

Student Written Submission draft
A note by the Deputy President (Education)

If you aren't already aware, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the QAA) are conducting a massive audit on College early next calendar year. This is the audit that happens every five years and the QAA go round College with a gloved white finger checking for the slightest deviation from best practice. As you can imagine, College are trembling on their feet, and have already done a lot of work to smarten up ready for the audit. Our role, apart from helping them do this by sitting on the committees and working parties, is to contribute to the audit visit with a Student Written Submission, where we tell the QAA in detail about the student experience at Imperial.

Here is the SWS as of 30-10-09 for your information. It needs some work done on it still but we are nearly there. I will submit the SWS to the Quality Assurance Advisory Committee tomorrow (the 3rd) for an accuracy check with time to make some final revisions before it is approved by Union Council on the 16th of November and final submission on the 20th.



Imperial College QAA Institutional Audit

Student Written Submission

January 2010

1. Students of Imperial College London are automatically members of Imperial College Union, a students' union with the following aims and objects:

The aims and objects of the Union shall be:

1. *To advance the education of its members and promote, without prejudice, their welfare at all times.*
 2. *To promote and encourage the interest by students in matters outside the College curriculum, especially cultural, social and sporting interests.*
 3. *To represent the needs and interests of its members to Imperial College and external bodies.*
 4. *To provide or ensure a range of facilities which advance the interests of the students of Imperial College.*¹
2. This submission has been passed by the democratically elected Council of Imperial College Union and is thus presented as representative of the experiences and opinions of students at Imperial.

Staff-Student Meetings

3. At departmental level, feedback from the representation network is disseminated in Staff-Student Meetings attended by
 - the Departmental Representative, the Year Representatives, the department's Senior Tutor and Director of Undergraduate Studies, in the case of undergraduate Committees
 - the Course Representative, the department's Senior Tutor and Director of Postgraduate Studies in the case of postgraduate Committees
 - and a small selection of other academic and administrative staff from the department.
4. These meetings usually happen once per term, but the frequency and format of them is still inconsistent across departments, and the quality of the outcome varies widely.
5. In Aeronautical Engineering, the list of issues raised by the representatives is lengthy and varies little from meeting to meeting. The Departmental Representative has expressed concern that the issues being raised now are the same as those raised two years ago and the meetings are ineffective, through a combination of their infrequency considering the volume of issues to deal with, and a lack of follow-up actions.
6. However, in other departments, these meetings are effective and are the primary point of feedback from students to staff. In Electrical and Electronic Engineering, SSMs have recently brought about improvements in the quality and timeliness of assessment feedback, and in Earth Science and Engineering, guidelines were produced to prevent the movement of coursework deadlines on the request of students through SSMs.
7. ICU is currently improving the training and resources available to academic representatives, both by providing them with a printed guide² and comprehensive list of roles and responsibilities, and with an in-house training session at the beginning of the academic year. Ideally, the vast majority of academic

issues should be communicated to staff through these meetings, so the training is centred on ensuring that representatives are able to intermediate effectively and representatively between their year groups and these meetings. A comprehensive document of Staff-Student Meeting good practice guidelines for departments to follow is available online³.

8. Quality assurance committees in College are also keen to improve the effectiveness of Staff-Student Meetings, and have recently requested that their outcome be reported to the Quality Assurance Advisory Committee annually. The ICU Deputy President (Education) has trained the 2009-10 representatives to report all communication with staff, particularly that which occurs within Staff-Student Meetings, to a central email address for compilation for this purpose. It is also hoped that this will provide enough evidence on the performance of departmental representative teams for ICU to identify best practice and weak areas for appropriate action.

Working parties

9. Students are not represented on all academic committees; however, progress has been made since the previous audit. We have achieved some representation on the Strategic Education Committee, giving a 15 minute presentation once per academic year. Although we have no vote, this has proven to be an effective method of representation, achieving a new 'merit' classification for postgraduate Masters degrees, student status for PhDs in their writing-up period and an increase in the minimum PhD stipend to include London weighting.
10. At a faculty level, student representation is inconsistent. Of particular concern is the lack of a student representative on the Faculty Teaching Committee (FTC) in the Faculty of Engineering. The Faculty of Natural Sciences has a student representative on its FTC, but attempts to extend this to Engineering have been met with resistance over a number of years. Although we have been given assurances that a student representative may be allowed in the future, we feel that progress in this area is too slow, particularly as student representation in other faculties is well developed. We have included the terms of reference for the FTC, highlighting those points where we feel student representation would provide especially valuable input.

Terms of reference for the Faculty Teaching Committee in Engineering:

- *To develop and maintain the Faculty's Teaching Strategy*
- *To promote inter-Departmental and inter-Faculty teaching activities where these can improve the quality or enhance the efficiency of teaching within the Faculty*
- ***To identify (both from within the Faculty and elsewhere), and promulgate within the Faculty, examples of best practice in teaching***
- ***To monitor and develop Faculty-wide mechanisms to enhance student recruitment and selection***
- *To develop strategies for the marketing of the teaching capabilities of the Faculty to potential students and others*
- *To consider the implications for teaching within the Faculty of external developments likely to impact upon Engineering education*
- ***To advise on, and monitor the quality of, support for the Faculty's teaching activities***

11. The committee structure within the College has changed since the previous audit. Following a recent review, which included student input, a number of them were merged, removed or reduced in size. Our level of representation is proportionally the same, and we hope that the smaller committees will be more effective and less time-consuming than the previous arrangements. The number of students on the main academic committee, Senate, has been reduced from three to two in line with a one-third reduction in overall size. We continue to have seats on the main quality assurance committees and the President remains on the College's governing body, the Council.
12. As well as sitting on permanent committees, students are invited to sit on several College working parties set up to achieve unique goals in improving academic quality. ICU generally nominate the Deputy President (Education) to attend, but sometimes other representatives are more appropriate: for instance, the Biochemistry Teaching Review Working Party invited the Departmental Representatives for Biochemistry and the Deputy President (Clubs & Societies), all Biochemistry undergraduates, to participate.
13. The following are examples of working parties where there has been student representation: Student Experience Stream, Student Administrations Systems Improvement, Postgraduate Qualification Framework Creation, Humanities Review, Biochemistry Teaching Review, Extenuating Circumstances Review, E-Learning Review, Student Academic Experience Review. This membership has been extremely valuable, our input has been respected and taken into account, and we urge College to continue these invitations in the future.

Biochemistry Teaching Review

14. The Biochemistry Teaching Review is an example of a collective failure by both student representatives and College to identify a developing issue.
15. Appendix **SOMETHING**⁴ is a comprehensive representation of the teaching performance of the Division of Biochemistry over the last two years, as shown by the responses to SOLE, the survey of teaching filled in termly by undergraduate students.
16. **[biochem feedback and guidance figure] (refer to document of all biochem SOLE stats)**
17. Over the last two years, neither student representation nor internal College academic review procedures effected much change in teaching quality in the Division, despite anecdotal knowledge by students and staff across College of problems. Student representatives presented concerns to divisional Staff-Student Committees every term; however, they felt that the staff who could address the concerns were not interested, often merely telling the students that change was not practicable. At other times, senior divisional staff were actioned to investigate issues, but no action was taken. A few incremental improvements were made, but they did not have any widespread impact, nor did they identify any of the major themes behind the issues raised by representatives. The minutes of the six meetings that took place during the 2007-08 and 2008-09 sessions, recorded by the Division, have been reproduced in the Appendices⁵.

18. In March 2008 the Quality and Academic Review Committee, at the time the most senior central quality assurance committee in College, received the report from a review of undergraduate teaching in Biochemistry performed by four academics external to College. An excerpt from the confirmed minutes of this meeting is reproduced in the Appendices, including the text of the report⁶. This review also failed to effect any positive change in the Division.
19. In March 2009 the entire cohort of second year undergraduate students in the Division of Biochemistry (Department of Life Sciences) signed a formal letter of complaint to the course convener concerning teaching quality. This letter has been reproduced in the Appendices⁷. The severity and urgency of the matter at the time of complaint highlights the failure in this case of both student academic representation and College's quality assurance review procedures.
20. Following the submission of this letter, the Quality Assurance Advisory Committee immediately set up a working group to perform an emergency review of undergraduate teaching in the Division, with the aim of effecting a drastic short-term improvement in quality, particularly in the second year, before the beginning of the 2009-10 session. This review was carried out and QAAC seeks to perform a longer-term, more comprehensive, review of teaching in the Division in order to make recommendations for the 2010-11 session.

Earth Science and Engineering

21. In contrast to the Division of Biochemistry, The Department of Earth Science and Engineering actively seeks student involvement in end of year reviews and when interviewing for academic members of staff. At the end of each year an MSci Project round-up meeting is held in order that MSci students can give feedback to academic staff on their experience of the MSci project. This feedback is used constructively when planning the following year's project.
22. Earth Science and Engineering also involves a student panel when interviewing applicants for academic staff positions, comprising at least the Departmental Representative and Year Representatives. The panel interviews each applicant for approximately 30 minutes, asking questions concerning issues such as teaching styles and student engagement.

Personal tutoring

23. All Imperial College students are assigned a member of academic staff from their department as a personal tutor. Normally they will stay associated with the same tutor throughout their degree, who is expected to be a first point of contact for pastoral needs and advice, reference writing, and academic help where the tutor is appropriately qualified. Typically each tutor has a group of about three tutees in each year of a course.
24. At the time of and since the 2005 Institutional Audit, the quality of personal tutoring has been highly variable across College. Until last academic year, very little progress had been made, despite the mention in the 2005 Student Written Submission and the issue being a recurring point of student dissatisfaction to date. However, a student presentation to the Strategic Education Committee Away

Day in early 2009 brought further attention to the issue, and since then two significant developments have been made:

- a. Senior academic staff, led by the Dean of Students and the Dean of Learning and Teaching, have formed a Working Party to establish a personal tutoring roles and responsibilities document for all tutors, and discuss other ways of improving personal tutoring across College and making it consistent.
- b. An ongoing scheme, Student Administration Systems Improvement, part of the ICT Student Experience Stream, has changed its direction, now giving priority to delivering an electronic system to allow both students and their personal tutors to view their academic attainment at-a-glance and pick up poor or inconsistent performance immediately. This should bring about much-needed improvements in the areas of student performance feedback along with the quality of personal tutoring: as discussed elsewhere in this Submission, feedback at Imperial is an area of great concern.

25. Add evidence of satisfaction change 2005>2009.....

26. In Computing, a dual-tutoring system is used in the first year, with a group of six students having a personal programming tutor (PPT) and personal maths tutor (PMT). The group is split in half, with three students using the PPT as a personal tutor, and three using the PMT as a personal tutor. Should a student have a problem with their assigned personal tutor, they are able to switch to the other tutor. The system ensures that the new tutor is already familiar with the student and their academic progress.

Sole

27. College carry out online surveys of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching termly. The undergraduate survey, Student Online Evaluation (SOLE), has been running since 2003 and will be the main focus of the following. Recently, plans have been established for research [ADD ALI'S COMMENTARY ON SOLE]

Funding

28. The subvention given to us by Imperial College is vital to our activities, funding the core representative functions and a portion of our clubs and societies activities. This subvention is under threat due to reductions in HEFCE funding. Following a 5% cut for the 2009-2010 academic year, we consolidated two senior management positions to find savings, but have very little scope for reducing our staff size further without impacting on our core functions. We expect similar cuts in future years and plan to expand our external income streams to maintain our current levels of activity.

29. Unfortunately we have recently experienced barriers to raising external income, facing internal competition from College departments. For example, the careers service aggressively marketed their Engineering Careers Fair, originally a student event, moving it to the same location as the Union's long-running fair, holding it a week before and undercutting on price.

30. We accept that in the current climate of HEFCE cuts that we will need to expand our income streams; however, we cannot do this while facing internal competition which may hamper our ability to continue funding our activities.

Additional course costs

31. At 2009 entry, new undergraduate Home students pay £3,225 tuition fees per year, and new Overseas undergraduates pay between £18,000 and £37,300 per year depending on the course taken. However, these are not the only costs associated with the courses, as additional charges apply to many students where payment is a necessary condition of award of degree. There is widespread feeling that it is unfair to be required to pay sometimes in excess of £1000 in addition to their tuition fees in order to complete their course. Unlike costs such as stationery, travel to College and textbooks, these are fixed costs for each student and they cannot be mitigated (as, for instance, borrowing textbooks from the library removes the cost of buying them).
32. It is of even greater concern that none of these additional costs is mentioned in the undergraduate prospectus; these charges at best disappoint students and at worst put them into considerable financial difficulty.
33. Where students are demonstrably unable to pay these costs, the College Hardship Fund and the publically-funded Access to Learning Fund are available to provide financial support. In the 2008-09 session the Access to Learning Fund helped 144 UK students with a total subsidy of £166,867. The College Hardship Fund, with contributions from private donors, was able to support 177 students with a total subsidy of £68,907. For this we are very grateful and support the work of all those contributing to and administering these funds.
34. A sample of the compulsory costs to students can be found **in Appendix SOMETHING⁸**. The most widespread problem is the cost of personal protective equipment, which can be up to £20. It is felt that the scheme in the Department of Mechanical Engineering is reasonable, where students' first boiler suit is issued free of charge, and any replacements are charged for.
35. There are three Departments that incur charge for provisions other than personal protective equipment. The total cost of field work in the Department of Earth Science and Engineering can be £2,200, and the minimum technical equipment required totals £445. Medical students are required to attend three placements at a cost of up to £500 each and to purchase clinical equipment at a cost of at least £79. The Department of Civil Engineering charges over £450 for compulsory field trips during the course.
36. ICU at least recommends that these costs be estimated as comprehensively and accurately as possible, and published to inform students and prospective students. In the future we would like to see these costs to be absorbed into tuition fees, particularly given the recent increase in international fees beyond inflation.

Support services

37. Imperial College recently established the Student Hub desk as a 'one-stop shop' for all administrative and advisory matters for students. It is staffed by multiple receptionists who provide an interface with the Registry, put students in contact with the Accommodation Centre, Finance Department, pastoral support services and other services. This centralized contact point has been a great success and feedback from students has been nothing but positive. Queue times were high, particularly at the start of session, until the start of the 2009-10 session when measures were taken to reduce them by making more services available online and ensuring that the administration of new students was more efficient, reducing the number of visits to the Student Hub to solve problems. ICU would like to praise the Student Hub for its excellent efficiency, customer service and quality of advice provision.
38. Imperial College provides a wide range of free support services to students for their health, well-being and career. These can be tailored to suit the needs of different students and are designed to be available at any time. Imperial student support services staff are generally friendly and highly competent. However, ICU is increasingly concerned that these services are understaffed and students can suffer from the non-availability of staff. For academic support for taught students, the National Student Survey 2009 ranks Imperial number 219 out of 261 institutions⁹; the NSS encourages careers advice provision to be considered a type of academic support, and while pastoral support services do not come under this heading, they have an extremely high impact on the ability of students to learn.
39. Appendix **SOMETHING**¹⁰ compares support services staffing numbers to the other Russell Group institutions for whom data has been obtainable.
40. The International Office provides valuable support to students on all issues relating to coming to, settling in and staying in the UK, particularly for visa applications. As apparent in the graphs, Imperial's provision of international support staff per non-UK student is mediocre in the context of the Russell Group, despite Imperial's reputation as a truly international institution, College's emphasis on international recruitment and recent increases in international student numbers.
41. As seen in the relevant graph, both the Counselling Service and the Union Advice Centre are poorly staffed in comparison to the rest of the Russell Group, with only one member of staff in the Advice Centre for all 12,779 students and four counsellors (3,651 students per counsellor). A small increase in the Counselling Service budget and ICU's subvention from College would allow additional staff to be recruited in both these centres, making a significant improvement in the amount of support time available per student.
42. As seen in the relevant graph, the Disability Advisory Service is also poorly staffed, coming third last in the Russell Group. The DAS has seen a significant improvement over the last few years, increasing in number from one to three staff, but, especially considering the rapidly increasing rates of disclosure of common disabilities such as dyslexia, and increased participation of people with disabilities in university and student life, this leaves much to be desired.

43. Bit about careers – "sorry no data but it's not very good"

• **To do:**

- **Add content by HT**
 - **Add content by AM**
 - **Finish bit about careers above**
-
- FEEDBACK (JS/ KP?)
 - Coursework and test performance: show evidence from SOLE and NSS (JS)
 - College collect it!
 - College do very little with it apart from RSM at SSM when they debrief
 - (ask other dep reps)
 - SASI (JS)
 -
 - Expectations:
 - Tutorial class sizes (JS)
 - Ask around departments
 - Compare to prospectus

¹ Imperial College Union Constitution (excerpt), version approved by Union Council 16-1-09

² Appendix ... : Undergraduate Rep Guide and Postgrad Rep Guide

³ Link to Staff-Student Committee Good Practice Guidelines

⁴ Appendix... : Biochem NSS results

⁵ Appendix ... : Biochem SSC minutes

⁶ Appendix : QARC March 08 excerpt

⁷ Appendix : Letter written by Biochemistry students

⁸ Appendix ... : Hidden course cost table

⁹ Appendix ... : NSS for academic support

¹⁰ Appendix ... Russell Group support services