

**Imperial College Union
Constituent Union Report
Governance & Identity Committee / 4 February 2021**

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Purpose: To understand and review CU support requirements

Decision(s): For Discussion

1. Constituent Union Support

Constituent Unions (CU) have played a historic role in shaping the student experience at Imperial and the Union's democratic structures. Each CU has a different set of requirements and needs depending on the CUs aims and ambitions, history, and the context operating currently across different academic departments/faculties.

ICU recognises that whilst CUs are a key part of its current structure, the support it provides to CU executive committees may be insufficient. The purpose of this report is to work collaboratively with CUs to understand how they are supported currently, what good support looks like and to develop an action plan going forward to improve the experience of students leading CUs and the subsequent impact the CU can make.

1.1 Consultation

An informal consultation was undertaken in December 2020 by the ICU President and Head of Membership Services. Each CU President was invited to provide feedback on current support, give an overview of how the 2020-21 academic year has gone, what the challenges they have faced and their ideas for improved ICU support, both in the short term and post-COVID.

All CUs were met with, apart from the Silwood Executive Committee, and provided helpful, constructive feedback. It was clear that whilst there is work to be done by ICU to properly support CUs, student leaders are committed, passionate and able to lead their CU effectively.

2. Theme 1: Improved Communications from ICU

All CUs reported that communications from ICU needed improvement. Whilst it was clear work was needed to prioritise communications from ICU to CUs there were positives.

- Acknowledgement that COVID-19 and remote working made it more challenging to stay connected but efforts were recognised, in particular responsiveness on Microsoft Teams Chats to questions
- The fact that the consultation meeting on support taking place was an indication that ICU was proactively reaching out and this was well received,
- A CU president Whatsapp group (created and led by the CUs themselves) was a good way of keeping in contact and collaborating.

Feedback for improvements included:

- More direct communications from ICU to CU leaders
- Clear communication of the staff structure, how to contact them and what ICU staff roles are, crucially who supports CUs on particular areas of work.

- Enhanced knowledge amongst ICU staff on what CUs do, their purpose and what they are working on. CU Union Council reports should be shared to relevant staff, this will help develop understanding.
- It was recognised that when it is safe to do so, there will be benefits of in office working locations in the ICU office spaces.
- Direct support for CU within ICU comms channels to help raise awareness and engagement amongst the student body.

3. Theme 2: Better Training

It was clear from the feedback that there were differing experiences of handover and training for CU executives. Handovers for their new roles were mixed, with some having a good handover but overall improvements can be made. There should be a minimum standard for handovers to ensure consistency and not disadvantage roles to be successful due to lack of knowledge transfer.

Feedback suggested that the ICU training offer focused more on operational details and was potentially missing the mark for more senior volunteers both with systems related training but also soft skills such as communication or chairing an effective meeting. Some CUs had even taken the initiative to coordinate and deliver their own training programme working with external providers to deliver soft skills workshops based on requirements identified.

The way decisions are made in ICU and who to ask specific questions to remains unclear, training should incorporate networking for CUs with each other, relevant ICU staff and officers.

There was a theme that emerged from some that they would benefit from tailored support which built upon specific challenges either linked to the CU (eg culture change) or the individual (eg confidence). ICU should consider mentoring for CU presidents as part of its support as well as regular intervals for check ins and feedback.

ICU in general should deepen its understanding of each CU, the challenges they face and build training in a more bespoke way. The impetus is on ICU to consider each CU appropriately, ensure its support is clear and available, but CUs should also feel empowered be more forthcoming with their requirements.

4. Theme 3: Union Decision Making

CUs overall felt that they are not meaningfully involved in ICU decision making. When they are, it is often after the fact or too late to meaningfully engage. There was a perception that CUs are not readily involved in ICU central projects that impact them and this is to the detriment of the outcome.

There was acknowledgement from CUs that it is not possible to always be consulted and there was recognition that sometimes this is not appropriate. However, it is clear that there should be a review and further dialogue on how CUs can be meaningfully involved in ICU decisions earlier in the decision curve.

5. Theme 4: Low Engagement

It was a common theme that student engagement was a challenge for all CUs. The impact of COVID-19 and remote teaching has exacerbated pre-existing challenges with student engagement for CUs.

There is a lack of ICU support with CU communications and promotion. ICU should reflect on its centralised support for communicating the opportunities and impact of CUs and how students can become involved.

Feedback suggested that there is a need to consider the structure and role of CUs in order to minimise the overlap between ICU and Department Societies.

It was evident that the role of some CU Presidents needed redefining. Feedback provided suggested a reduction in influence of some CU Presidents as an academic representative to their relevant department(s) had diminished or was in need of review. The majority of feedback pointed to the prevalence of the president role as an administrator rather than a representative. CU presidents felt their role was inward looking with a predisposition to ICU internal processes, as opposed to representing students to the College.

6. Recommendations

To be finalised after discussion at the 02/02/2021 GIB meeting

Suggested split between:

- short term actions which we should take
- upcoming reviews/project work where CU voice(s) may be useful
- what should be taken forward/considered post-COVID