

Final Report of the Democratic Structures Review

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Overview

The Democratic Structures Review Working Group (DSRWG) was set up to review a range of aspects of Imperial College Union's democratic structures and processes, with a focus on Union Council, Council subcommittees, and Constituent Unions. The membership of the Working Group was formed of volunteers from Council and the Governance and Identity Board (subcommittee of Council).

DSRWG commissioned a survey of Council Members' views concerning Council, which were used to inform the review process. DSRWG also relied on its own membership's experience with the Union's democratic structures, as well as on consultation with relevant groups including Constituent Union Presidents and Officer Trustees.

The recommendations of DSRWG cover the following areas: Council Membership, Council Accessibility, Officer Accountability, Council Subcommittees, Constituent Union Governance and Campus Representation.

Council Membership

Current Position

DSRWG noted that the composition of Union Council currently stands as:

1. The Officer Trustees (5)
2. The Council Chair
3. The Constituent Union Presidents (5)
4. The Management Group Chairs (6)
5. The Union Liberation and Community Officers (9)
6. One Welfare Officer of each of the Constituent Unions (5)
7. One Academic Affairs Officer of each of the Constituent Unions (5)
8. Three Postgraduate Academic and Welfare Officers (AWOs) (3)
9. Sixteen Representatives to Council (16)

This is a total of 55 members of whom 39 (71%) are ex-officio. Some aspects of this membership that were considered included:

Postgraduate Academic / Welfare Representatives

Of the 39 ex-officio members, 12 are necessarily Undergraduates (the non-Silwood CU Presidents, Academic and Welfare Officers). Only 6 are necessarily Postgraduate (the Silwood reps and AWOs).

Furthermore, the ex-officio roles that are not necessarily PG roles are disproportionately held by Undergraduates due to their increased overall engagement in the Union.

A recommendation of the PG Review was to increase the representation of PG students on Council. The most straightforward way of doing this would be to allocate Council seats to all 8 PG AWOs, as well as the new PGT and PGR Representation Chairs, bringing the total number of dedicated PG roles up to 13 when Silwood are included.

Campus Representatives

It has been pointed out that Silwood is overrepresented on Council for its size. Silwood is also unique on Council as a representative body for a campus, rather than a group of Departments/Faculty as other Constituent Unions are. A more detailed discussion of campus representation follows later in this report, but it is suggested that in terms of representation on Council, we would not wish for there to be more than one Silwood rep (the Silwood President).

Another recommendation of the PG Engagement Review was to ensure better representation for two of Imperial's other campuses - White City and Hammersmith. These are the College's two largest campuses by student numbers apart from South Kensington, and are currently predominantly Postgraduate.

We could therefore consider replacing the three Silwood reps with one Silwood rep, and one rep for the Hammersmith and White City campuses. Per the later discussion, this latter rep will take the form of the White City and Hammersmith Students' Union President, a 6th Constituent Union President role.

Recommended Membership

The DSRWG recommends that the Membership of Union Council is revised to be:

1. The Officer Trustees (5)
2. The Council Chair
3. The Constituent Union Presidents (6)
4. The Management Group Chairs (6)
5. The Union Liberation and Community Officers (9)
6. One Welfare Officer of each of the Constituent Faculty Unions (4)
7. One Academic Affairs Officer of each of the Constituent Faculty Unions (4)
8. Eight Postgraduate Academic and Welfare Officers (AWOs) (8)
9. Postgraduate Taught and Research Representation Chairs (2)
10. Sixteen Representatives to Council (16)

This is a total of 61 members of whom 45 (74%) are ex-officio. As before, 12 roles are necessarily Undergraduate. There are now 11 roles that are necessarily Postgraduate, and 1 (White City and Hammersmith Student's Union President) that is likely but not guaranteed to be Postgraduate.

Implementation:

Changing the membership of Council requires amendment to Bye-Law A.1.

Potential Concerns

DSRWG noted, and dismissed as not overriding the benefit of these changes, the following concerns:

Overall Size: The overall size of the meeting has increased from 55 to 61. This may have ramifications on meeting effectiveness, and of logistics of meetings (seating arrangements etc).

Ex-Officio %: The percentage of ex-officio members has increased slightly to nearly three quarters. This may be seen as leading to a reduction in “lay student” representation on Council.

Quoracy: The increase in membership comes primarily from Postgraduate roles. Due to the current situation of lower overall PG engagement, this may result in a smaller percentage of Council members regularly attending meetings, posing quoracy risks (though of course persistent non-attendance is dealt with by removal of voting rights).

Proxy Voting

DSRWG further noted concerns about the flexibility of assignment of ex-officio Council seats. It may be the case than someone with an ex-officio role on Council is not interested in attending meetings and does not turn up. Currently, they would simply lose their seat and their constituency would go un-represented.

A potential improvement would be to allow an ex-officio seat to be temporarily or permanently transferred to another role which is similarly qualified to represent that constituency. For instance, a Liberation/Community Officer seat may be delegated to someone with a role in that network, a CU/MG seat could be delegated to another executive committee member, or a PG / Campus seat could be delegated to another representative of that constituency.

The DSRWG recommends that a mechanism is put in place to allow this form of proxy voting. This would make it possible for a Council Member to permanently or temporarily transfer their vote to another person in an elected role who is similarly qualified to represent their constituency. This flexibility would not apply to Representative to Council roles, or to the most senior roles (Officer Trustees, Council Chair, Constituent Union Presidents). For administrative ease, and to ensure that the seat is transferred to a ‘similarly qualified’ role, Council should formally approve any such transfers at the start of a meeting. This would be done similarly to the restoration of seats which have been lost due to non-attendance.

Implementation:

The allowance of proxy voting will require a change to Union Council Standing Order 19 (Proxies). There will also be an amendment to Standing Order 3 (Order of Business) to include approval of the transfer of votes.

Council Accessibility

DSRWG felt that there are three key types of student to whom Council could be made more accessible: newer, more inexperienced members of Council, students without a role on Council (both other volunteers and lay students), and Council members who are not based at South Kensington.

Accessibility to non-Council Members:

For Council to be accessible to non-Members, it must be easy to find information about when/where the meetings are taking place, and what is on the agenda. Currently, this information is buried on

the Union website under Your Union > How We're Run > Committees > Union Council, and is near impossible to find unless you know what you're looking for.

It has also been frequently reported by students (even engaged Union volunteers) that they were not aware that Council meetings were open for any student to attend and speak at.

The DSRWG recommends that the Union website is revised to make information about Council, including meeting dates and locations, easier to find.

Accessibility to inexperienced Council Members:

There has been feedback that the training available for Council Members is not adequate for them to be comfortable writing Council papers. One of the issues with current training is that it is purely delivered across 2 sessions at the start of the year, and there is no opportunity for a 'refresher.'

There is a 'confidence gap' when it comes to papers, where members would like some support and comments from other members on their paper before submission. Currently this is only possible if Council members are sufficiently familiar with others to reach out directly for their input.

DSRWG recommends that the training that is offered for Council members should be revised. This training should be particularly focused on how to engage with Council, what papers can be written about, and how to write a paper. This training should be supplemented with online training resources on the website which can be referred to at any point in the year.

There should be clearer channels for Council members to put forward paper ideas and then collaborate with other members on writing the paper. A mechanism should be created to encourage collaboration between potential paper authors and interested parties. One of many possible ways of doing this would be refocussing certain Council subcommittees as primarily fora for consultation and collaboration on papers for Council (see section on Council Subcommittees).

Accessibility to Council Members not based at South Kensington:

Currently, students who are based at other campuses such as Silwood Park, or who are undertaking study on a remote programme, may not be able to easily attend Council meetings which take place in person at South Kensington. This is a barrier to their engagement in the Union's democracy. The Union should invest in hybrid meeting technology enabling Council meetings to be joined remotely. However, DSRWG acknowledges that Council meetings are more effective when as many members as possible join in person. Accordingly, permission to join meetings remotely should be limited to those Council members who are not based at South Kensington campus.

Implementation:

No change in governing documents is required. These recommendations should be fed into the Union's Annual Operating Plan for Governance.

Officer Accountability

The DSRWG felt that there were deficiencies in the way that Officer Trustees are currently held to account by Council. The Working Group examined four possible models for Officer accountability, based on examples of models used by other students' unions. These models included retaining the current approach, taking a more "hands off" approach to officer accountability, and relying more

heavily on town hall meetings for accountability. The DSRWG opted to endorse a fourth model, based on the approach taken by Oxford University Students' Union.

The DSRWG recommends the establishment of a new subcommittee of Council – a “Scrutiny Committee” tasked:

- To communicate clearly with the membership the work of the Officer Trustees;
- To carry out an in-depth analysis, coordinating with all other forms of scrutiny utilised by the Union, of the work of Officer Trustees;
- To produce feedback with constructive criticism to guide the work of the Officer Trustees, and;
- To hold Officer Trustees to account for their work and, when appropriate, recommend Motions of Censure or Motions of No Confidence to Council.

This committee would be made up of 4 volunteers from Council, plus the Council Chair who would act as chair, and would meet twice per term to undertake the outlined responsibilities. If there were more Members interested in joining, appointment could be done by STV election as for other subcommittee roles. Council would no longer hear reports from OTs directly, but would instead receive a report from the Scrutiny Committee, outlining anything that Council should be aware of.

Implementation:

The Scrutiny Committee requires Standing Orders to be included in Appendix B of the Council Standing Orders. It would also be appropriate to list this committee under Bye-Law A.19.

Bye-Law A.14 should be amended so that the Council agenda no longer includes direct reports from Officer Trustees, but instead a report from the Scrutiny Committee.

Appendix A of the Council Standing Orders will need to be substantially rewritten to reflect the change in reporting.

Council Subcommittees

Context

There are currently 5 subcommittees of Union Council:

Subcommittee	Purpose	Voting Membership	Notes
Education and Representation Board	Forum for discussion relevant to Education & Academic Representation	DPE (Chair), Faculty Academic Officers, PG Academic & Welfare Officers	Owns Higher Education Policy
Community and Welfare Board	Forum for discussion relevant to Welfare & Wellbeing Representation, and community & liberation.	DPW (Chair), Faculty Welfare Officers, PG AWOs, Liberation & Community Officers	Owns Accessibility Policy, Halls Policy, Liberation & Community Policy, Religious Observance Policy, Safe Space Policy
Governance and Identity Board	Forum for discussion of identity (history, traditions, image), governance, and Constituent Unions.	President (Chair), CU Representatives, Council Chair, two other Council reps	Owns Mascotry Policy, Union Awards Policy, Union Bar Policy

Clubs, Societies and Projects Board	Oversee CSPs	DPCS (Chair), CU reps, Management Group reps	Allocates CSP funding. Subcommittees including Tours, Activities Development Fund, New Activities committees. Owns CSP, CSP Equipment, CSP Annual budgeting, and Room Booking policies.
Services and Sustainability Board	Forum for discussion of services, spaces, events, and sustainability.	DPFS (Chair), Ethics & Environment officer, other representatives	Subcommittees: Services & Facilities, Sustainability & Environment, Events. Has not yet met.

These subcommittees broadly have dual purposes. The first purpose is to act as a forum for bringing together senior volunteers within a particular area to discuss matters within their area. In this sense, they can be a useful sounding board for the OT chair to consult on ideas and projects, and they can be used to workshop proposals before they go to Council. The second purpose is to exercise delegated powers of Council in owning and setting Policy within the subcommittee's remit.

Before 2012, only CSPB and a "Representation and Welfare Board" existed. RWB was split into ERB and CWB in 2012, and then in 2018 SSB and GIB were added such that all OTs chaired a subcommittee.

Observations and Problems

- Not all subcommittees are equally active. CSPB is the most active, with it and its subcommittees meeting on a regular basis. SSB is the least active, having had only one meeting this year. Other subcommittees sit in between.
- Subcommittees are not very accessible to students who are not members of that subcommittee.
- There is a lack of clarity around when a Policy proposal ought to be taken to a subcommittee versus to Council directly. It is also often unclear whether a particular matter appropriately sits within a particular subcommittee's remit (e.g. tankards under GIB).
- Certain subcommittees (particularly ERB) very infrequently exercise their policy-making powers. Because of this, the purpose of ERB is very unclear when there are also Taught and Research Academic Representation Fora.
- It seems somewhat arbitrary that we have a one-to-one correspondence between Council subcommittees and OTs.

DSRWG believes that it will simplify our democratic processes to retain policy-making responsibility only where it is exercised in practice. This will mitigate confusion around the appropriate committee to bring policy proposals to, and around the policy-making remit of subcommittees. It will also ensure that key decision-making happens at Council, which is the most widely accessible of Union committees and has the broadest range of experience.

Recommendation:

To disestablish the Education and Representation Board. The usual business of ERB, principally consultation around active issues in the Education space, will be delegated to the Taught and

Research Academic Representation Forums. Policy-making power with respect to Education matters will be returned to Union Council.

To replace the Community and Welfare Board with a Community and Welfare Forum, which will carry forward responsibility for discussion and consultation around community/welfare/liberation related matters, but which will not have policy-making powers (these will return to Council).

Implementation:

These changes will need to be reflected in Bye-Law A.19 as well as in Appendix B of the Council Standing Orders.

Ownership of the Accessibility Policy, Halls Policy, Higher Education Policy, Liberation and Community Policy, Religious Observance Policy, and Safe Space Policy will be transferred to Union Council. However, the Community and Welfare Forum will be delegated responsibility for reviewing the policies formerly owned by CWB and proposing amendments to Council.

References to ERB and CWB need to be amended in the Representation Policy and Liberation and Community Policy.

Recommendation:

To replace the Services and Sustainability Board with a Services & Facilities Forum, a Sustainability & Environment Forum, and an Events Committee, all chaired by the DPFS. None of these committees will have policy-making powers.

Implementation:

These changes will need to be reflected in Bye-Law A.19 as well as in Appendix B of the Council Standing Orders.

Recommendation:

To replace the Governance and Identity Board with a Constituent Union Forum. This forum will carry forward GIB's role in facilitating discussion around CU support and inter-CU cooperation. It will not have policy-making power, but will have delegated authority from Council to ratify Constituent Union Standing Orders.

Implementation:

These changes will need to be reflected in Bye-Law A.19 as well as in Appendix B of the Council Standing Orders.

Ownership of the Mascotry Policy, Union Awards Policy and Union Bar Policy will move to Union Council, with the CU Forum delegated responsibility for reviewing the Mascotry Policy.

The decision-making authority indicated in the Union Bar Policy will change from GIB to the President.

Constituent Union Governance and Campus Representation

The DSRWG recognises two key issues with the current approach to Constituent Union governance. First, that each Constituent Union has an independent Constitution approved by Council. These Constitutions have a great deal in common, but are often not actively reviewed by the CUs (apart

from the committee roles) and contain content which contradicts the Union's Governing Documents. Where there are areas of inconsistency between the Constitutions, it also becomes difficult for ICU to centrally make changes to how Constituent Unions operate where they require amendments to all CU Constitutions.

Recommendation:

The DSRWG recommends that instead of each having independent constitutions, the fundamental shared regulations concerning the governance of Constituent Unions should be written into the Bye-Laws. Each Constituent Union would then have a set of standing orders, outlining the elected roles and committees within the CU.

Implementation:

Changes will be required to Section H of the Constitution (thus requiring College Council approval). Specifically, H.4. which specifies that CUs have constitutions, should be removed.

An additional Bye-Law L will be required to contain the key shared elements of Constituent Union constitutions. The content of Bye-Law A.20 – A.22 can also be migrated into Bye-Law L.

Standing orders will need to be written for each Constituent Union.

The second issue with CU governance noted by the DSRWG is that we use the same classification of "Constituent Union" for those representing faculties and departments (RCSU, CGCU, RSMU, ICSMSU) and for the one representing a campus (Silwood Park). This leads to peculiar arrangements – such as Silwood having three representatives on Council for its ~200 members, and having representation on all Council subcommittees even where it is not clearly justified. With the recommendation of the PG Review for a new representation structure for students at White City and Hammersmith, the need for clarity here is more pressing.

Recommendation:

The DSRWG recommends that we recognise two different categories of Constituent Union – Faculty Constituent Unions and Campus Constituent Unions, which will have different representational needs. Silwood Park Students' Union will be a Campus Constituent Union, and additionally a new CCU should be established to represent students at the White City and Hammersmith campuses.

Implementation:

This distinction will be reflected in Bye-Law L.

A set of standing orders will need to be drafted for the White City and Hammersmith Students' Union in co-design with the students based at those campuses.