

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

Student Trustee Reflections

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Purpose: To provide Board with a reflection on the year as a Trustee of Imperial College Union.

What have you learnt during your time as a Trustee and what went well?

Overall, it's been a great experience! Given me an insight into how the sector works and how trustee boards in general work – it's been invaluable in preparing me for similar work later in my career and has made me much more confident about the prospect of applying for a position as a trustee at other institutions. Student trustees are a valuable part of the Union too, bringing a unique perspective to the Board and a student-focused mindset that is likely harder to achieve on the Board without students' input.

What did you particularly value being part of the Board as a Trustee and why?

When I ran for the role in the 2020 Leadership Elections, I partly did so as it felt like a “natural progression” from my previous volunteer roles (notably RSMU President). While it *kind of* is in terms of seniority of work, the actual experience is very different and, in my opinion, could be carried out by anyone with the drive and mindset necessary, regardless of previous experience with the Union. This is something I didn't fully appreciate when I ran – while my experience in CU and CSP positions informed my working knowledge of how the student side of the Union worked, it did very little to prepare me for the more day-to-day functional side of the Union.

This paragraph sounds like it should belong in the “challenges” section, but it's important to stress that that shift in perspective was valuable, both in terms of my personal and professional development and my experience as a member of and contributor to the Union. It's been a great experience, and a very different one to the role I envisioned back in March 2020 when I ran!

Did you experience any challenges as part of your role? If so, what were they?

The learning curve was pretty steep! The gap between any other Union volunteer role and a seat on the Board is quite large, and probably understated in the role description/election marketing material.

It's also often difficult for a student trustee to fully engage with some of the more comprehensive aspects of the Board's work, e.g., the budget, as I don't have the same experience as the external trustees or the time commitment and daily interaction with the Union that would facilitate a thorough understanding of the documents.

This is all part of the experience though; the learning curve, while perhaps possible to mitigate against, is probably unavoidable due to the substantive difference between volunteer roles (even senior ones) and the work that is undertaken by the Board. Perhaps more guidance

could be given during orientation – maybe go through the year’s expected work with incoming trustees and give a brief explainer of how each part works, or something like that.

Problems like this are detrimental to both individual student trustees and the Union as a whole; if student trustees don’t have the confidence or prerequisite knowledge to engage with every aspect of the Board’s work, they get less out of the experience and the Board loses out on a perspective that, by its own admission, it needs and values.

What recommendations would you make for areas of improvement for Student Trustees in the future?

Orientation could be more comprehensive or helpful – I don’t really remember what was in my Trustee orientation (or if there even was one, given the COVID situation), but I suppose either way that’s not ideal. Orientation should prepare you fully for the year and should cover everything that might be difficult, new or unusual for a student trustee. Key aspects of the Board’s work that might be alien to a student trustee with limited experience should be explained (e.g. Budget, audit, basic stuff like the general working structure of the Union), and key members of staff should be introduced, at least by name, so that student trustees recognise each individual staff member who contributes to a paper or a discussion. All trustees should be kept up to date with new hires or changes in working environment, so that we have a full understanding of who does what when.

Mentoring could also be more useful! While the lack of communication between me and my mentor is partly my fault, a more structured approach may be useful, and could also help to outline some of the problems that stem from feeling or being “out of your depth”.

Finally, thank you! It’s been a great experience being on the Board, and has taught me a lot, both about the sector, trustee positions in general, and about myself (as cliché as that sounds)! Best of luck to everyone leaving as we move on and even more luck to those staying ;) ! The Union has a lot of work ahead of it, but I’m confident that with a team like ours, we’ll be just fine.

Chris ☺