

DPCS End of Year Report 16/17 – James Cox

Introduction

Whilst “You don’t actually do anything” is common to hear, being an Officer Trustee at Imperial College Union is challenging, dynamic, and at sometimes downright difficult. This can only be amplified during times of staffing vacancy, where those who were helping you with precedent and practice disappeared into the ether. It’s at this point where it sinks in that you are the decision-maker for the students you represent, and you should probably start making the decisions. Being at the head of the network of 2000 volunteers and 376 clubs of hyper-analytical and hyper-critical students (a good thing if there is to be improvement) definitely keeps you on your toes, however slowly but surely the leather glove hardens to an iron fist over the course of 12 months.

I would encourage all of you, at the heads of your own networks of students, to strive towards tangible change to their student experience. We have such a fantastic opportunity, whilst also a duty, to improve the lives of those around us; unfortunately I fear sometimes this point is missed. I would encourage next year’s Council to work closely with the incoming Officer Trustees, don’t underestimate how quickly some changes can actually be made. I would hope for an environment where the gathering of up to 60 Imperial students in a room can focus on matters that will engage the student body for the better, and not be trivial matters that come from a desire to play at politics. The latter disengages the students, the staff and the Officer Trustees, weakening the ability for students to understand how to make change at this institution, and killing the desire to actually do so.

I digress, please see below the changes I have made this year. Contrary to my usual style, I write fully as this is a reflective piece (I have put highlights in bold).

I am not inclined to include the day-to-day responsibilities, fighting fires, eActivities, students coming in stressed because they royally messed up, interview panels, working groups, reporting groups or Trustee-related responsibilities. I will be talking about my projects, which I wish there could be more time for.

Manifesto

“I want to improve the communication between Sport Imperial and the union, and to increase funding for clubs and societies.

The allocation to C&S through budgeting has increased by ~10% from £307,000 in 2011 to £332,000 in 2015, whereas participation increased by ~40% from 18,000 in to 25,000 total memberships in this time; this is clearly not proportional. I would like to be able to allocate increased funding to clubs and societies with the aim to increase participation all across Imperial. This is important as they provide an excellent way to make friends and a much-desired break from work, contributing to overall wellbeing and personal development.

There is room for improvement in the communication between Sport Imperial and the union. A joint strategy is currently being developed, the successful execution of which would be a vital task for the incoming DPCS. Our sports clubs are student-run, therefore it is important to me to ensure that students are heavily consulted in this process.

Having been the Vice President of Clubs & Societies for the RSMU, I have a good understanding of how to oversee clubs and to help them where necessary; I understand that most clubs are very happy to run themselves. I organised The Bottle Match, the second oldest rugby varsity in the world played between the Royal School of Mines and Camborne School of Mines; through this I learnt how to create a compromise to appease staff higher-up whilst maintaining the interests of the students.”

Club Funding

CSP Grant

Whilst the figures in my manifesto were a bit rubbish in hindsight (incoming resources includes club SGI, memberships included free memberships), the point still stood that club funding had not increased to match activity. Whilst other opportunities fell out of the woodwork as the year progressed, it was most important to me to increase the CSP grant by a suitable figure. So how do you actually go about doing this?

When implementing major manifesto points, the importance is on illustrating the need, the priority, and coming up with a proposal that is supported by all the decision-makers.

[https://www.imperialcollegeunion.org/your-union/how-were-run/committees/16-17/Finance and Risk Committee/1639](https://www.imperialcollegeunion.org/your-union/how-were-run/committees/16-17/Finance%20and%20Risk%20Committee/1639)

The need was dictated by facts and figures pulled from eActivities. I made clear visuals to show the increasing costs of joining a society (shown by membership products as a proxy, where the no. stayed approximately the same), and highlighted how rapidly the costs of CSPs at Imperial were increasing without an increase in grant.

The priority was proven through a) electing me on this manifesto in the first place, b) the freshers' fair strategy consultation (tankards and counters), c) the results from the strategy consultation released to all students and d) the support from my fellow OTs to make it a priority.

A top tip on passing anything is to ensure your proposal has passed before even sitting down at a meeting. This means meeting those with conflicting priorities/ concerns before you're ever on the table. **A staff member opened by eyes to the problem of uncapped clubs & societies providing a squeeze on the budgeting pot** (to the detriment of the rest of the clubs & socs) and so I truly hope that a large part of the discussion of next year's CSPB is to prioritise the ability to fund new clubs or to sustain funding for our existing ones.

But hey, £35,000 increase to CSPs, the largest increase ever (who's keeping track though? (I am)). I could've stopped there on this manifesto point, but in my eyes this simply isn't enough, and there needed to be methods to increase funding further without having to increase the grant again.

Syndicate Sponsorship

Stolen from the manifesto of an unsuccessful DPFS candidate, syndicate sponsorship seemed to be a great idea. Let's get small clubs, package them together with other small clubs and sell avenues to our students so they can run their activities for cheap. In handover with my predecessor I created a wonderful and functional spreadsheet to cut and snip at the clubs to create various groupings. However, nothing really happened after that until much later in the year.

Fast forward to now, and this work has been vital in feeding into the Sponsorship Working Group, a project with much wider scope than my little Excel spreadsheet. In the future (near enough future I hope) my ideas for syndicate sponsorship will be taken on by a staff member who will be employed to generate revenue from external sources towards CSPs and the Union on the whole. Think what that means though, the Union relies a lot on the bars to be able to fund its non-income-generating departments such as the Advice Centre and Student Development, now we begin to look for this income elsewhere so we can rely less on our own members.

Life Membership & Donations

Convergent evolution is a wonderful thing, especially when it's two Officer Trustees trying to make the Union a little better. Nas and I sat down early in the year to discuss how to make Life Membership better; however both of us had come up with the same idea.

The point is, no graduate wants to put £60 of their hard-earned money into a black hole in the central Union, especially a graduate whose sole exposure has been in the bar (thinking their clubs are separate for some reason), saying "they are just making money off us".

People want to give back to what gave them their incredible student experience, in order to support the same experience for the next generation of students.

And so the new life membership idea was born; an idea that will grow in time to include more perks, the priority for us was to change it so it was a) cheaper and b) allow the funds to go in the direction of the graduates choosing (i.e. their club). This will be launched by the end of June.

In future I hope for there to be options for standing orders and a separate account code on eActivities to ensure the fund is spent appropriately, but for now the importance was to change the mindset of those considering Life Membership.

The donations portal side of things came where Israeli Society were to receive £22,000 of donations from generous benefactors. Not only was it a pain to receive the donation (back and forth in emails), but GiftAid was completely missed; expect to see this in future.

Give5k

A fun little day, in reality which showed how great our CSPs are; we ended up trending on Twitter! Rest-assured, the 5k will come into the grant for budgeting, with ACC Badminton getting a little extra as a result of winning.

Recycled Grant

They say Rome wasn't built in a day, but recycled grant pretty much happened in the course of 15 minutes.

[This segment is unfortunately redacted due to infringing on Student-staff policy, but imagine a short conversation with a unanimous and positive conclusion about keeping unused grant in the CSP zone]

And there you have it. No need for fancy graphs or surveys, just a sweet £30k extra to stay in the CSP domain (plus no more frivolous spending with encouragement from the DPCS as we'd lose it otherwise).

Use of funds

There would be little purpose in increasing CSP revenue if it were to be leaked away (can't use the phrase I was angling for in an official report) on bar tabs and the committee. It is vital that we take a top-down perspective and understand that some clubs are simply struggling to get by. **We need to save the pennies for the fairest use of the limited money we have.** Hence, the Expenditure Policy to go to Board of Trustees will dictate the appropriate way for our charity funds to be spent.

Budgeting

It's 1am. You're in a meeting room at CSPB, you are sweating under the pressure of defending a club that forgot how to use a semi-colon; this is how budgeting used to be. This year we are moving to completely change it, with a transition year of funding only the core activities. I'm sure my successor will be working on this over the summer. We have the data from the past, we know the expense, we don't want to have to read page after page of description on why a club really needs a new bag, we need the honest figures.

Even with process improvements in terms of volunteers using Google Drive to debate lines, budgeting remains a monster and we *will not speak of it* (HP reference for the fans). It needs to change dramatically, and have much more input from the people we employ to assist with club finance. **Whilst it's a great talking point that I was handed £390,000 with a "Go on", a warm smile and a pat on the back, this does not look particularly great in an audit by the charity commission;** we need more oversight.

Sports

We discussed change earlier, but change doesn't mean a solution. What do you do when you want to change a long-standing issue where you don't know what the problem is, you don't know how to change it and you don't know what the solution to any problem could be? Well, you run for Deputy President (Clubs & Societies) of course! So began the ballad of sport at Imperial.

It began at BUCS conference in July before my term even began (yes I took those days off in lieu at some point). The first thing I found was that the staff members at Sport Imperial are lovely, they really wanted to help student clubs do well in performance or participation. So where was it going wrong? I attempted to tease out from the Acting Head of Sport where he thought the problem was too little avail. However, I knew most of the problems from my time as a student, so in the very same man's interview for Head of Sport in September I made sure I put forward the question of, "Many students believe Sport Imperial to be an opaque organisation, and how would you tackle this?" I was promised a communications piece, which never came.

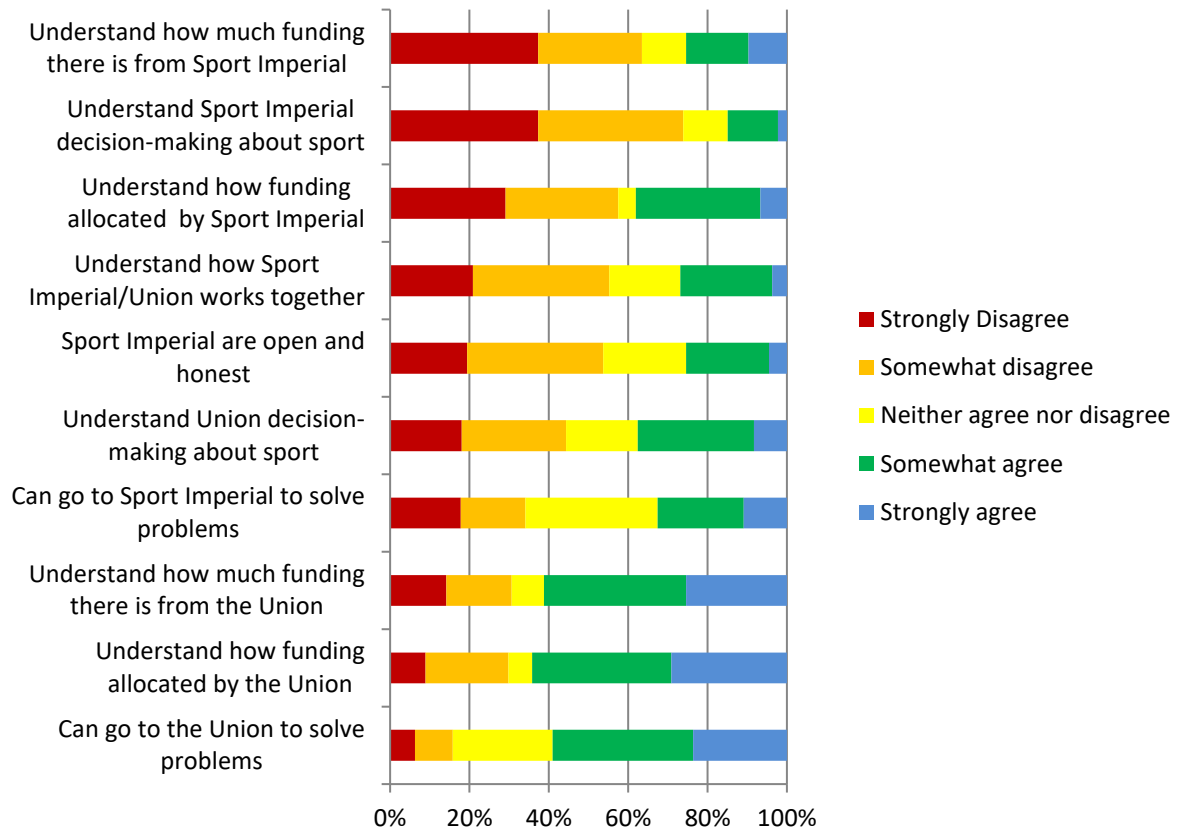
The sports strategy was running in the background in November, but my issue with the sports strategy was that whilst it was set up to try and tackle these issues, the fact remained that it tip-toed around the actual problems. At a strategy away day we teased out further issues but it was lacking the student voice, the cutting honesty which was necessary at this stage; I proposed a survey.

The survey in January/February highlighted what solution we needed. It was clear the structures we had in place made communication, signposting and cohesive decision-making hugely different.

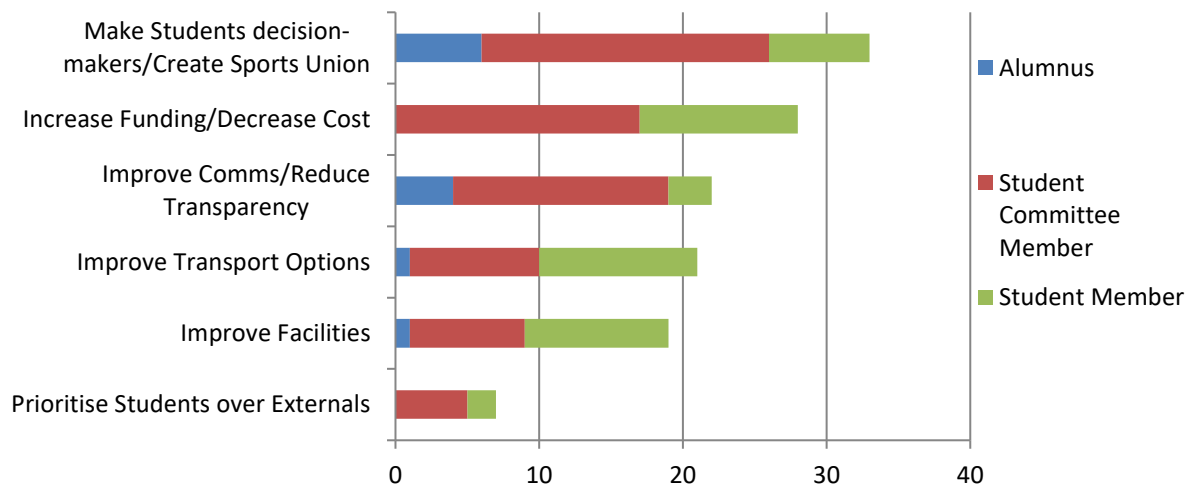
We needed all of club sport to be in one place, with one team, with students making the decisions.

How do you effect a change to a long-standing structure that has multiple parties involved? Well, the same as always. You demonstrate the need (the survey), the priority, the proposal (TBC) and garner buy-in. The priority and buy-in has been immensely challenging and long-winded, but we have reached a place where we are all on the same page about needing to result in the above solution, which is incredible! This piece in my end of year report, the piece in my other report, the Felix article all serve to maintain momentum on this. We will have new governance structures for student sport, better channels of communication and solving problems, and hopefully then the student body will begin to buy-in to sport like never before.

Summary of Opinions from Club Sport Review Survey (Alumni + Student Committee)



Text Comment Themes of : "How do you think we should solve the problems of sport at Imperial"?



Non-Manifesto

I can shoe-horn most of my work into club funding, but there are some large projects which will have a significantly positive impact which came out of nowhere from inception to implementation.

Management Group Redevelopment

This year's DPCS/CSPB theme has very much been "challenge the status quo to improve clubs' structures and processes". The less time we force upon our elected student volunteers, the more time there is to actually develop the clubs. This idea first came about in 2012, so to kick up the dust and let it settle at completion is an immense satisfaction for me.

At the start of the year, a group of CSPB members met in Meeting Room 6 with a small stack of post-it notes and Microsoft Excel. What left that room was a definitive list of problems with the current structure and a plan to solve it.

We restructured the existing Management Group structure to put all clubs in their proper place, whilst splitting the groups up into small, manageable sub-groups in order to keep them better supported, and give them a quick pathway up to the top of the chain to solve their problems if necessary. This would significantly decrease the amount of clicking time on eActivities which has been the role of the Management Group Chair in the past! At the same time we increased the expenditure cap before Management Group approval, which looks to reduce the amount of admin by 1/3 in one fell swoop.

At the same time we started a new project to develop effective training and start drop-in sessions, as the fewer emails and queries, the more time there is to work on longer-term benefits.

Room Bookings/Space

Until the student body decides they don't want any more clubs, there will constantly be an increasing demand on space. Fortunately for us, this is not just a Union problem and is felt by Imperial College's thirst for growth afterwards. We secured student club bookings taking priority over external bookings in College in one of their own policies, we persuaded College to let students operate the partition walls, we have even kickstarted a rapid improvement exercise to attempt to make our processes for ad-hoc bookings better by (eventually) having a timetable for students to see existing bookings. Various other changes too will allow the Student Activities Administrator to deal with bookings more quickly, and as a result we can reduce the 3-week booking period.

Et fini.

Some of the major issues clubs that face have been tackled this year, but the looming behemoths of transport and storage remain. Rest-assured the foundations have been laid to ensure that these can be brought to completion by the next team of officers.

There are other things which I would love to see completed next year:

- Storage is redeveloped in Beit Quad, to allow for more space and a fair use of the space for clubs.
- Students are engaged in the developments in sport and the Union and College successfully launches the new team/brand which students are satisfied with.
- Transport to Harlington/Heston for all sports clubs is easy and available for students on Mondays and Wednesdays.
- Mozzarella sticks stay at £1.50 (or else I'm going to get my life membership refunded).
- Interruption of studies students (on a case-by-case basis) are permitted to continue participation in the Union as normal.
- There is a campaign run on how exercise and sleep affects the brain in a positive way, to appeal to science-driven Imperial students to improve their work/life balance.

Acknowledgements

All of what I have achieved could not have been possible without the foundations laid by my predecessors in years gone by. Without their achievements previously, I would either have been swamped with other problems or not had the precedent to build upon. To the previous sabbs who have been here throughout the year, for pastoral support to keep us sane (Kieron, Ben), I give thanks.

The Activities Team have been there every day, every night, on WhatsApp, on email. Whilst we can delve into whole new levels of niche club-related banter, I couldn't function at all without them.

The rest of the staff at the Union make it a fantastic place to work, even when the January blues set in. Although I hide away in an office for most of the time, they are some of the loveliest people who I have ever had the pleasure of working with. Special mention to Jarlath "Jarlsberg" O'hara for leading with a student-led mentality and being an all-round excellent Managing Director; I would follow this man into battle.

CSPB, legends, whilst none of you may be reading this ever (I don't judge), you've helped me gather my thoughts all year on improving how we make clubs and socs work for the better. What's a policy anyway?

Finally, to the only other people I can count on to be as pressured as I am at all times, whilst maintaining a positive façade for each other, the Officer Trustees. I will thank them separately another time, in a medium where I can be soppier.

I will finish saying the Union is in a brilliant place right now, with incredible staff and bright prospects. I encourage you all to make the most of the opportunities you have next year to create tangible benefits to the student body.

James Cox, Deputy President (Clubs & Societies), 16/17