



Imperial College Union Communications Committee Report

Wednesday 14th March 2018

AGENDA ITEM NO.	
TITLE	Leadership Elections 2018: How should we communicate
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	<p>This report evaluates the communication methods used internally and externally during the Leadership Election 2018. It sets out five main aims for communications in the future: communications should be focussed, accurate, structured, widespread, and well-communicated. The paper has a number of points for discussion within Communications Committee.</p>
PURPOSE	<p>To identify some of the areas where communication could be improved in future leadership elections, stimulate discussion on these areas, and produce ‘best practice’ guidelines for communications in the future.</p>
DECISION/ACTION REQUIRED	<p>To note the report, discuss its contents, and approve its recommendations</p>

I. Background

- I.1. Imperial College Union's (ICU) *Our Strategy 2017-20* cites 'Democracy' as one of the key values of ICU, with the aim to "build a powerful and meaningful student democracy, which will engage every single one of us"¹
- I.2. ICU's position as one of Britain's "strongest student democracies" is a key reputational asset, strongly linked to the identity of ICU as a whole. It is highlighted by both our Officer Trustee (OT) team² and *Our Strategy 2017-20*³.
- I.3. The Leadership Elections (LEs), which are run each year around February/March, are a vital time of year for ICU and our stakeholders.
- I.4. No papers have previously been brought to Communications Committee with the aim of evaluating how we communicate – both internally within ICU and externally with our stakeholders – during the LE.
- I.5. Clear, efficient communication, while always vital, was increasingly important this year due to:
 - I.5.1. The change of the campaigning/voting period from two weeks to one week, in line with a number of other students' unions, which has thrown up a number of fresh challenges.
 - I.5.2. The fact voter turnout, following a number of years of increasing, dropped by nearly 10% between 2016-2017⁴.
- I.6. Following discussion with OTs and other stakeholders, it was felt reflection on and discussion of communications during LE18 would allow us to put in place recommendations for future years.

2. Methodology

¹ <https://www.imperialcollegeunion.org/sites/default/files/files/Our%20Strategy%202017-20%20%28spreads%29.pdf>

² <https://www.imperialcollegeunion.org/your-union/your-representatives/officer-trustees/chippy-union-president>

³ <https://www.imperialcollegeunion.org/about-us/our-strategy-2017-20/you>

⁴ <https://www.imperialcollegeunion.org/leadership-elections-2017/stats/dashboard>

- 2.1. In preparation for this paper, I spoke to a number of key stakeholders, namely OTs, Constituent Union (CU) presidents, media societies, and candidates. I did not consult those directly involved with LE18, e.g. Returning Officers.
- 2.2. During these consultations, I asked a series of questions, including what they thought the aims of communication during LEs should be, what communications had been done well, and what could be improved in future years.
- 2.3. Due to the time-frame of the elections, and the date by which this paper needed to be submitted, I was unable to include recommendations relating to the latter portion of the LE. This paper will therefore only concern itself with the period of LE18 leading up to, and including, the opening of voting on Friday 2nd March 2018.
- 2.4. During consultations, it became clear there were a number of standards stakeholders felt our communications should meet in future LEs, namely communications should be:
 - 2.4.1. Focused
 - 2.4.2. Accurate
 - 2.4.3. Structured
 - 2.4.4. Widespread
 - 2.4.5. Well-communicated
- 2.5. This paper has been written to explore how we can ensure our communications meet these standards in the future. It is intended to be the first step in a series that should culminate with a clear election communications plan for the next LEs

3. FOCUSED – What should the aims of communications during LEs be?

- 3.1. Communications sent out during the election period should be done so while always keeping in mind what the aims of communication are in general.
- 3.2. Stakeholders identified two *perceived* core aims of communications around LEs:
 - 3.2.1. Increase the number of candidates running as much as possible
 - 3.2.2. Increase voter turnout as much as possible, particularly from groups known for a lack of engagement, e.g. Postgraduates
- 3.3. Stakeholders generally felt the elections team prioritised these aims at the expense of other, potential aims. A certain level of frustration was expressed by stakeholders who felt constrained by these aims, and requested a greater degree of freedom.

3.4. Stakeholders identified a number of further aims they felt *should* be incorporated into

LE communications:

- 3.4.1. Increase the diversity of candidates
- 3.4.2. Ensure potential candidates are prepared for campaigning, and understand the nature/responsibilities of their role
- 3.4.3. Support the candidates in running their campaigns
- 3.4.4. Make sure students are making an informed choice on who is representing them

Discussion points:

- Are we able to incorporate all these aims within LE communications?
- If not, which aims should we be prioritising?
- Should voter turnout continue to be the primary goal of communications, as it is currently perceived to be?

Recommendations

- Begin election planning next year with a thorough discussion of what the aims of communication should be, ensuring all communications from the Union are in accord with these aims.
- Allow the unilateral aim of increased voter turnout/candidates running to be questioned, in favour of a more multi-faceted communication policy.

4. ACCURATE – How can we ensure the communications we send out are accurate?

4.1. Stakeholders identified a number of problems relating to attention to detail within communications, e.g.

- 4.1.1. Manifestos submitted early on in the nominations period were accidentally made available early⁵

⁵ <http://felixonline.co.uk/articles/2018-02-23-elections-error-accidentally-reveals-manifestos-early/>

- 4.1.2. The Disabilities Officer was referred to as the “Disabled Officer” across a number of election communications, including printed booklets and *Felix* adverts⁶
- 4.1.3. Incorrect information was given to candidates in their Candidates’ Pack⁷
- 4.1.4. Communications on social media made use of the hashtag #VoteUCU rather than #VoteICU⁸
- 4.2. Such mistakes have a number of knock-on impacts on ICU and stakeholders:
 - 4.2.1. They cause reputational damage to the elections team and ICU as a whole.
 - 4.2.2. They can alienate current volunteers and potential candidates.
 - 4.2.3. They can increase the pressure felt by candidates, student volunteers, and staff members.
- 4.3. A number of stakeholders made the suggestion that there should be increased oversight into campaigning communications, particularly those in printed media.

Discussion Points:

- Should this process be done internally, or should an external sub-editor be hired?
- Should key stakeholders be provided access to information relating to their positions *before* the material is disseminated, e.g. allow Liberation Officers (LOs) to look through material relating to their roles?
- Should this oversight cover all material, or be prioritised to printed material?

Recommendation

- Put in place a form of structured oversight for communications, ensuring sub-editing is standard protocol.

5. ORGANISED – How can we link communications to overall LE organisation?

⁶ <http://felixonline.co.uk/articles/2018-02-16-union-apologise-after-calling-disabilities-officer-disabled-officer/>

⁷ https://www.imperialcollegeunion.org/sites/default/files/Leadership-Elections-2018_Candidates-Pack.pdf

⁸ <https://f001.backblazeb2.com/file/felixonline/Comms+Committee/WhatsApp+Image+2018-03-02+at+15.07.01.jpeg>

5.1. Stakeholders identified a number of concerns over organisation, in particular with the LE timeline:

5.1.1. Dates and times did not seem to be fixed, and would shift throughout the LE planning period, e.g. the “Candidate Reveal” on Friday 2nd March was, over the course of a few days, advertised as starting at 12pm, 12.15pm, and 12.30pm.

5.1.2. LE communications began at the same time as a number of other communications, e.g. advertising Varsity, despite earlier plans not to run two concurrent campaigns.

5.2. This lack of organisation was a major stumbling block for communications during this year’s LEs. As well as causing confusion, these mistakes generated a sense of frustration and resentment among stakeholders, who were subsequently less likely to engage with the LE process across all levels.

Discussion Points

- What were the causes of this poor organisation in this year’s LEs?
- How can we ensure we have a clearly-organised communication plan for next year’s LEs?

Recommendations

- Put in place a set timeline at the beginning of the planning process, and do not change it beyond a certain date, e.g. end of Winter term.
- Ensure the timeline for LEs does not clash with other campaigns, prioritising the LEs wherever possible.

6. WIDESPREAD – How can we make sure the message gets out there?

6.1. The vast majority of stakeholders thought consistent branding was a strong point of LE18, and advertising was deployed to good effect throughout the South Kensington campus, e.g. good coverage with banner displays, booklets were informative. They

also felt a wide range of communication channels were used, e.g. social media, physical presence,

- 6.2. Some stakeholders raised concern over the amount of publicity material being distributed at non-SK campuses, and staff involvement with disseminating this material. This is particularly of note since non-SK campuses host students from groups who do not traditionally engage with LEs.
- 6.3. There was a general lack of physical presence of sabbatical officers during the election period. A series of 'meet-and-greet' style sessions were organised in February, but communication errors meant they were organised without the go-ahead of sabbatical officers, and were not advertised well. The sabbatical officers generally felt that, while a good idea, these sessions were not a success.

Discussion Points

- How can we ensure our coverage of campuses is consistent? What are the barriers to this?
- How could we have averted the problems faced by the 'meet-and-greet' sessions?

Recommendations

- Improve coverage to non-SK campuses, with both publicity material and staff support available.
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7. WELL COMMUNICATED – What should we be communicating, and to whom?

7.1. The majority of stakeholders felt they were not kept informed of developments during the planning and execution of this year's LE. To give a few examples:

7.1.1. ICTV were not contacted early enough regarding organisation of 'Meet the Candidates'.

7.1.2. Emails from stakeholders asking for information relating to the LEs did not receive a response.

7.1.3. CU Presidents were asked questions for which they were unable to provide answers.

7.2. This had a number of deleterious effects:

7.2.1. Increased level of stress for a number of stakeholders, e.g. candidates, media societies.

7.2.2. A number of stakeholders were frustrated by the lack of communication, and refused to take part in key election events, e.g. Meet the Candidates

7.2.3. Stakeholders were unable to disseminate information to students.

7.3. This lack of information affected all levels within ICU, including OTs and sabbatical officers. Sabbatical officers expressed frustration they had not been kept up to date on events, and said it made them less likely to be involved with LEs as a whole. However, they also recognised potential conflicts of interests that might exist, and a need to keep them at a distance to the organisation of LEs.

Discussion Points

- Who are the key stakeholders, and what level of access to information should they have?
- How do we get election information to the the right people, while ensuring LEs remain fair for all participants?

Recommendations

- For each aspect of the communication strategy, identify which stakeholders need to be involved, when they should be contacted, and by whom.
- Offer a space on the elections working group to at least one OT as standard.
- Send regular updates to a core team within ICU, extending beyond the elections working group.