and tricky business. Though it has been quite taxing, I feel fortunate to have had this experience, which most would not benefit from over several years in the workplace, and which will serve me well beyond Imperial.

I also feel incredibly privileged to have held this role at all, which I consider a prestigious and notable one. I have been part of transformative work on both sides of Prince Consort Road, sometimes in the drivers' seat, often just as another member of the team. To be paid well to hold a role like that, where one can make positive change on behalf of others, is extremely rewarding, not to mention relatively unusual. I do not take it for granted.

While I am ready to move on from this role, I do so with some trepidation. Imperial has been my home for a quarter of my life; I understand this place, and I've enjoyed being able to study and work here. Recent circumstances have not been ideal, but I genuinely would not have preferred to be anywhere else over the past 24 months.

### **Acknowledgements**

Nobody does anything alone. I want to acknowledge the tremendous positive impact other people have had on my journey in this role, and in the years beforehand. I suspect we'll have an opportunity to thank them all properly verbally or over email before the end.

I would not have ended up in this role without the tremendous support I received from friends, other student reps, and academic staff, who supported, praised, and encouraged my efforts as an undergraduate.

I am grateful for the support I received running in two contested election campaigns, particularly from current student members of Board, and especially from the (soon to be appointed) Dr James. I'm glad to be passing the baton to someone who's almost as competent as I am.

I want to recognise the profound impact student volunteers working on the refugee bursary issue, the responsible investment lobbying, and all our education-focussed work have had over the past two years. This includes Luciana Miu, Positive Investment Imperial, and Divest Imperial. I also want to acknowledge the important role sympathetic staff have played in these processes, such as Alyssa Gilbert, Pramod Puthumanapully, Emma McCoy, and Omar Matar.

Union staff have also played a key role in this journey. This includes:

- Graham Atkinson, who had to get us through perhaps the worst of times as interim MD
- Victoria Agbontaen, who has gone above and beyond to offer support to full-time officers and Council members
- Tom Newman, for keeping us sane when no one else would, and for the work he put into the Felix review this year
- Tom Flynn, for righting the ship, getting us aligned behind a new strategy, identifying issues others missed, and for continuously offering us good counsel and fantastic careers support

I'm also grateful to Jayne, Rob, and Ashley for the role they've played in rectifying issues behind the scenes. The Union would be much poorer (literally!) without you.

I'm grateful to all the external trustees, but especially want to recognise Kate and Graham as they depart, for the tremendous effort and insightful contributions they've offered the Union over the years. I also want to recognise Jill, who has done more than any non-executive chair should ever have to, while also making time to support individual staff members and officers. The work you have done is extremely commendable.

Finally, I want to thank my fellow officers. Last year and this year they have truly been tremendous – supportive, effective, and tenacious; their efforts have made Imperial College a much better place for students. I would write more here, but I think I'll save it for the leavers' speeches.

I've had a tremendous time in this role, and I'm incredibly proud of what we've achieved.

Thank you all.