

Imperial College Union
Board of Trustees / 13 July 2022

Deputy President (Welfare) 2022 Reflections

Author(s): Nathalie Podder – ICU Deputy President (Welfare)

Most important, however, is the . . . avenue to meaning in life: even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation, facing a fate he cannot change, may rise above himself, may grow beyond himself, and by doing so change himself. He may turn a personal tragedy into a triumph.

- Victor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

Content Warning: Mention of trauma and post-traumatic growth

Introduction

I came into this role not knowing much of what to expect, nor did anyone in this room know what to expect of me. I went from 0 to 100, having no prior experience of volunteering as a student representative and no prior involvement with the Union's leadership structures. What I did have, however, was a wealth of unconventional experience.

I had spent the last 6 years of my life treading water and fighting against multiple disabling illnesses, spending every other year of my life in hospital. My brain went from being my most prized possession to being shrouded in a fog, unable to focus enough to even read a sentence of lecture notes. In my broken state, I had a very hard time believing that I would ever contribute anything useful to society or that I would even live to the age of 25.

Against all odds, however, I made it. I got my energy back and am pouring my heart and soul into giving a voice to those who remain too weak or tired to speak. My world went from feeling numb and cold and grey to being full of colour and life again. Having survived the unimaginable, I have lost all fears or reservations that I once had. I now aspire to live every waking moment to its fullest potential and acknowledge time as a priceless limited resource that will never return.

Time is, indeed, an extremely limited resource for us sabbatical officers, but I am happy to say that at this current point in time, which marks the halfway point in my tenure, I have yet to feel any regrets. I entered this role with the expectation that even if nothing changes for the better, then I at least want to be at peace knowing that I did everything I possibly could. That commitment lit a flame within me which not only has proven to be self-sustaining, but also continues to burn brighter every passing day.

Personal/DPW Reflections

What went well so far:

- Engaging with students: Talking to and getting to know students from all different walks of life has been the highlight of my role. I have mentored multiple volunteers who have gone on to achieve Outstanding Service Awards and it has been truly heart-warming to see their growth. Working with the liberation officers has been a true joy – I will always remember how we worked together as a team to tackle a variety of

equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) challenges in the Union and the College. The most memorable of all encounters was the town hall on spiking that I chaired in response to an open letter to the Union that garnered over 200 signatures. I approached that meeting with openness and authenticity, and as a result, my loudest critics became my fiercest allies.

- Data and research: The single most effective lobbying technique that I have uncovered as a sabbatical officer at Imperial is the use of data to back up an argument. This is no surprise considering that we are a STEM institution, and students and academics tend to base their worldviews around statistics and research rather than personal beliefs and ideologies. This does come with its own set of limitations that need to be challenged, (as will be explained by Koreo's upcoming presentation on EDI themes). Nevertheless, I have accomplished this in a number of ways:

- I interviewed all 9 liberation and community officers on how the College disciplinary procedures affect marginalised groups.
- I collaborated with ICUsToo, Imperial's student campaign group against sexual violence, to roll out and publish a report on ICU's first survey on sexual misconduct. This survey garnered over 600 responses and helped kickstart the review of the College's disciplinary procedures.
- I worked with the DPFS to do a detailed Safety and Security Review of the Union Venues, which included multiple stages of student consultation as well as an all-student survey.

- Sector-wide collaboration: I have managed to place ICU on the radar of the student union and higher education sectors in a variety of ways:

- ICU's sexual misconduct survey was posted on the Union website as well as on WonkHE and has even garnered the attention of the Office for Students.
- I led a focus group with other London universities on members' disciplinary procedures in student unions.
- I attended a UUK conference on addressing and preventing sexual misconduct, bullying and harassment in universities. Following this, I liaised with a senior staff member from Warwick on the lessons learnt from their discipline review.
- I have been interviewed by local London journalists on the issues around spiking in student union sector.

- Overhauling a broken system: Student disciplinary procedures have long been acknowledged to be unfit for purpose. They lacked resolution or any real incentive for survivors of mistreatment to come forward. The process lacked transparency, and agency was not given to those who are making the difficult decision to come forward, placing them at risk of having their power taken away from them all over again. The Union President and I have worked as a formidable team on this front, and I cannot possibly imagine a better ally. It was an incredibly slow and delicate process, but we stayed firm on this front, elevating the student voice to the centre of this process. College has now come to agree with the Union on the following points:

- The process needs to be trauma-informed and serve to protect the individuals that are directly involved, as well as the wider College community.
- Both responding parties and reporting parties have the right to know the outcome. This is an essential element of natural justice.

- There needs to be a route of mediation and conflict resolution that aligns with the principle of restorative justice, and that seeks to encourage learning and growth.
- Routes to support need to be integrated into the entire process, from beginning to end.
- Under no circumstances should a victim of bullying, harassment or sexual violence be made to sign a non-disclosure agreement which prohibits them to speak of their experiences. College has agreed to sign a pledge committing to this promise.

Things to improve for the coming months:

- Internal change: I couldn't help but notice one shortfall that I found myself edging towards – whilst I put a herculean amount of effort into lobbying the College to fix a system that was in dire need of change, there is a parallel process in the Union that still needs to happen.
 - We have yet to complete the review of the Union's own member's disciplinary and complaints procedures – and whilst it makes sense to complete this on the back of the College finishing its own review, there is more that I would have liked to accomplish on this front (particularly with Lloyd in office and his policy-writing prowess).
 - Additionally, the Safety and Security Review still has substantial parts of it that have yet to reach completion, including a retendering process for a new security firm and the implementation of new measures to improve safety and accessibility.
 - Another aspect of internal change that I struggled to make progress on this year was the CSP culture review – a large part of this is due to growing pains in the Activities & Development and Representation Teams; in terms 1 and 2, I faced substantial challenges in coordinating these two realms of the Union, as all the project leads from both teams were so busy and overworked at the time. This seems to have improved now that the teams have been filled with new roles.
- Giving my body a chance to keep up: For a bit of context: I am the daughter of a transplant surgeon. He saves multiple lives per day and is used to running on about 3 hours of sleep, and yet still somehow manages to run a half marathon on the treadmill every day at home. Like him, I am an individual who is wired to be wired – my highest highs occur when my days are fully packed and planned out to the quarter-hour whilst my lowest lows occur when things slow down and I'm forced to sit still. At 25, I am still learning to come to terms with my physical limitations and the long-term consequences of overworking even if it feels good in the moment (and I say this ironically, given that I am writing this document at 1:28 AM). There were a couple of points this year where I pushed myself past the point of exhaustion and where I started developing memory loss and slowed down on routine tasks. Slowing down for the sake of long-term efficiency is a difficult thing for me to fully commit to, given how acutely aware I am of the time-limited nature of my role, as well as the finiteness of life in general.

Reflections for ICU

The good:

- Staff Culture: The culture of the Union's staff team continues a positive trajectory from when Shervin gave his reflections last year. Everyone in the office is quick to lift each other up and compliment each other on a job well done, which does wonderful things for morale and productivity. Sweet treats have become a commonplace occurrence; it's something of a tradition to bring something back to share with others after going on trips abroad for annual leave. There seems to be a genuine excitement and eagerness to continue to improve the Union and its ability to serve students in the future.
- Partnership with the College: I have been pleasantly surprised with how collaborative the relationship between the Union and the College has been. Even where it comes to extremely contentious and difficult topics like the discipline review, there ended up being an openness that exceeded the expectations that I had when I came into the role. I must give huge thanks to my predecessors, the current managing director, and the outgoing chair of board for this. Together, you have laid the groundwork for some incredible change.

Things to work on:

- Equality, diversity and inclusion: The current managing director has been an incredible ally in laying the groundwork for a diverse and inclusive organisation that actively seems to remove barriers to participation, both within the Union and in the College. For the most part, there seems to be a keenness within the organisation to improve on this front, but with limited knowledge, skills, and individual agency. The current senior management team is quite homogenous – this lack of representation makes it difficult to bring sensitive issues affecting marginalised groups within the organisation to the forefront of the conversation. This can lead to a feeling of powerlessness for staff; as an officer trustee, there are certain things that even I have struggled to challenge within this past year. Issues faced at staff level are mirrored by the membership as well. The importance of allyship and giving marginalised groups the space to contribute to high level conversations cannot be overstated.
- Sustainable leadership: The quote that I presented at the beginning of this paper applies just as much to ICU's journey of transformation as it does to my own personal story. We both went through a period of crisis and came out the other side. We both had to make difficult decisions and turn to desperate measures to survive. For me, this involved the use of unsustainable coping mechanisms; for the Union, this involved the development of a top-down approach to management, with little room for co-creation. There was very good reason for this of course; it was essential for surviving a period of volatility and uncertainty. In the long term, however, this will make it difficult for marginalized voices to be fully heard and recognized. The Union is seeing an incredible opportunity for post-traumatic growth, and to take full advantage of it, it must learn to let go of the very things that it depended on to survive.
- Retaining institutional memory: With the huge turnover of permanent staff that took place this year, the Union has given itself the chance for a fresh start in line with Back to Basics. However, this comes with a huge risk: most of the people who were around when the culture of the Union was incredibly toxic and dysfunction are no longer going to be around, which means that those currently in their place will have no memory of what this was like. Keeping EDI work at the forefront is an essential part of long-term healing that will prevent the Union from returning to old habits, and it is key that our

enablers understand this and do not become complacent. Our board will have an important part to play making sure these lessons are not forgotten and we keep moving forward in a positive direction for many years to come.

Conclusion

This has been an incredible journey so far. My own personal transformation has been unbelievable, and I can hardly even recognize myself compared to a year ago. In the beginning I struggled with trusting my own voice and made a deal with my board mentors that I would commit to speaking at least once during every board meeting. I am now more comfortable in my own skin than I have ever been, and it is thanks to the positive challenges that this role has provided. I want to thank every person in this room for being a part of that journey.

Having arrived at the halfway point of my tenure, I want to shift my focus from fixing what is broken to laying the foundation for long term change and enabling future leaders to drive the Union forward in a positive direction for many years to come. I will continue to engage with the volunteers and mentor potential successors (I have a few good ones in mind)! I will do everything in my power to set them, and the Union as a whole, up for success.