

# Submission to the Residential Experience Review



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# Introduction

Imperial College Union believes that the residential system maintained by the College and the support provided for residential situations play a vital role in supporting and enabling our world-class educational and research community.

We are lucky to have an enviable legacy of both physical estate and institutional experience in supplying highly-regarded and well-located accommodation for our new undergraduates, complemented with established wardening, pastoral and social networks. These are facilities and traditions that many other universities take great efforts to emulate. However, we recognise that there is always room for improvement and development, and welcome any proposal to review and develop the accommodation provision and broader support services in a holistic manner.

## We welcome any proposal to review and develop the accommodation provision

Strategic plans from a wide range of College's departments and institutions have a recurring theme: the importance of fostering and developing a diverse, global and talented student community, served by excellent pastoral care and transition arrangements.



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This common thread runs through all four key themes of College's Education & Student Strategy [1] and of 'Our Plan', the Union's own set of strategic objectives [2]. Relevant excerpts include:

- **ESS 1.6:** Continually enhance the 'Welcome' experience for all new students
- **ESS 1.7:** Develop a programme to support the 'transition' for new students
- **Our Plan SC3:** Work in partnership with College to review and improve the 'Welcome Week' provision through a review of the Union's activities and advising the College on how to improve their own arrangements

Each of these objectives, and several others found throughout the plans, implicitly rely on a high-quality, well-supported residential system that is sensitive to the individual and communal needs of students, and that is designed in support of College's higher objectives: excellence in teaching, learning, and research.

## **The College owes a duty of care to meet students' educational needs, including pastoral care**

Furthermore the College has expressed its sentiments towards the wider needs of students in its Hall Warden Policy [3], namely: The College owes a duty of care to meet students' educational needs, including pastoral care. This means that students can expect the support services available to be of a reasonable

standard and that individuals needs will not be knowingly ignored or overlooked.

Given the importance of the residential system to College and its students, Imperial College Union proposes that the ongoing Residential Experience Review should aim to produce a new long-term vision for our residences and the wider services which support the residential experience. In this document we present our proposals to ensure a shared vision for future development in this area.



## Scope and limitations of the submission

This submission splits evidence into three broad sections: 'Undergraduate Halls', 'Postgraduate Halls' and 'Beyond Halls'. Each section has a list of beliefs and each belief has key themes that will be discussed in the document.

The aim of this submission is to highlight evidence available from a range of sources which are relevant to the wider residential experience. These include specific and general feedback from the student body, policy documents from the Union and College, reports submitted to various groups and summaries of requests for advocacy brought to the attention of the Union.

The Union's aim has been to highlight opinions and options for the future development of the residential experience at Imperial. The excessively short timescale for the submission of this document has dictated that no specific consultation with the student body was possible to inform a clear direction.

Our central recommendation is that the review group commission full scale and extensive consultation with the student body based upon a specific set of options, all of which are realistic to achieve. It is our anticipation that no wide reaching changes to the residential experience would be implemented before this consultation has been completed, so do not expect any significant changes to be enacted before the 2015/16 academic year.

For a digital copy of this report and  
accompanying information go online to

[imperialcollegeunion.org/rer](http://imperialcollegeunion.org/rer)



All information correct  
at the time of going to  
print February 2014.

# 1 Undergraduate Halls

We believe that our first year accommodation offer has the following purposes:

1. To provide a safe environment to students who may be living away from home for the first time and ensuring students' well-being through the provision of pastoral and wellbeing support
2. To bring a diverse mix of students together, to provide social opportunities for students and build a sense of community.
3. To ensure that finding suitable accommodation close to their place of study is not a barrier to students' access to Imperial College.

We believe that all students should benefit equally from the first year accommodation offer, regardless of financial background, age, disability status or any other protected characteristic under the Equality Act.





## Safe Environment

A safe environment protects both a student's physical and mental well-being. This means that as well as ensuring student accommodation is a hygienic and secure environment, there should be provisions in place to support students' well-being through a potentially difficult transition to university life.

## Pastoral and wellbeing support

Support for pastoral and wellbeing matters is vitally important in an undergraduate hall of residence in particular; students studying at university for the first time face a number of significant life changes, be it living away from the first time or moving to a new city or country. A diverse student body has a range of needs - some students just need a friendly face, others need signposting to established services and others will require significant pastoral support.

One of the residential system's inherited assets is an established wardening system, covering all undergraduate halls. The wardening system has a number of responsibilities, primarily pastoral care of residents, but also the creation of a welcoming and safe residential community, and assisting these student-led committees in the organisation of events and trips.

Wardening teams are routinely and consistently valued highly by students. In the recent Student Experience Survey [4] undergraduates living in halls of residence were asked if they were satisfied with the support provided by the wardening team in their hall. Only

4% disagreed, with an overwhelming 84% agreeing they were satisfied with the support provided. In response to the same question in the Student Experience Survey held in 2012 [5] 82% were satisfied with the support provided by wardening teams. Additionally, the start of session survey run by Campus services found a 98% satisfaction rating from hall residents about their wardens. These survey results reflect the positive theme in the free text comments about the support provided by the wardening teams:



The hall wardens and sub-wardens are approachable and friendly.



Wardening staff are really helpful and have really gone out of their way to provide fun activities and help us out wherever possible.



The door to the wardens office is almost always open and the wardening team make themselves available through the day (and the night!)



I really love living in halls and really appreciate all the work the wardens, sub-wardens and seniors put into making the year great!



The people at Imperial are very friendly easy to get along with. People seem genuinely concerned about my welfare.



Wardening teams specifically care for student's wellbeing in the following ways: being trained in first aid to cope with incidents and emergencies and recognising patterns in behaviour that may indicate a student's deteriorating mental health, for example non-attendance of hall events or a student not leaving their room.

However, the wardening system as it stands is not perfect. Free text collected from the surveys previously quoted indicate there are varying standards of service across the Halls, while the number of negative comments are minimal, some students quote specific dissatisfaction. (Taken from the SES 2012):



With regards to the wardening team, any comments made by students criticising the hall seem to be taken personally by them which is not very productive.



Wardens are often not available.

The Union recommends that the review group specifically confirm the need for proactive pastoral and wellbeing support in undergraduate halls of residence. Additionally the Union recommends that the review group consider the best way to deliver wellbeing and pastoral support in undergraduate halls, noting the extensive positive feedback for the current wardening team arrangements in a range of surveys.

## Behaviour, discipline and harmonious environment

Student Accommodation is a crucial part of the learning environment. A safe, welcoming and harmonious environment is essential in ensuring that students make a successful start at the College - when the environment is well-managed *“Living arrangements help students to identify common ground with peers and this in turn appears to strengthen their perception of their relative position within the HE context”* [6].

However, this environment can become destructive if it is not carefully monitored and managed. If issues related to anti-social behaviour, bullying or harassment are not identified and dealt with effectively and swiftly the positive environment can quickly be eroded. It should be a priority for students to be able to exist in a welcoming environment which is conducive to educational attainment, facilitates the development of social capital, and is free from bullying, discrimination and isolation.

An effective system of pastoral support for student residents is essential to this and the ratios of those providing to support to student residents should be adequate to ensure it enables individual students to receive the support and guidance that they may need, alongside the capacity to deal with individuals who may be putting the effectiveness of the learning environment at risk.

Again, students recognise the role of the wardening team in dealing with threats to this environment, as seen through free text comments in the past two Student Experience Surveys [4,5]:



Really appreciate the effort the seniors and wardens have put in to make halls life an enjoyable experience.



Locked myself out twice now, the wardens were amazing! They came to my room really quickly and didn't make me feel guilty at all :).



Seniors to help me to become familiar with the new environment.

It is recognised that this environment can be challenging to manage; for example, the issue of food thefts in halls has featured numerous times in this year's Student Experience Survey [4]:



Thefts have been ridiculous in the first term.



(The worst thing about halls is the) Theft of food or crockery.

The Union recommends that the review group consider the best ways to maintain discipline and good behaviour in an undergraduate hall, to ensure a harmonious learning environment is created and maintained.

## Physical security

Even when living in accommodation provided by a world class institution, Maslow's hierarchy of needs still applies: physical security is important to students and crucially their parents and loved ones as well. Imperial is fortunate to have undergraduate halls located in some of the safest areas of the UK [7].

Indeed 96% of respondents to the Student Experience Survey 2012 indicated they felt safe on campus, a reflection of the excellent staff working to ensure the physical security of the College estate. Still, free text responses from students have picked up some remaining security issues, mainly related to bicycle thefts or tailgating:



I have often seen strange people lurking around Wilson house. Stolen bikes are a very big problem. (SES 2013)



During the first month, 10 bikes parked in front of Wilson had already been stolen and up to now, nothing had been done to increase the security. (SOSS 2013)



Security feels very efficient and safe. (SOSS 2013)



I have been tailgated a few times by tall, strong guys and being a girl it's intimidating to question their validity. (SOSS 2013)

Most undergraduate halls have on-site security teams, but many require wardening teams to undertake duties to assist in maintaining the safe environment. Examples include handling common student issues such as lock outs and lost keys, identifying nuisances to other students such as noise complaints and liaising with other services if there are incidents where a students' welfare is an immediate concern.

The Union recommends that the review group consider the best ways to maintain physical security in an undergraduate hall of residence, in the context that the range of potential tasks is relatively wide.

## Hygienic and robust with adequate service provision

### Cleaning

Cleaning of communal areas should be performed on a regular basis and should be tailored to fit the requirements of the space. This is of particular importance in halls' kitchens as these probably run the highest risk of becoming unhygienic and unsanitary environments.

Kitchens are an area where there is a great variety of demand across the various halls. Feedback from students suggests that some kitchens are only used by 10 students, others by 50. To the knowledge of the Union the cleaning provision for kitchens remains the same at three times a week regardless of usage.

The Union has made a number of recommendations to Campus Services to increase the provision of cleaning in kitchens with high numbers of users, specifically using the example of Pembroke Hall where as many as 50 students share one kitchen. Despite these efforts, the provision has yet to change and there are many free text complaints in the recent Student Experience Survey from students about kitchen cleaning:



The level of cleaning is simply not high enough. For a shared kitchen, being cleaned every other day is frankly unhygienic and insufficient. (SOSS 2013)



I am unhappy with the cleaning arrangements that are in breach of contract on Imperial's part. (SES 2013)



The kitchens need to be cleaned more regularly, along with the rooms and bathrooms. The contract is very expensive and having a dirty kitchen is really unpleasant and unsanitary. (SOSS 2013)



Cleaning is not of a standard I would expect for such a high rent. Kitchen is not cleaned often enough.

It is the view of the Union that the frequency of room cleaning and inspection for defects should be communicated clearly to students at the time of application for accommodation. This, like all other advertised services, should be treated as a key component of the accommodation 'package' that students pay for and mentioned as such in any accommodation contract. It is also the view of the Union that suitable cleaning materials and equipment should be made available for use by students should they wish to clean their own rooms.

The Union recommends that the review group specify an appropriate level of cleaning in rooms, kitchens and communal areas of undergraduate halls, taking into account usage of spaces and feedback from students.

## Hall management

While cleaning has dominated the most recent feedback in halls of residence it must not be forgotten that there are numerous other issues connected to managing the hall environment.

The key players in charge of ensuring the environment is hygienic and robust are the hall management staff. It is the view of the Union that the hall management team should be responsible for:

- Ensuring facilities such as appliances and fire extinguishers are maintained and regularly inspected,
- Ensuring fixtures and fittings are repaired in a timely manner, for example broken showers
- Ensuring reported defects are rectified in a timely manner, for example changing light bulbs
- Overseeing the cleaning staff to ensure adequate service to the Hall and liaising with Campus Services if cleaning provisions are inadequate.
- Monitoring the stores of cleaning equipment intended for students to identify and replace defects.
- Liaising with the wardening team over issues that involve students, such as unkempt rooms and confiscating student items,
- Maintaining a presence in the Hall and providing regular and relevant updates so students are aware of who to contact with these issues

The Union recommends that the review group consider what tasks should and should not be undertaken by the hall management staff.

## Mix of students

The Union believes that undergraduate halls of residence provide a unique environment for students to socialise and make friends in their first year at university. As Imperial is an international university, this mix of students allows for people to meet from completely different cultures and backgrounds, which offers an opportunity for education and integration. The Union believes that hall events should be inclusive to encourage a diverse range of students to interact, and we recognise that certain aspects of events may act as barriers to participation, for example the expense of the event or the presence of alcohol.

## Arrival, first impressions and transitions

The overwhelming majority of undergraduate hall residents are new to higher education and to communal living, with new responsibilities for cooking, cleaning and generally looking after themselves while learning to share space with others. There are several transitions that students have to make to adjust to their new environments:

- Higher education learning and teaching styles differ from secondary education in ways that are often not clear to new arrivals
- Arriving in a new social scene comprised entirely of strangers can be overwhelming for anyone, regardless of their social abilities or experience
- A significant percentage of students find themselves in an unfamiliar city, country and culture, with their support networks of family,

friends, schools and even religious networks distant and shifted into difficult time zones.

First impressions are important, not only for students when they first move in, but also for their accompanying family members. Moving into a hall of residence at the beginning of the year could be the student's first impression of the College and the first sighting of their home for the next year.

Welcoming students is an important part of the process. This year, the Union sent #helloICU student volunteers and sabbatical officers to undergraduate halls of residence to welcome students upon arrival and answer questions from apprehensive parents or students. This was received well by the students with 94% rating their welcome to Imperial as satisfactory or better in the Union's Welcome Week Survey [8].

The wardening team themselves play a substantial part in this process by welcoming students, helping them move into their rooms and facilitating the first welcome events. As the wardening team will be living with the new arrivals, a positive first interaction is vital for setting a positive tone to the year.

To evidence just how important the transition to university life can be here are particularly poignant responses to the Student Experience Survey's question about students' worst experience at Imperial:



Lack of support during freshers. I was really homesick I couldn't walk around freshers fair without being in floods of tears.



Rather than an academic bad experience, for me the worst feature of all this new stage is living alone, in a different culture, using a new language, without anybody known.

The Union recommends that the review group consider how the welcome experience for new students arriving in undergraduate halls of residence should be best managed and delivered, and by whom.

## Range of social opportunities

The Union believes that it is extremely important to provide social opportunities for students to interact with their peers. This is because some students may find moving into a hall filled with strangers particularly overwhelming and it is important that all students are facilitated in forming friendships. There are many benefits to students having these relationships:

- It ensures students do not feel isolated
- Providing a social support network benefits students' mental health and ensures that there are people to notice and care should a student's health deteriorate
- Having a rich social life can offer stress relief from courses that many students find intense and exhausting

To ensure everyone in a hall has access to these social opportunities and that students can meet students from all cultural backgrounds, it is important a range of activities are provided.

Results from the recent Student Experience Survey [4] indicate that of the 439 undergraduate respondents who were living in a hall of residence, 95% had attended an event run by their hall, with a mean attendance of three events. Given that the survey was completed at the end of the Autumn term this seems a positive indication that the events are valued, considering the students had been living in halls for approximately nine weeks at the time. Furthermore in the Start of Session Survey 2013 [9], 88% of respondents rated the social activities in their hall in the first week as good, very good or excellent.



Student welfare in terms of socialising activities is well taken care of as shown by the various dinners and outings organised by the hall wardens.



The Wardening team and Seniors have been fantastic they have put on great events and have been very supportive.



The best social experience I've had at imperial was when I was living in Parsons hall in first year. So many events were organised and I felt that I was making the most of living in London.

Of few who had not attended an event many cited being too busy as the reason, both with workload and other extra-curricular opportunities. However, some did cite uncomfortableness with the events, reinforcing our point that there must be a range of events organised in halls of residence which are appropriate to all the residents.



None of them were my cup of tea.



I really feel out of place at the types of events that are organised.



Wasn't 18, too busy after I turned 18.



Good, but would be better if it was less party and alcohol based. (SES 2013)



I would personally prefer a reduction in my room costs than free brunch on Sunday. (SOSS 2013)



Current social events do not make it easy and comfortable for students to interact with each other, especially between students of different nationalities. (SES 2013)

In the same survey 81% of undergraduate respondents who were living in a hall indicated that they were satisfied with the

social opportunities provided by the hall. In the Student Experience Survey conducted in December 2012 the result to the same question was 76%. These are results which commend the work done by the wardening teams in halls.

The Union recommends that the review group confirm the need for a range of inclusive events to be run in undergraduate halls and consider the best methods for them to be delivered.

## Vertical integration

Providing space in undergraduate halls of residence for older year students acting as hall seniors and subwardens allows for vertical integration between the years. This is important as older students, who have experience of College, the Union and the student experience of London, can offer support to new students and offer guidance for social activities that the new cohort may wish to undertake. Students appreciate the opportunity to meet older years in Halls, as shown in this comment from the Student Experience Survey:



The wardening system is fantastic and should be continued indefinitely. It is hugely helpful to feel part of the family "vertically" at Imperial (i.e. across age ranges) and not just horizontally (as a year).



The College's Hall Warden Policy states that Hall Seniors are *"are approachable, enthusiastic and hardworking, returning students that assist the Wardening team in helping first year students settle into College life and organising events throughout the year"*, and furthermore *"are not involved with the pastoral or disciplinary aspects of running the Hall but do sometimes provide valuable information by being sensitive to what is going on in their immediate surroundings"*.

The Union believes that the Hall Senior system is highly beneficial to the undergraduate hall environment. To attract the individuals who are most suited to the roles, the Union feels it may be worth having a centralised process for recruiting hall seniors which could then be advertised centrally. Currently, each Hall advertises for its own seniors during February and March, but a more user-friendly approach may be to collect applications centrally but allow individual Halls to select applicants most suited to their wardening team.

The Union believes there should be a standardised, mandatory training package for wardens, subwardens and hall seniors. Currently all hall seniors are required to attend Hall Senior Induction in the week before term starts. The Union sees no reason to change this arrangement, indeed depending on the level of mandatory training required as a result of this review there may be the need to expand to time available for training to ensure that halls are ready for the arrival of new students. Refresher training should also be given to

wardens and subwardens to ensure skill sets remain up to date regardless of how long individuals may have occupied their position.

The Union believes that wardens should be ultimately responsible for everyone on their team completing the mandatory training and a senior member of College staff should be responsible for all wardens completing the required training. Team building and bonding are valuable activities to build a cohesive team of hall seniors and wardens, these activities should be facilitated and funded. The Union also believes that any costs of training or team building for hall seniors, subwardens and wardens should be funded directly from the rent that residents pay and not from the hall amenities fund.

The Union recommends that the review group explicitly confirm that the Hall Senior system will be maintained in its current format and establish a suitable mandatory training and teambuilding framework for hall seniors, subwardens and wardens. Furthermore the Union recommends that the review group consider ways of funding training and team building for these groups.

## Hall committee

The Hall Committee is made up of elected student representatives from each during the first few weeks of term. The Union believes their remit should be:

- Representing the views of the students of their hall of residence to the relevant authority, be it to the wardening team, the hall manager or the Union
- Deciding which events students would appreciate in that hall and having control over the budgeting of those events
- To liaise with the Union to ensure adequate communication of events, support services and advice to the incoming cohort of students.

The Union recommends to the review group that the Hall Committee should be elected using the Union's online voting platform in the October Rep Elections. This ensures the Union has the details of the Hall Committee members, which would aid in contacting them. For the students in the hall of residence, it ensures there is a fair election process and means they only have to participate in one set of elections for their Course and Hall Reps, rather than running multiple elections very close together in the academic year.

The Union recommends that the review group consider the best way to elect Hall Committees to ensure a robust democratic process.

## Amenities fund

The use and management of the amenities fund has been a subject of discussion in recent months. This fund is currently compulsory for all students living in an undergraduate hall of residence; the funds are used for a variety of activities including the provision of hall events, welcome activities at the start of the year, and some communal costs such as purchasing a Christmas tree.

As mentioned in the previous section the Hall Committee should be deciding on which events the hall stages together with their budgeting, in essence how to spend the amenities fund. This sentiment is reflected in the College's Wardening Policy [3], but the practicalities are a little more complex.

Decisions about expenditure before a Hall Committee can be elected need to be taken by someone, this includes expenditure which needs to occur in the lead up to the start of term in October. These decisions could be made by an interim Hall Committee made up of the Hall Seniors, currently these decisions fall to the hall warden. Furthermore, whether the financial decisions of a Hall Committee actually need administering by a student volunteer is a question which the review group must consider. The Union's understanding is that it is not standard practice for students to have access to approve expenditure through the College's systems. If a decision to follow this route is taken then careful consideration will need to be given to the training and support this would entail.

An alternative method could be to employ the systems and technology the Union has in place for administering finances of student groups. Each of the Union's 300+ Clubs, Societies & Projects manages all their finances online, with all approvals carried out by student volunteers. This model and system could be employed to allow Hall Committees to manage their finances, there would however need to be mutual agreement over the financial governance which would need to be in place if this model were to be used and whether this could be implemented on a practical basis.

Another model to support Hall Committees would be to make each into a Union Society, meaning the Hall Committee positions essentially fall under the existing Club, Society and Projects framework. This model has a number of benefits:

- It ensures that students have ultimate control over the amenity fund
- It ensures the Committee who are using the fund have proper financial training and support
- It facilitates good communication between the Union and the Halls Committee
- It holds the Committee to account as financial records for the Society will be accessible live and online

Within this model there are however a number of considerations which will need further work before this model could be implemented. Societies which have little overlap of members from year to year require a high level of support and this will need to be factored into the support model. As a society the activities

of the Hall Committee will also fall under the direct responsibility of the Union and as such rules around finances are only one of a number of considerations, others include safety, the use of spaces, elections and discipline of committee members.

One of the current purposes of the amenities fund is to provide a budget for social activities within the hall. Currently, all students contribute to the amenities fund as an additional fee on top of their rent; as this fund is entirely student money for student activities, it is important that the amenities fund is clearly demarcated for student use. Having the Hall Committee as a society will allow for a level of transparency and accountability to the students as to how their money is being spent as it would take on the form of a society membership fee, rather than being an additional fee on top of rent which students may not explicitly see the benefits of.

There are two ways that a Hall Committee society could function:

### **Mandatory membership**

When a student enters a Hall of Residence they are automatically enrolled in the society. The amenities fund remains a component of the students' rent and the job of the Halls Committee is to decide how that money is spent.

- This provides incentive for Halls Committees to provide inclusive events as accounts will be viewable to their members and so they will be able to see how their money is being spent
- Rents will remain relatively unchanged

## Opt-in membership

Students contribute to the amenities fund by purchasing society membership. This would remove the amenities fund as a component for rent in undergraduate halls.

- If only certain students purchase membership, the incentive on the Hall Committee to provide inclusive events may be diminished. Alternatively, it may encourage the Committee to promote inclusive events to attract more membership, if they are given proper training and support.
- Rent for each student is likely to decrease.

The importance of suitable, inclusive use of the amenities fund can be seen in this student's comment:



The hall subsidises expensive events i.e' a trip to see 'Wicked', but even subsidised it's over £20. I still can't afford these events. I think they should run more cheaper events or even just subsidise us more, it's not fair I pay the same social contribution as the others but still can't access many if any of the events. (SES 2013)

The Union recommends that the review group consider the best way in which the amenities fund could be managed, taking into account that there will need to be a clear and transparent relationship between decisions of a Hall Committee and expenditure which is subsequently made, as well as the need to provide clear financial reporting to residents of the hall.

## Options for delivery of a safe environment

The Union recognises that there are a range of models being used in the sector for the delivery of the objectives previously discussed around providing a safe environment. Currently at Imperial this is achieved through a wardening system whereby staff members and students take on volunteer roles in exchange for rent free accommodation within undergraduate halls of residence.

While minor variations in the precise role of wardens, assistant wardens and subwardens occur with respect to their locality of appointment the main responsibilities as they currently stand are outlined in the College Wardening Policy [3].

A number of different models could be employed by the College to achieve similar aims:

- Consolidation or dispersion of the current model to provide either larger or smaller wardening teams
- Appointment of senior students with a smaller range of responsibilities, supported by professional staff
- Full time professional staff providing the range of services

Regardless of the delivery method employed, the Union notes the particular role the wardening system is currently playing, namely fulfilling the following objectives:

- Providing a high-level of on-site pastoral support to students

- Offering and encourage vertical integration through the appointment of hall seniors and subwardens
- Providing a range of social activities through the support of Hall Committees
- Disciplining students where appropriate for violations of the Halls Agreement
- Supporting students to take initiative on decisions relating to Halls life through supporting the Halls Committee
- Representing concerns of students to relevant authorities within College

Within a hall of residence, many teams of staff are working to ensure a good student experience - typically the wardening staff, the hall management and, in some Halls, a dedicated on-site security service. All of these activities are important to the experience of an undergraduate student in College accommodation and must be carried through in any future models which are employed.

## **Recruitment, selection and management process**

Any people appointed to roles supporting the delivery of the residential experience mission should not be influenced by any protected characteristic and the Union recognises that the ideal candidate for wardening positions may come from any background.

It is important that wardens are supported after taking on new roles and are regularly reviewed to ensure they are delivering the high standard of service expected by the College. In order to do this, it is important to have a robust and formalised appraisal process which fits into a clear management structure within College.

## Access to education

The Union believes that finding suitable accommodation close to a student's place of study shouldn't be a barrier to attending Imperial. Although students may have different accommodation preferences, location and price remain the most highly valued requirements for their Halls of Residence as evidenced by the Start of Session Survey 2013 [9]. To reflect the range of needs for students, a range of affordable accommodation which benefits all students should be a high priority of the College's accommodation portfolio. In an increasingly competitive market, students' consumer interests may be an important factor in university choice as students want to feel they are getting good value for money at their chosen institution.

## Role of accommodation in choice of university

Imperial College is a prestigious and world leading academic institution, it has an enviable reputation however the Union believes it must focus on and invest in all aspects of student life to ensure that those who are students reach their full potential.

The Union believes the cost of living in London alone is a significant deterrent to studying here and that when choosing a place to study the cost and standard of living contributes significantly to the decision process. In order to continue to attract the best applicants it is essential that the College can not only offer affordable, attractive accommodation but that an experience to rival and better competitor

institutions is offered.

A brief look at the accommodation offered at other leading UK institutions (Oxford [10], Cambridge [11], UCL, LSE [12], Durham [13], St. Andrews [14]) and others worldwide (MIT [15], CalTech [17], Yale [18], Stanford, Harvard [19]) reveals common principles:

- High standards of pastoral care involving senior students, academics and others,
- Provisions for social activities and community building,
- Guaranteed first year accommodation,
- On or near campus accommodation,
- A focus on the important the introduction into academic life and a sense of belonging.

Many of these institutions are steeped in tradition, place a great importance on the transition into academic and adult life with models that do not appear to the casual spectator as cost-driven. Many instill great importance in each 'College' or 'house' in systems with hundreds of years with continuing success.

The Union believes that the College should be investing in not only the education, but social development and well-being of the College's students. Providing a safe, supportive and convenient environment should be considered of the utmost importance and that further work needs to be undertaken to establish the part accommodation plays in choice of university for those students who are academically able enough to study at Imperial as undergraduates.

The Union recommends that the review group commission research to establish to what extent the undergraduate accommodation portfolio influences the choice to study at Imperial for those academically able to do so as undergraduates.

## Provisions for new undergraduates living out of halls

While the majority of first year undergraduates take up a place in a hall of residence, a number choose to live elsewhere. According to the latest available statistics, 241 new undergraduate students chose to live out in the 2013/14 academic year [20].

The reasons for this choice are potentially widespread, but often relate to these students coming from areas which are a reasonable commuting distance from the College. With

numerous social and support functions focused around halls of residence for new undergraduates the College must be mindful of not forgetting this group of students during the important transition to university life.

Over the past few years a number of small initiatives have been trialled to support this group, particularly around Welcome Week, but with varying levels of participation. No extensive research has been carried out to establish what support this group might require, or indeed whether not living in a hall of residence in their first year has impact on their experience of the College in general, their education or their participation in co-curricular and extracurricular activities.

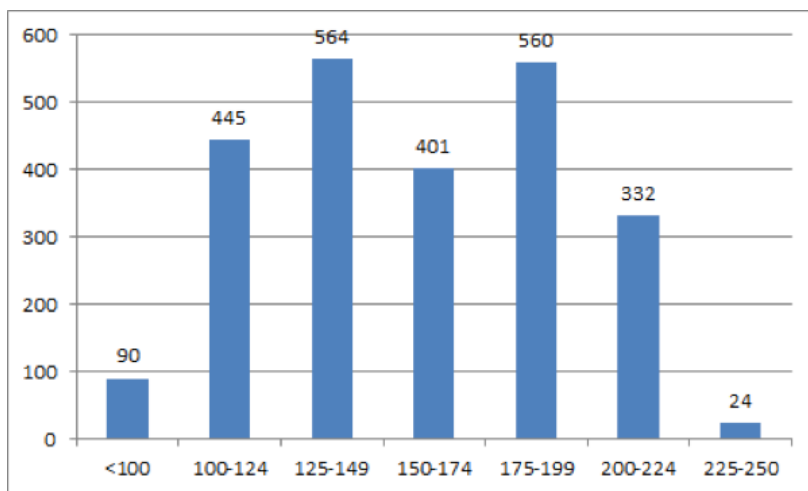
The Union recommends that the review group commission research to inform the College's future approach to support new undergraduates who choose not to live in a hall of residence.

## Locations, portfolio mix and costs

The Union believes that a fundamental part of Imperial's future residential strategy should be offering accommodation that is affordable for all groups of students. The Union believes that students should be able to easily see where their rent is going and the rationale for the rent prices should be communicated clearly to students.

The Union has concerns about how the future accommodation portfolio will reflect the different economic needs of Imperial's students.

The histogram below represents the current rent [21] paid by students each week by in the College's undergraduate halls:



The data shows that the average rent paid by students is £156/week. On a 39 week contract, this means students are paying, on average, £6,084 on accommodation for the whole year. Given that this cost may be coming out of a student's maintenance loan, which is up to £7,751 annually, this leaves students with £1,667, or £43 a week over 39 weeks, to spend on food, transport, social activities and other costs.



It is also worth noting that a maintenance loan covers a 52-week year, not just the 39-week contract term. A consequence is that should a student need to pay for accommodation over the summer, only having £1,667 left over after spending on first year accommodation could land them in financial difficulty.

A petition to save Garden Hall last year garnered over 1,200 signatures with many students citing the relatively low price and location of the hall as reasons to keep it in the accommodation portfolio. Additionally, students have highlighted their concerns over accommodation costs through survey responses:

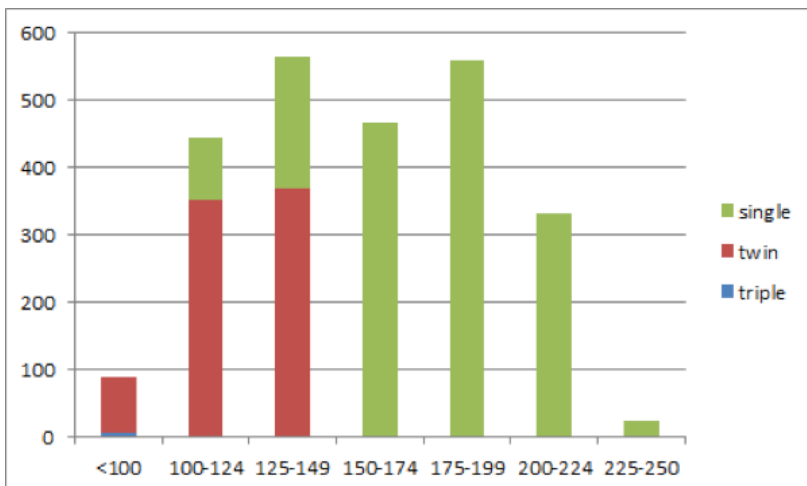


Halls are too expensive near SK campus. (SES 2012)

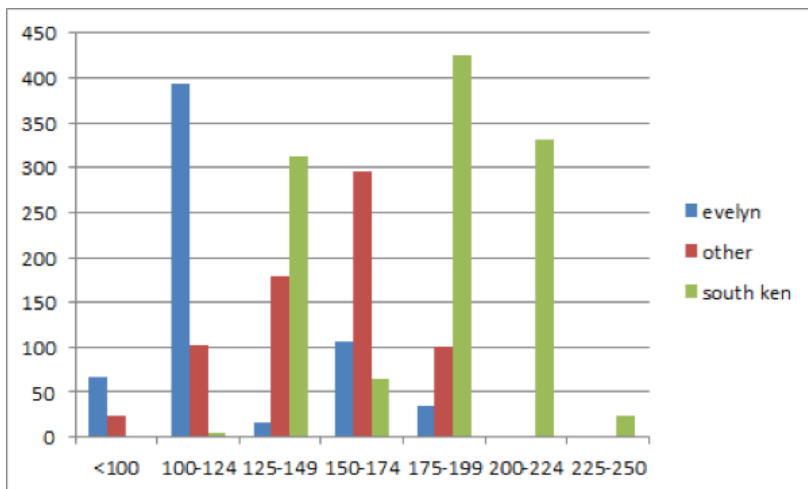


I heard that there are disputes over whether to close Fisher Hall. You should not as it is actually the only residence with acceptable fees. It would be impossible for students to study at Imperial otherwise even when they would be the brightest of their course.(SOSS 2013)

Breaking the data down to reflect shared/single rooms and the location of Halls also raises concerns. This histogram shows the proportion of shared and single rooms which make up each price bracket:



This bar chart shows the location of the rooms which occupy each of the price bands:



This chart shows that the vast majority of low-cost accommodation is located in Evelyn Gardens and, outside of Evelyn Gardens, there is very little opportunity to find low-cost accommodation in South Kensington. This highlights immediate concerns over the future of Imperial's accommodation portfolio. As Evelyn Gardens' lease expires in 30 years, failure to renew the lease or offer similarly priced accommodation could drastically increase the rent students pay in their first year. This could act as a major deterrent to prospective students from poorer backgrounds.

Additionally, losing Evelyn Gardens with the view of building low cost accommodation further from South Kensington may create the dynamic of only well-off students being able to afford to live near campus. In the recent Student Experience Survey [4] undergraduates living in halls of residence were asked how long their commute to College was, the results broadly match the volume of rooms available in the College undergraduate hall portfolio. The respondents were then asked if they felt the length of their commute to College has affected their participation in Union social opportunities.

21% of the respondents indicated that they felt the length of their commute discouraged them from participating in Union social activities and many free text comments echoed this problem:



I was previously allocated to Xenia before moving to Gabor, Eastside. Living in Xenia was both a financial burden (transportation costs) as well as an inconvenience when it comes to involvement in campus activities--not just social opportunities with Union, but also, say, morning lectures (experience delays, not stopping at South Ken station etc. when taking Underground), career events and opportunities held in Imperial, other co-curricular activities. (SES 2013)



The halls are of a very inconvenient distance from the university, adding to the cost of living dramatically and wasting a lot of time traveling. (SES 2012)

The effect of building low cost accommodation further from College could be that well-off students are given a much richer student experience than those living further away, which is a dynamic College should be actively striving to avoid.

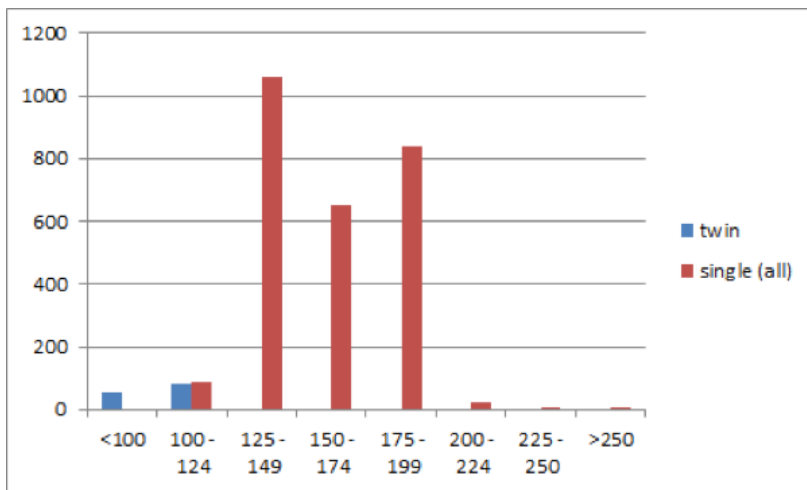
Finally, looking at the two graphs together, the spike of South Kensington accommodation at £124-149/week is due to the presence of shared accommodation in Eastside and Southside, and most of Evelyn Gardens

accommodation takes the form of shared rooms. For students unable to share rooms (for example students under 18), the changing portfolio could affect them the most as there is very little affordable accommodation on offer for them, especially affordable accommodation in South Kensington.

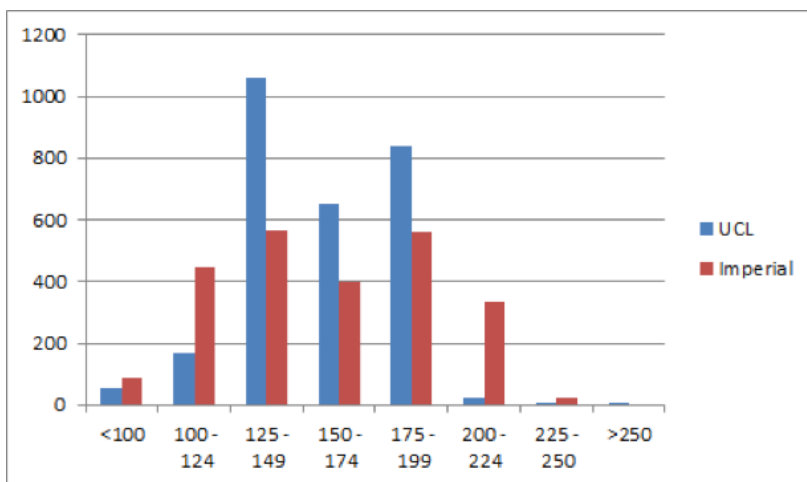
Students who require accessibility arrangements can currently only be housed in Beit, Southside or Eastside Halls, meaning the lowest weekly rent these students can pay is £175 (Beit). The Union has concerns about the message this sends to students who require these arrangements. Also, the current practice of only offering these rooms to first year undergraduates raises issues of what students do in subsequent years as renting suitable accommodation in the private sector and arranging suitable transport into College on a daily basis could be significant barriers to these students studying at Imperial.

## Other London universities

Using the information available on UCL's website, it is possible to compare Imperial's accommodation offer with UCL's. Below is a histogram showing number of rooms in uncatered accommodation available in each price band at UCL, split by single and shared rooms:



Here's a graph directly comparing Imperial's offer with UCL's:



The graph above shows that, although UCL has a much greater accommodation portfolio than Imperial, Imperial has an unusually high number of rooms in the higher rent brackets. UCL also offers far more single rooms than Imperial which means that although there is a similar trend in the number of rooms available in each price band, UCL students are arguably getting far more for their money. In a competitive higher education market, factors such as accommodation costs may factor into students' decisions over which university to attend. As a world-leading institution which wishes to attract the best students, it is important Imperial remains competitive on all aspects of student experience, including the affordability of studying at Imperial.

## Transparency

The Union believes there should be transparency around what rent is used for. Although the College have hinted that rents are used to subsidise other commercial ventures which benefit students e.g. food prices or use of Ethos; where this money goes and how it is used needs to be explicitly stated to justify the rent charged to students. This is borne out by comments from students:

I am curious to know why I am paying £170 per week for a hall that is 20 minutes away from school while my fellow schoolmates in Beit spend £187 per week to stay next to school SSOS2013

The Union recommends that the review group draft a policy on rent charges for undergraduate halls of residence. This policy should include the rationale for rent prices, whether subsidy should be provided to certain rooms and how transparency can be ensured.

The Union recommends that the review group seek to clarify the future plans for Evelyn Gardens and communicate these plans to the student body at the earliest possible opportunity. Furthermore the Union recommends the review group develop a strategy for how the accommodation portfolio should be developed to ensure a balance between distance, affordability and room mix.

## Communication of options and application/offer process

Communication with individuals pre-application should aim to allow students to make an informed choice about applying to Imperial and the financial implications of taking up a place in an undergraduate halls of residence.

The Union believes that communication with potential students should highlight the diverse range of needs Imperial caters for in terms of accommodation, but also present an accurate reflection of the rent portfolio. For example, listing the rent of Evelyn Gardens as £60-187/week is not a useful statistic given that only three students in the College could ever end up paying £60 a week by staying in the one triple room where this rent is offered. It could be argued that having information provided in this format could be considered misleading. It would be far more useful to present the number of rooms in each price bracket for each hall and the portfolio overall.

Students themselves have raised issues about the communication surrounding Halls before they applied:



The information provided about each hall was severely incomplete. (SOSS 2013)



I don't think there was enough information about the halls on the Imperial website for me to make an informed decision. (SOSS 2013)



Its written on the accommodation website that it is a 20 minute walk across Hyde Park and that is not true.



Although repetitive emails were sent, no pictures of the Xenia accommodation could be found.



I was not able to find much information about the differences between the halls. I found it difficult to distinguish between them when applying. (SOSS 2013)



Too little information are listed and included into the Imperial accommodation websites, especially the newly refurbished Wilson House. No extra information was given to help us to choose which halls we would prefer. (SOSS 2013)

Statistics from the Student Hub show that 77.4% of students received one of their first five choices for accommodation [22]. The Union is concerned about the procedure should a student fail to be allocated a room within their preferred price band as the current system, where a student either accepts their one accommodation offer or potentially lives out of a hall of residence may cause students to panic and accept rent prices they cannot afford. This is highlighted by the following student's comments:



The process seemed to ignore my preferences and give me a room that really is not affordable for a student. No alternative was offered, instead we just had to accept it without any support. (SOSS 2013)



As an insurance choice I was told that it would be unlikely I would receive an accommodation offer. (SOSS 2013)



I didn't receive a lot of help with accommodation choice. It wasn't clear the numbers of people to one kitchen, fridge, cleaning and whether our original preferences were really relevant or not. (SOSS 2013)

The Union recommends that the review group commission a review into the way information about halls of residence (in particular rent information) is presented to potential students and of the processes used to allocate rooms to new students.

## Summer hall accommodation

The Union recognises that for most undergraduate students a 39-week accommodation contract is sufficient as students wish to return home for the summer months following their first year at the College. However, for some students this may not always be feasible or desirable and in Campus

Services' start of session survey [9], 12% of halls residents would prefer a 51-week contract. Where students can demonstrate genuine hardship, the Union would like College to investigate the possibility of charging these students the term-time rate over the summer months, rather than the commercial rate which can be far more expensive. For example, a single room in Bernard Sunley hall at the summer rate can be as much as £226 a week depending on the length of stay; the term-time rate is £179 a week.

The Union recommends that the review group consider what the level of rent should be for students wishing to stay in an undergraduate hall over the summer vacation.

## College associated management

The Union believes that it should be formally consulted before any changes are made to the Accommodation Licence, allowing ample time to seek suitable student opinion. Any proposed changes, including exact wording of amendments to the licence, and the reasons for change should be consulted upon before a new cohort of students sign the contract so that any objections can be raised and resolved in a timely manner.

The Union believes the Accommodation Licence, laying out a student's legal position, should be supported by a separate, signed Halls Agreement. This agreement could lay out what is expected from students upon taking a room in a hall of residence but could

also outline what they can expect from College staff. Although not a legally binding document, this could set the tone for the rest of the year and inform students of which staff are responsible for each aspect of their halls experience to ensure problems are reported to the correct person.

This year saw changes to the College's Accommodation Licence which were made without student consultation and after students had signed the licence, in regards to the cleaning provision. As shown in the comments below, students were unhappy with this breach of the licence:



We are furious that the cleaning service is monthly not fortnightly as stated in our contract. This is a breach of contract. (SOSS 2013)



Very unhappy about the cleaning service being reduced from that advertised in the contract. A formal complaint was made, but this has changed nothing. (SOSS 2013)

The Union has offered significant support and guidance to Campus Services in productively communicating the benefits of the recent changes which are not in line with the licence. The advice was not actively taken on board, and actions taken were arguably counterproductive. The Union is still fielding requests for advocacy on this matter on a regular basis.

The Union recommends that the methodology which should be used to change the College's Accommodation Licence in future, together with investigating the need for a Halls Agreement.





# 2 Postgraduate Halls

The Union recognises that postgraduate students have different needs, experiences and responsibilities when compared to their undergraduate peers. However, for some postgraduate students who may be new to London or even new to the United Kingdom, they could share many of the same concerns, apprehension and nervousness as undergraduate students when moving to a new city. The Union considers the provision of postgraduate accommodation options critical to the success of the future mission of the College.

The main postgraduate halls are in Imperial's part-owned company GradPad, which has three halls in Battersea, Wood Lane and Fulham. However, it is worth noting that postgraduate students in Silwood campus are provided with on-site halls accommodation and a limited number of postgraduate students can take up subwarden positions in undergraduate halls, though this is subject to a selection process.

The Union believes the aims of postgraduate student accommodation at Imperial should be:

1. To provide a safe environment with an appropriate level of pastoral and wellbeing support for the residents,
2. To bring postgraduate students together and build a sense of community,
3. To provide the option of affordable College operated accommodation within a reasonable distance of students' places of study





## Safe environment

The Union believes that one aim of postgraduate student accommodation at Imperial should be to provide a safe environment with an appropriate level of pastoral and wellbeing support for the residents who choose to live in this style of accommodation. The accommodation should provide suitable and sufficient security, together with appropriate levels of wellbeing and pastoral support. The Union considers the welcome process to be an important element of life in a postgraduate hall, and strategies, plans and action should be in place to facilitate this appropriately.

## Security, wellbeing and pastoral support

The three postgraduate halls operated by the College under the GradPad banner all offer a 24 hour security service, CCTV, secure bike storage, female-only corridors and free onsite gyms [23]. The halls at Silwood Park offer a range of accommodation options with varying facilities [24]. Due to their proximity on the campus, a range of other facilities are available which are relatively good considering the number of students located there.

At Silwood Park a wardening system is in place, yet at GradPad there is no wardening system or onsite pastoral arrangements. The difference in wardening and pastoral support between the Silwood and central London locations does raise a question as to why this difference in approach is taking place. The support at Silwood Park is reflected in free

text comments from the Student Experience Survey 2012 [5]:



The [Silwood] Union Team and Wardens are excellent - shame they are not given more money/facilities to play with for the students. The standard is much lower than South Kensington. (SES 2013)

The Union recommends to the review group that that further research should be undertaken to establish what the pastoral requirements for postgraduates living in halls of residence are, and set out a roadmap to achieving this arrangement consistently in each postgraduate hall.

## The welcome process

The welcome process for postgraduates is as important as for undergraduates. When new postgraduates are accommodated in halls of residence operated by the College the view of the Union is that the welcome of these students becomes an explicit responsibility of those responsible for operating these venues.

It is hard to determine whether any form of welcome activities happen within the postgraduate halls from the feedback we have available, more work needs to be carried out to establish what the desired activities are and then outlining who should be responsible for them and putting the various structures in place to do this.

While the majority of postgraduates living in a Hall of Residence will not be new to communal living it must be noted that they may be new to London and potentially the United Kingdom. Additionally they may have undergone a very different living experience elsewhere during their undergraduate education. It is likely that they will be arriving in a new social scene comprised entirely of strangers, while they may have experienced this before it can still be overwhelming for anyone, regardless of their social attributes or experience. Care and support needs to be taken by the operators of postgraduate halls of residence to ensure this transition does not cause overwhelming challenges for the residents.

The Union recommends to the review group that further research should be undertaken to establish the needs of new postgraduates living in halls of residence, particularly during the welcome and settling in process. Objectives for improving the experience should be agreed upon and implemented.

## Sense of Community

The Union believes that a second aim of postgraduate student accommodation at Imperial should be to bring postgraduate students together and build a sense of community through the provision of shared social spaces accessible by all residents and the provision of community creating activities and events.

### Shared social space Provision

Regardless of the style of the accommodation within a hall of residence, whether its residents are undergraduate or postgraduate, suitable and sufficient social space must be provided to enable human. While there are most likely differences in the style of this social space, whether it be a kitchen, TV room, lounge, coffee shop or even gym, it is important they exist in suitable quantity. Social spaces are important for meeting fellow residents, establishing friendships and networks and having shared experiences. In postgraduate halls of residence where studio accommodation which include kitchenettes are the norm, the value of shared social space could be a significant contributing factor to combating potential loneliness and isolation.

The lack of social provision features in the SES, for example:



GradPad certainly does not measure up to the good standard offered by the greater university's social efforts.

The Union recommends that further research should be undertaken through this review to establish the requirements within postgraduate halls of residence for shared social space. These requirements should be built into future development plans and if current facilities are non-compliant, into short term alteration plans.

### Community Building

Building a student community is as important in postgraduate halls as in those that accommodate undergraduates. While a robust and inclusive welcome process, combined with suitable and sufficient shared social spaces are important, in the view of the Union, prerequisites for building a student community, these factors in isolation do not necessarily achieve the overall objective.

The lack of community is noted within free text commentary in the Student Experience Survey 2013. While a hall of residence community does not necessarily solve the wider absence of a significant postgraduate community it could be a positively contributing factor.



I did not feel there exists a very tight PhD “community” feeling; most students seem to land on a project and, if they are lucky, be integrated on a broader research group where they have other fellow students to socialise with. However, many others land on PhD projects where they work alone and miss a sense of belonging to an academic community. It can feel very lonely.



Work to create more of a community/  
campus university experience.

The view of the Union is that specific plans need to be in place for building a community of postgraduates within each of the halls of residence. These plans should be researched through this review process and involve consultation with students who currently live in these establishments and those who have had experiences of living in postgraduate halls of residence elsewhere. This research work may also like to reference the current work being undertaken by the Graduate School regarding cohort building. Once a clear plan has been established the review group should make recommendations about how these could be implemented.

## Affordable accommodation

The Union believes the third aim of postgraduate student accommodation should be to provide the option of affordable College operated accommodation within a reasonable distance of students' places of study. There are a number of factors to consider here and the Union is realistic that the current portfolio of postgraduate accommodation will be remaining for the foreseeable future. In this section considerations are given to the levels of rent for GradPad, contractual arrangement situations which have reached the Union as requests for advocacy and the applications of academic sanctions for non-academic related debt to the College.

### GradPad rent

Imperial owns part of the company GradPad, which provides postgraduate accommodation to students. GradPad markets three Halls to Imperial students. There are a range of rooms and students in each of the GradPad locations which are available online through the GradPad website [25], to summarise these are:

- Griffon Studios in Battersea - studios £200-290/week
- Wood Lane Studios - studios £215-350/week
- Orient House in Fulham- mix of ensuite rooms in shared flats and studios £190-270/week

The GradPad website also lists the approximate commute lengths from each of these Halls into Imperial's South Kensington campus as:

- Griffon Studios - 21 minutes by public transport

- Wood Lane Studios - 18 minutes by public transport
- Orient House - 18 minutes by public transport

The GradPad website states this data is sourced from the Transport for London website. As part of the preparation of this submission the Union has checked this notion. The Transport for London website [26] actually lists the approximate commute lengths from each of these Halls into Imperial's South Kensington campus, for arrival at 9.00, as:

- Griffon Studios - 35-43 minutes by public transport
- Wood Lane Studios - 40-42 minutes by public transport
- Orient House - 31-38 minutes by public transport

These travel times are significantly different from the information provided to prospective residents and should be corrected with immediate effect. The actual travel times from GradPad are reflected in free text comments from the Student Experience Survey 2013, all from the section asking about the worst part of their student experience so far, all from postgraduates:



Distance between my campus and GradPad Studios.



Travelling between Imperial and Orient house everyday is more time-consuming than I thought.





Distance from wood lane to South Kensington.

It is interesting to note the differences between the rent charged for GradPad, PhD stipends and average rent rates in London. The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council minimum PhD stipend for 2013/14 for students in London is £13,726 [27]. This basic stipend can be exceeded (usually by PhD students within a Centre for Doctoral Training) but not undercut. Some indicative Imperial PhD stipends include: EEE CDT - £15,900, Computing CDT - £15,720 and Physics CDT - £15,590.

Comparative annual rents for rooms in GradPad are:

- Orient House cheapest (8-bdrm flat): £190/wk x 51 weeks = £9,690
- Orient House standard studio: £230/wk x 51 weeks = £11,730
- Griffon cheapest: £200/wk x 51 weeks: £10,200
- Griffon standard studio gold: £225/wk x 51 weeks = £11,475
- Griffon premium: £290/wk x 51 weeks = £14,790
- Wood Lane cheapest: £215/wk x 51 weeks = £10,965
- Wood Lane standard studio gold: £250/wk x 51 weeks = £12,750
- Wood Lane premium: £350/wk x 51 weeks = £17,850

In conclusion the cheapest possible GradPad annual rent is £9,690. The most lucrative PhD stipend the Union have been able to identify is £15,900. The most financially advantageous outcome for a PhD student living in GradPad is one who is well-paid, in the cheapest accommodation option, the result being they would be spending 61% of their income on accommodation. Shelter [29] in a recent blog [28] have said that in private sector, renters pay an average of 43% of income on rent; mortgage owners pay 19%; social tenants pay 29%. The 50% threshold is considered by Shelter to be mark of unaffordability of housing.

All of the GradPad studio rents are high compared to the average price of a studio in the Greater London area, which is priced at £185/week. December 2013's rental index by SpareRoom [30] shows that average rent in London postal zones is as follows:

Area	£/week average rent	% increase from previous quarter
East Central London	£207	6.28
East London	£146	3.42
North London	£152	1.32
North West London	£170	4.71
South East London	£138	2.17
South West London (Griffon & Orient)	£163	4.29
West Central London	£221	6.79
West London (Wood Lane)	£177	3.95

All GradPad accommodation is above average rent for area in which the halls are located. Price point is arguably problematic for those without other sources of funding; students in the best combination of income & rent living in GradPad are left with £120/wk for food, travel and all other costs. Including the cost of a Zone 1-2 student travel card they are left with just under £100/wk for other living costs.

Comments about living costs from postgraduates appear in the Student Experience Survey 2012 and 2013:



I would have appreciated more affordable accommodation opportunities for students.



Not enough student accommodation/not affordable for (PG) students.



It is a pity that Clayponds closed, letting no postgrad accommodation affordable for postgrad on grants (rent at Griffon is almost equal to my full bursary). We are now forced to look into private accommodation which do not provide the same social links.



Postgraduate halls that are affordable and close to South Kensington.

The Union recommends that as part of this review an appropriate level of rent for GradPad should be proposed by the review group, with a value put on extra services and facilities

which may be offered through living in this establishment compared to an index such as that provided by SpareRoom. Furthermore in recommending this appropriate level note should be taken of the threshold considered by Shelter to be unaffordable.

## Contract arrangements

Through evidence collected by the Union concerning requests for advocacy from students there seems to be some confusion as to the status of GradPad as an Imperial- entity and whether assistance can be provided to students in situations of difficulty. These requests for advocacy mainly involve situations concerning late payment of rent or exit clauses from contracts and whether the College services which are generally accessed via the Student Hub can assist in these matters. Over the past two years the Union has received a number of requests for advocacy where assistance has not been easily forthcoming.

The Union is clear in its opinion of the status of GradPad, it is a part of Imperial College London. Residents at GradPad should be able to access the same services from the College in relation to their accommodation queries as students living in undergraduate halls of residence. Indeed it is worth noting that on GradPad contracts the terminology “Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine, trading as GradPad” is used, and on the website specific reference to ownership of IP by Imperial College London is made [31].

The Union recommends that the review group establish clearly the status of GradPad and confirm the services students living there can access when in financial difficulty.

Furthermore there appears to be a difference in the contractual arrangements between students who have a United Kingdom based guarantor for their rent and those who don't. Those without a United Kingdom based guarantor must pay for the complete term of their tenancy (51 weeks) upfront, while those with one may pay in installments. These arrangements are detailed on the GradPad website [32]. Whether the spirit of treating students equally is borne out through this arrangement is a debate which, in the opinion of the Union, should be opened. This contractual obligation should be considered in the context that any postgraduate stipends and bursaries are generally not paid in an annual lump sum.

The Union recommends that the review group consider whether the requirement for United Kingdom based guarantors is necessary for allowing payment in installments for GradPad rents.

## Academic sanctions

In July 2013 the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) launched an investigation into university sanctions for non-payment of non-academic debt [33]. This investigation was launched under the Enterprise Act 2002 and centres around what institutions do when students owe money to the university which emanate from non-academic charges, such as accommodation fees. The investigation is aiming to find out whether laws are infringed by universities preventing students from graduating or registering for subsequent years of study if they owe non-academic debts to the institution. The Union has stance on this matter which was published in August 2013 [34].

Currently, the College does state that students who owe debts to the College for undergraduate accommodation can, as a last resort, be prevented from entering subsequent years of study. One rationale for this practice is that separating academic and non-academic debts isn't clear-cut and so in undergraduate halls, where there is a high level of pastoral support through the wardening team, it could be argued that this is not purely non-academic debt.

Despite being asked by the Union during the preparation of the Union's stance on academic sanctions for non-payment of non-academic debt [34], the College have been unable to confirm whether or not the same sanctions apply for Imperial students staying in GradPad. Given that GradPad does not currently offer

students pastoral support, it could be argued that any debts incurred to GradPad are purely non-academic in nature. Given the Union's stance on this matter, the Union would not support the use of academic sanctions for debts incurred to GradPad.

The Union recommends that the review group consider whether, in light of recommendations from the Office of Fair Trading, debt incurred through living in halls, both undergraduate or postgraduate, is considered non-academic by the College.



# 3 Beyond Halls

The Union recognises that less than one fifth of students live in College operated accommodation. The broader support offered by the College to finding and evaluating accommodation options is of vital importance to the wider experience, happiness and security of the College's students, both undergraduate and postgraduate. Accommodation, at its base level, features as a basic level requirement in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs [35], and can be a substantial determiner of an enjoyable or disastrous time as a student. For this reason the Union considers the support the College offers to accommodation choices beyond halls of residence as a key part of the residential experience and some of these services and consequences are explored in this section.

The Union believes the aims of the College's residential support beyond halls of residence should be:

1. That social bonding and the development of friendships between students is important to their happiness and mental wellbeing when searching for and living in private accommodation.
2. That advice regarding seeking private accommodation and ensuring its suitability is important and can prevent significant adverse consequences for students.
3. Rent Guarantor Scheme
4. Occasionally unfortunate circumstances occur relating to private accommodation and support mechanisms are important to assist in managing their repercussions.





#helloicu  
crew

## Social Bonding

The Union believes that social bonding between students is an important determinant of their mental health and broader well-being. Wherever possible, students should be supported in developing these friendships to make the transition into private accommodation a less daunting process. Equally, for students who reach the end of their first year at the College in need of flatmates, this process should be facilitated so that they can find compatible people to live with, to help ensure they have a social support network once they leave the pastoral support network of a hall of residence.

### The importance of friendships

The transition from school or sixth-form College to university can be a big step for some students; as well as adjusting to living alone for the first time, students also have to adapt to a new city and, for a reasonable number, a new country. Forming relationships at university is essential for a student's wellbeing, welfare and academic performance as they provide social support networks and facilitate knowledge-sharing between coursemates. If these friendships are not formed in the early stages of university life, students can feel a sense of isolation and loneliness which impacts on their integration into College life and their satisfaction with the Imperial experience.

Friendships can be formed at university in many different ways. College accommodation provides a good opportunity for students to meet people from many different backgrounds

who they may not otherwise socialise with. Departments provide further opportunities for students to form friendships within and between years, for example through the Union's 'Mums and Dads' scheme [36] which encourages vertical integration and a sense of community within each course. Imperial College Union Clubs, Societies & Projects provide additional opportunities for the building of friendships whilst at university by meeting people with similar interests and pastimes. Clubs, Societies & Projects are formed by a diverse range of students from different departments and year groups. All of these different factors come together to allow students to form a diverse and unique social support network for their years at Imperial.

Commentary in the Student Experience Survey reflects this:



Teamwork activities helped with making new friends and knowing each other.



Making friends with the people in my halls.



Good friends in my office.



Sports clubs and the friends it's given me.



Living in halls-cooking dinner with friends.





Moving into private rental accommodation with friends

## Flatmate finding

For students entering into private accommodation or moving between different accommodation, the organisation required to ensure the new accommodation is safe and suitable can seem very daunting. What can potentially seem even more daunting is finding other students with the same requirements from their accommodation e.g. price and location, especially if they are unable to find anyone suitable in their existing friendship groups.

To ensure students are equipped for this process, the opportunities to find new flatmates should be diverse to suit all timeframes and plentiful to accommodate students' demanding academic schedules. Although a year-round schedule of events would be most convenient for students, it is likely there will be increased demand in September for the new intake of postgraduates and in Spring for undergraduates seeking accommodation for the next academic year - additional opportunities should be provided at these key times of year.

Regular and well-advertised flatmate finding events can provide a good opportunity for students to find others with similar

accommodation needs. These events should be welcoming and informative with a relaxed environment to allow students to find flatmates themselves or be encouraged and assisted by the event holders if necessary.

Additionally, a database or online forum of flatmate finders would provide a further opportunity for individuals to find flatmates if they are unable to attend events. For such a system to be successful it would need to be user-friendly and regularly updated to ensure its continued use; although Imperial Home Solutions [37] has this capability, it is under-utilised by students which means it has little efficacy.

The Union recommends that the review group consider a full a review of the College's opportunities, systems and events for matching potential students together to find accommodation beyond halls of residence.

## Advice for private accommodation

The Union believes that advice to students seeking private accommodation is incredibly important as ensuring students are equipped to find suitable, safe accommodation means they are less likely to experience adverse events during their tenancy. Ideally, advice should be provided as far as is practicable through a one-stop-shop solution, with suitable online support for students located away from South Kensington.

### Vacancy advertising

Imperial Home Solutions [37] is an online accommodation database run by the Student Hub [38]. It is advertised as ‘the quickest route to student accommodation’ and allows students to search for properties based on various criteria.

To the Union’s, knowledge there are no landlord checks or requirements in place - anyone can register for the service and advertising one property on the site costs just £35 for one year. Although this practice makes sense from a commercial standpoint, the Union believes that having a housing service so explicitly affiliated with the College may give students the impression these are trusted or vetted landlords advertising to them. As a consequence, students may potentially be less vigilant renting from landlords through this database.

The other service Imperial Home Solutions provides is a message board so students can find flatmates. As of January 21 2014, there

have only been 33 posts on this message board, suggesting it is not well-used by students.

One suggestion for improvement would be the creation of a landlord accreditation scheme which rewards landlords who demonstrate good practice. The aim of such schemes would be to minimise disputes between landlords and tenants by ensuring landlords are aware of key property management issues. This confers benefits for students as it provides reassurance to those moving into a new property and has the potential to reduce stress related to accommodation worries which is beneficial to student well-being. Indeed the College is using the strapline “Don’t panic” in the advertising for their Private Housing Evening in March 2014 [39], it could be argued that this does not necessarily ease anxiety for students when thinking about finding accommodation.

Other institutions tend to employ one of two models:

- Creating a university-specific accreditation. For example the University of London [40]. This is where universities develop their own code of practice and only allow advertising from landlords who sign up to this code
- Using existing accreditations. This is where universities give preferential advertising to landlords who have accreditation from agencies such as the UK Landlord Accredited Partnership (UKLAP) [41] and denote which landlords have the accreditation on their databases.

Although the Union recognises the role of sponsorship in the creation of events such as the Private Housing Fair [42], it is however important that the advice given to students is in their best interest and isn't driven solely by commercial interests or relationships.

It could be argued that the College appears to have a preferential arrangement certain estate agents which may bias the advice given to students. On the College's website under 'Letting Agents' [43], only one estate agent is explicitly listed on this page with an accompanying advert - currently 'RR properties' which has recently changed from 'Foxtons'. All other letting agents can only be viewed by clicking to open a PDF document, which then only contains a table listing 39 letting agents, where the only information available is the logo of the company and the telephone number or web address.



The Union recommends that the review group consider whether the current vacancy advertising systems the College has in place meet the needs of the student population. Additionally the Union recommends that the review group seek to clarify the basis of relationships with any Estate Agents the College has and make this information available to the student body.

## Contract checking service

Contract checking is a service where an experienced professional reads through a student's housing contract before they sign it and offer advice on what the contract means and if they believe any clauses should be removed. This service is offered by both the Union's Advice Centre and the Student Hub. Since implementation, these schemes have proved popular - the Hub has reported 168 requests for the service over the first eight months of opening.

The Union considers these services vital to alleviate potential difficulties at an early stage and encourage the review group to consider ways in which services can be extended, particularly to students at campuses away from South Kensington.

## Rent Guarantor Scheme

Currently, students who do not have a United Kingdom-based guarantor are expected to pay up to a year's rent in advance when moving into private accommodation, including the College's own 'GradPad'. This cost can be a significant barrier to studying at Imperial, especially when taking into account tuition fees, visa fees, and the possible addition of NHS charges should the proposed new Immigration Bill be implemented in its current form. 48.6% of Imperial students are not from the United Kingdom, so the potential impact of such a scheme is potentially significant [2].

Many institutions, such as UCL, York and Kent are implementing schemes which allow for the University to act as a guarantor for students lacking a United Kingdom-based guarantor. This allows these students to pay rent in installments, rather than the high down-payments they are currently expected to pay. In a Union-run survey of International Students, 29% stated they already had problems renting privately and many cited paying 6-12 months' rent in advance as a barrier to renting in the private sector [44].

In order to remain competitive in the sector, it is the view of the Union that it is essential that Imperial follows suit. The appendix of this submission contains a proposal for implementing such a rent guarantor scheme at Imperial. The Union recommends that the review group incorporate this proposal within their findings.

## Unfortunate circumstances

The Union recognises that occasionally students can experience unfortunate incidents as a result of renting in the private sector. These can range from disputes with housemates and problems negotiating deposit returns all the way up to evictions from a property. The Union believes that it is vital students are supported in dealing with these incidents and their repercussions.

### Accommodation sharing complexities

The Union occasionally deals with cases of students who no longer wish to leave with each other through The Advice Centre [45]. The disputes are often over financial matters, such as one tenant refusing to pay utilities or rent. On rare occasions, this can take the form of one tenant collecting payment from others in order to pay bills and then simply keeping the money for themselves.

Students can also fall into difficulties when relationships break down in a property for a range of reasons, romantic involvement, general differences of opinion and lifestyle being the most common. Students are often in fixed term contracts for accommodation, so leaving these contracts can be complex and involve extensive communication with the landlord. The Union's Advice Centre offers mediation for when relationships break down and advice about how to either break a contract or be replaced as a tenant.

The Union recommends that the review group consider the potential impacts on academic

performance and the wider residential experience which a breakdown in relationships between students who share accommodation may precipitate and how this could be best aided through the range of the College's support networks.

### Tenancy Deposit Scheme

All landlords who rent property to students through an Assured Shorthold Tenancy have to put the deposit into a government approved Tenancy Deposit Scheme (TDS) [46]. The Union can evidence that students tend to approach The Advice Centre when a landlord attempts to withhold the deposit, meaning they often seek support in making alternative dispute resolutions with the scheme where their deposit is held. Furthermore a number of students also approach The Advice Centre during the period of their tenancy to inquire whether or not their deposit is protected in a TDS and what to do if they find it isn't.

The Advice Centre sees a number of cases each year where deposits aren't protected and suspicious claims are being made by landlords. The Advice Centre can advise students of their rights in these cases, write letters explaining the legal situation on their behalf and advise students on how to proceed within the law.

The Union recommends that the review group consider ways in which the College can propagate knowledge about Tenancy Deposit Schemes throughout the various support networks.

# Summary

## Undergraduate Halls Recommendations

- Confirm the need for proactive pastoral and wellbeing support in undergraduate halls of residence.
- Consider the best way to deliver wellbeing and pastoral support in undergraduate halls of residence.
- Consider the best ways to maintain discipline and good behaviour in an undergraduate hall.
- Consider the best ways to maintain physical security in an undergraduate hall of residence.
- Specify an appropriate level of cleaning in rooms, kitchens and communal areas in undergraduate halls.
- Consider what tasks should and should not be undertaken by the hall management staff.
- Confirm the needs for a range of inclusive events to be run in undergraduate halls and consider the best methods for them to be delivered.
- Explicitly confirm the hall senior system will be maintained and establish a suitable mandatory training and teambuilding framework for the wardening team.
- Consider ways of funding training and team building for the wardening team.
- Consider the best way to elect Hall Committees to ensure a robust democratic process.
- Consider the best way in which the amenities fun could be managed.
- Commission research to establish to what extent the undergraduate accommodation portfolio influences the choice to study at Imperial.
- Commission research to inform the College's future approach to support new undergraduates who choose not to live in halls.
- Draft a policy on rent charges for undergraduate halls of residence – it should include rationale for rent prices, whether subsidy should be provided to certain rooms and how transparency can be ensured.
- Seek to clarify the future plans for Evelyn Gardens and communicate these plans to the student body at the earliest opportunity.
- Develop a strategy for how the accommodation portfolio should be developed to ensure a balance between distance, affordability and room mix.
- Commission a review into the way information about halls and room allocation to prospective students.
- Consider what the level of rent should be for students wishing to stay in a undergraduate hall over the summer.
- Outline the methodology which should be used to change the College's Accommodation Licence in the future, together with investigating the need for a Halls Agreement.

## Postgraduate Halls Recommendations

- Commission research to establish what the pastoral requirements for postgraduates living in halls of residence are and set out a roadmap to achieving this arrangement consistently in each postgraduate hall.
- Commission research to establish the needs of new postgraduates living in halls of residence, particularly during welcome week.
- Commission research to establish postgraduate requirements for shared social space so that these requirements can be built into alternation plans or long term development plans.
- Research plans for community building in postgraduates and recommend how these can be implemented.
- Propose an appropriate level of rent for GradPad.
- Clearly establish the status of GradPad and confirm the services students living there can access when in financial difficulty.
- Consider whether the requirement for UK-based guarantors is necessary for allowing payment in instalments for GradPad rents.
- Consider whether debt incurred through living in halls, both undergraduate and postgraduate is considered non-academic by College.

## Beyond Halls Recommendations

- Consider a full review of the College's opportunities, systems and events for matching potential students together to find accommodation beyond halls of residence.
- Consider whether the current vacancy advertising systems the College has in place meet the needs of the student population.
- Seek to clarify the basis of relationships with any Estate Agents the College has and make this information available to the student body.
- Incorporate the Rent Guarantor Scheme proposal within their findings.
- Consider the potential impacts on students when housemate relationships break down and suggest how this could be best aided through the College's support networks.
- Consider ways in which the College can propagate knowledge about Tenancy Deposit Schemes throughout the various support networks.

# Appendix

## Proposal For Rent Guarantor Scheme

This document is Imperial College Union's proposal for the implementation of a Rent Guarantor Scheme that will allow for Imperial College London to act as a guarantor for students who lack a UK-based guarantor in order to prevent them from paying high down-payments when renting in the private sector. This scheme is modelled on similar programmes at University College London (UCL), Kent University and York University, and proposals from London School of Economics (LSE).

### Potential models

Other institutions who have implemented schemes based on UCL's model state that students who default on their rent will be held accountable by preventing these students from registering for subsequent years of study or graduating. In light of the recent OFT investigation into academic sanctions for non-academic debts and Imperial College Union's stance against this practice, this is not the model the Union would recommend as it may not be sustainable in the long term.

Instead, we propose that College investigates the possibility of purchasing corporate rent guarantor insurance, with the cost of the insurance recouped from the administration cost of students taking up Imperial's rent guarantor scheme. If this is done successfully,

this should create a cost-neutral program.

Students who default on their rent, in this case, should be treated like students who default on payments for undergraduate accommodation payments and can therefore be threatened with legal action for failure to repay the College.

### Mitigating risk

It is worth prefacing this section by saying that students defaulting on this scheme at other institutions is very low – since introduction at UCL, there have only been two cases of students defaulting on their rent. On both occasions, the students dropped out of the university entirely.

Risk of implementing this policy can be mitigated by either limiting the scope of the scheme or the maximum liability any one student could incur.

### Scope limitations:

In order to recoup the cost of the insurance, limiting student numbers too harshly could be a risk in itself; however there are moderate measures that could be put in place to limit the possibility of students misusing this scheme.

- Multiple occupancy - in cases of multiple occupancy, all tenants should be Imperial College London students or their dependents



### Maximum liability limitations:

- Cap guarantee – the College should decide a cap of weekly rent that would be covered by the scheme. LSE’s proposed cap is £180/week.
- Subsidiary cover – we would not recommend that utility bills or council tax be covered by the scheme
- Service charge – a single-issue payment should be required for use of the service. In the sector, payments tend to range between £30-50

One major advantage of paying rent in instalments rather than upfront is that students have more bargaining power should anything go wrong with the flat e.g. a landlord refusing to carry out repairs or a property being repossessed. However, if offering a rent guarantor scheme, this provides the College with the additional risk of a student intentionally withholding rent. In order to avoid this occurring, the following measures could be put in place:

- Landlord accreditation – starting a landlord accreditation service could allow the College to restrict this scheme to properties owned by approved landlords
- Contract-checking – this is currently offered by the Student Hub and the Union’s Advice Centre but could become a mandatory requirement as part for any student wanting to participate in the scheme.

### Debt Collection

The rent guarantor scheme will require a signed Agreement from the student signing up to the scheme. In cases of multiple occupants, the Agreement will be between the College and each student in residence.

The Agreement will lay out a student’s responsibilities in the scheme, including the following requirements:

- To observe the conditions outlined in the tenancy agreement between the landlord and tenants
- To notify the Accommodation Office of any intention to terminate the Agreement before the date stated in the Agreement
- To reimburse the College in the event of the College incurring any expenditure or loss as a consequence of acting as guarantor
- To inform the Accommodation Office if the College is required to pay rent on the student’s behalf. This should be done in writing, stating the amount due, the due date and the reasons for non-payment, so that the College can pay in a timely manner
- To pay the administration fee of signing up to the scheme
- To, under no circumstances, withhold rent without first consulting the Union’s Advice Centre. In cases of disputes between the landlord and tenant, the Advice Centre will act as a mediator.

- The Agreement would also state that the Accommodation Office will invoice the student for any fees occurred whilst the College acts as guarantor for that student and state that the student can be subject to Imperial College disciplinary procedures and/or legal proceedings if they fail to comply with the terms of the Agreement.

## Summary

- Implementing a Rent Guarantor Scheme would allow Imperial students who lack a UK-based guarantor to spread their rental costs over a year, rather than pay 6-12 months' rent in advance. As it stands, this is a significant financial barrier to study at Imperial.
- In light of other institutions adopting a scheme such as this, it is essential Imperial follows suit in order to remain competitive, especially to International Students
- Outlined above is a potential mechanism for implementing such a scheme at Imperial – this needs investigation with the Accommodation Office and College Management to assess the feasibility and plan the implementation of the scheme

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