

**Imperial College Union
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DPE Reflections

Author(s): Daniel Lo (Deputy President (Education))

Purpose: To share the DPE's reflections on the year.

1. Introduction

You may be aware that the DPE role wasn't my initial choice. I always wanted to be a finance guy, believing running for DPFS could help me achieve that. However, education wasn't something that was on my mind. Probably the biggest motivation was that I came from a department with the lowest NSS satisfaction rate. No matter how brilliant the teaching was, the assessment & feedback process was a pain. I was thinking of ways to lobby the Department to improve it. I later realised that being a year rep is not enough. Many College-wide educational matters need a fix and being the DPE is the best way to do so. I kept researching the role and found out that I liked the position a lot too. Perhaps I shall run for it again next year since all the OT roles were filled.

Opportunity seldom knocks twice, but it did. I immediately prepared for the Summer Election for the DPE role. Results were in, and I finally won.

Coming into the role only with a year of CSP committee experience but without any experience as a student representative was a challenge for me, besides my international background as a non-native English speaker. Some people judged me for my motivation, experience, and communication skills. I can only do a valuation and cash flow model for the organisation, but not reading thousands of pages of educational policies. I am grateful for the support from Union staff, student reps, and the College to break these stigmas and perform the best I can.

2. At the beginning

Believe it or not, I am an extrovert. I love talking to people and hosting socials to allow people around me to have fun. However, I was stuck at home during COVID and lost all my social skills. I initially seemed quiet before gradually picking up during the term when interacting with various student volunteers. It felt good to come back five days per week to meet my colleagues, although most of the College meetings were on Teams. The OT induction was useful, and my predecessor was very helpful in explaining all the bits of the role so that I could be well equipped on the first day of my actual work. The support I obtained gradually increased when new staff in the representation team joined during the first term. I first needed to work on the NSS College and Departmental recommendations (which the College, unfortunately, ignored my report). Staff members in the Rep team and I were relatively new, so we were unaware of the expectations for generating the National Students Survey (NSS) report and presenting it to the Provost Board, a prestigious meeting which consists of the College's Senior Management Team. It was stressful at that time, but I am glad that it was over so that I can focus on other work so that people will genuinely appreciate my work and effort.

3. Summary of my work

Representation is a very College-facing role, which explains why I spend half of my time working with people in the College and the rest on my objectives.

4. Lobbying the College

Increased financial support for students travelling to campus from red-listed countries

We discussed with the College to increase the base rate of financial support offered to students returning from red list countries, who must stay in quarantine hotels upon arrival. Nathalie and I also investigated the exceptional circumstances for taught students' policy and lobbied for greater flexibility in its terms and conditions.

Academic Misconduct Policy modification

Though unsuccessful, I reiterated multiple times in the meeting that there were loopholes in the academic misconduct policy, which students may be mistreated. In addition, some punishments may have a detrimental effect on heavy ECTS-rated modules, even if the student was accused of minor academic misconduct. While I support that academic integrity must always adhere, there should be greater flexibility in the policy so that students receive an appropriate warning/punishment without jeopardising their future studies/career.

In person vs closed book exams

I reached out to student reps and consulted their ideas on how they wanted their exams to run, given that we were steadily walking away from the COVID doom and gloom. Their feedback was presented, and I stressed the importance of exam transition and the benefits of retaining online exams for this year. I am glad that more than half of the undergraduate Departments and the entire Business School have kept their exams online. This was undoubtedly a big win for students and me, and I am happy that some Departments treated students' opinions seriously.

Postgraduate Taught degree in-year exam resits

This is another big win for PGT students and me. In-session resits were introduced in the previous academic year as a result of the impact of the pandemic. I lobbied with the College to be consistent with last year and provide an opportunity for in-session resits this year. The quote from the College's Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) was as follows:

“We recognise that there might be concern about the additional workload on staff and students associated with the setting and sitting of an extra paper during the same academic year, especially if students are already engaged in finishing dissertations or project work. However, feedback from ICU student representatives indicates that students are strongly in favour of in-session resits, especially as this would ensure that all students are able to graduate with their cohort. Provision of in-session resits will also provide a timely resit opportunity for those who are unable to take the assessment at the first sitting due to mitigating circumstances.”

The policy will be reviewed next year, and I hope they can consider this again and think beyond the COVID circumstances.

Module Evaluation Questionnaire (MEQ) launch and review

I was only involved in the later stage of the MEQ implementation process before its soft launch in winter 2021. It wasn't a successful launch. Teaching staff and students hated it. Some suggested that the data turnaround rate was too slow, and others believed that the MEQ undermined the value of providing/receiving lecturer-specific comments. The Union and I collected student feedback and contributed to the early stages of the MEQ evaluation.

5. Objectives and other key projects

NSS

I had gone the extra mile to read all the comments and analyse the NSS results to generate a spreadsheet with a breakdown of various Departments. This was helpful because student reps can focus on creating recommendations rather than finding the numbers and reading all comments in detail. I also set up 1-2-1 meetings with reps to ensure they were comfortable writing and presenting the NSS report in staff-student committees.

Rep training and rep engagement

It felt surreal to organise in-person rep training sessions for over 250 student reps, given where we were in the past three years. Nathalie and I designed the contents and made the session as interactive and engaging as possible. Besides the formal training, I held a few rep socials to allow them to interact with other reps and the Union. As a result, I feel like the reps have been more engaged with elements of human interaction and beverages.

The Academic Rep Forums and the Education & Representation Board also provided a great platform for student reps to discuss educational matters, including the big wins I mentioned earlier.

Mums and Dads Review

It confused me at first, too, as this was not what I had initially planned. Before expanding its functionality, I believe a proper review of the M&D is needed. It didn't work out as planned because we realised all departmental societies (dep socs) had already done all the planning, which left us stranded with no dep socs using our scheme. During Christmas, when COVID hits again, I rapidly adapted and designed a Christmas Buddy Scheme to help students connect with the Imperial community during the break. Unfortunately, the scheme wasn't successful as most people did not meet up eventually. I believe the M&D works well because there are designated "parents" to organise activities for new students, which does not apply to the Buddy Scheme.

International Students Support

I first looked into the International Student Support Hub and the Careers Centre, which received a high satisfaction rate from the Student Experience Survey. I later shifted the focus to the Centre for Academic English (CAE) and the library, hoping to increase plagiarism awareness and improve scientific communication for non-native English speakers (like me). It was unfortunately left at a later stage, so nothing succinct can be implemented. However, the Library and CAE promised to collaborate to provide better support for all Imperial students.

Feedback Board

Probably my most significant achievement after a bit of back-and-forth between the Union and me. Despite receiving huge support from the College and the reps, the Union wasn't quite ready to accept new proposals and possibly a massive change in how students provide feedback to the College. It was finally approved after a convincing response from student reps to suggest the Union implement an online feedback tool and increase rep visibility. I ran the feedback board trial from May to July in 3 Departments, covering over 2500 UG and PG students across various faculties. The effectiveness of the trial is yet to be reviewed, but I am proud that I can achieve a unique objective that could better streamline day-to-day feedback processes between Departments and students.

While the success or failure of this project is yet to be revealed, I am glad that I have finally achieved a large-scale project like this, and the College liked my idea. Credits to Munty (previous ICSMSU President) for his support and insight.

Additional items mandated by Union Council

I helped with two papers passed/discussed on Council – the Inter-departmental Coordination on Shared Modules paper and the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme paper. I bought these up with the Faculty and Departments, hoping to solve those issues quickly. The former paper was presented in their Faculty Teaching Committee and was addressed, whereas the latter requires further modifications from the author.

6. Things I should improve

- Interact more with colleagues
- Stop overworking
- Improve time management skills
- Be more assertive
- Written English
- Say “no” more often to things
- Be more aware of the work and cultural differences

7. Reflections for the ICU

Good things

Staff support and culture:

ICU looks massively different compared to the previous year when there was minimal staff support. Having a whole representation team in place benefits my work so that I can use my time wisely to focus on my objectives and lobbying work. The working culture is acceptable: everyone is nice and friendly. People in different teams collaborate pretty well. People are generally passionate about students and genuinely care about them (e.g., the Rep Team). Some have even gone above and beyond to assist with my personal development and job interviews. I am grateful for Tom F, Rob, Cat and Dipto's help to land my job in the financial industry.

A diverse OT team:

Our OT team works quite well. Everyone brings various skills and experiences to the table – one with a significant experience as a former student and knows the Union inside out; one with a great sense of humour and puts lots of effort when organising large-scale events; one can think very fast and dare to challenge the status quo; one with a friendly and caring character who is very passionate in her field; and my international background and strong stakeholder management skills. (You can guess which OT I am referring to). Although we don't always work closely, we support each other to achieve what we want during our time in the office. I hope to become friends with them in the end, but we'll see.

Things to improve

Rather than focusing on my less happy personal experiences, I am grateful to see the change the Union is trying to make when reading the reflections submitted by past OTs. Although there are minor things that the Union, SMTs, or the Rep Team can improve, I want my reflection to focus on the bright side rather than clinging to the past. However, I am happy to have a separate conversation if you want to find out more.

8. Conclusion

I have developed a lot personally and professionally this year as an OT, and I'm grateful for everything I have worked on. I'm happy I've worked in the Union over the past year, have met many great people, am pleased with the impact I've had, and will take a lot of experiences forward with me in later life. I do not regret signing up for the DPE role, and I will miss this place after I leave.

I wish everyone, those remaining and who left the organisation, all the best for the future.

Thank you, ICU, and goodbye.