

Motion to create an online Union Petitions System

Proposer: Ansh Bhatnagar (*FoNS UG OM*)

Seconders: Chimdi Igwe (*BME Officer*), Alessio Incitti (*LGBT+ Officer*), Ariana Sadr-Hashemi (*Mental Health Officer*), Peter Bridgman (*Arts & Entertainments Chair*), Rhidian Thomas (*Ethics & Environment Officer*), Michael Edwards (*RCSU President*), Shervin Sabeghi (*RCSU Welfare Officer*), Abhijay Sood (*RCSU AAO*), Michaela Flegrová (*FoNS UG OM*), Lloyd James (*FoNS PG Student*)

Union Notes:

1. That students have in the past voiced concerns and campaigned for positive change via external petitions systems, such as change.org.
2. That in this academic year alone, four visible petitions have been shared and signed by over 2500 students in total, including:
 - a) A petition to expand the gym at Ethos [1], garnering over 900 signatures on change.org.
 - b) A petition for one of the official Union campaigns, Divest Imperial, garnering over 1700 signatures on the Fossil Free platform [2].
 - c) Just over a week ago, a petition to save the swimming pool at St Mary's Campus [3], garnering over 1500 signatures on change.org.
 - d) A petition to bring back Stella at the Union [4], garnering over 100 signatures on change.org.
3. That anyone with an email address can sign these external petitions, meaning that there is no guarantee that everyone who has signed those petitions is a student at Imperial.
4. Petitions can be classed into two broad areas: things that the Union can do and things that College can do. In the latter case, the Union has the ability to take a stance on such things and lobby College to achieve that change.
5. That students' unions across the country have petition systems on their official platform, such as Birkbeck [5], Middlesex [6], and UCL [7], with Sussex SU having the most comprehensive petitions system [8].
6. The Union has committed to "support students to ensure their voice is heard and communicate the impacts of student-led change" as an objective under 'For Your Voice' in the 2017-2020 Strategy [9].

Union Believes:

1. That the Union has a duty to make it as simple as possible for students to make their voices heard.
2. That, although Union Council is the intended forum for students to use to achieve change, the average student is not aware of it, and if they are aware of it, they may feel intimidated by the bureaucracy of the Union. These two factors may have led to students resorting to external petitions in the past.
3. That as external petitions can be signed by anyone (not just Imperial students), this affects the perceived legitimacy of such petitions.
4. That the popularity of external petitions indicates student demand for a petitions system on the Union platform.
5. That this petitions system will help the Union be more aware of what the students want, and that this can lead to a more effective and representative organisation.

Union Resolves:

1. To create an online petitions system as detailed in Appendix I.
2. To mandate the current and incoming Officer Trustee teams to work with Union staff to act upon the above point by the start of Autumn Term of the academic year 2018-19.
3. To mandate the incoming Officer Trustee team with the task of organising a publicity campaign upon the launch of the petitions system.

References:

- [1] change.org (2017-2018) "Expand Energia Gym at Ethos" Available at: <https://www.change.org/p/alice-gast-expand-energia-gym-at-ethos>
- [2] Fossil Free (2014-2018) "Divest Imperial from Fossil Fuels" Available at: <https://campaigns.gofossilfree.org/petitions/divest-imperial-from-fossil-fuels>
- [3] change.org (2018) "Save St Mary's pool, Imperial College London" Available at: <https://www.change.org/p/sport-imperial-save-st-mary-s-pool-imperial-college-london>
- [4] change.org (2017-2018) "Replace Bud Light with an actual beer" Available at: <https://www.change.org/p/imperial-college-union-replace-bud-light-with-an-actual-beer>
- [5] Birkbeck Students' Union (2015) "Your Ideas and Petitions" Available at: <https://www.birkbeckunion.org/articles/your-ideas-and-petitions>
- [6] Middlesex SU (2018) "Student Voice" Available at: <https://www.mdxsu.com/thestudentvoice>
- [7] Students' Union UCL (2018) "Petition to the Provost: Increase funding for Student Psychological Services!" Available at: <http://studentsunionucl.org/forms/petition-to-provost-increase-funding-for-student-psychological-services>
- [8] Sussex Students' Union (2018) "Petitions" Available at: <https://www.sussexstudent.com/democracy/petitions/>
- [9] Imperial College Union (2017) "For Your Voice" Available at: <https://www.imperialcollegeunion.org/about-us/our-strategy-2017-20/your-voice>

Appendix I – The Online Petitions System

Objectives:

- Have petitions created by students visible on the Union website.
- To verify signatories by asking them to log-in in order to sign a petition.
- To ensure this petition system will be effective in achieving positive change.

Identified potential issues:

- Troll/Abusive petitions
- Petitions that would compromise the financial responsibility of the Union (to use a hyperbolic example: “make all bar drinks 50% off!”)
- Too many petitions

How to best implement an effective petitions system:

There should be a section of the Union website dedicated to student petitions.

Petition Creation: If a student wishes to make a petition, they should be able to give the petition a title, a description, and choose who to address it to.

Preliminary Phase: The petition will then enter a preliminary phase where it will not be publicly visible until the student can get 20 students to ‘second’ it. (They can choose to invite the 20 students at the petition creation stage. An email can be sent to these students so that they can click on a link provided if they wish to second that petition)

Petition Approval: The petition will then have to be approved by the Council Chair, in order to filter out troll petitions, or any petitions that have abuse directed towards people (or are otherwise inappropriate). A full CSV report of rejected petitions should be made available monthly on the Union website, for transparency. This may be automated.

Going Public: Once a petition is seconded by at least 20 students and approved by the Council Chair, the petition will go live publicly and any member of Imperial College Union would be able to sign it by logging in.

Council Consideration: Once a petition garners 200 signatures, it should be brought to the next Union Council meeting for consideration. If Council vote to not support the petition, the next stage applies.

Trustee Board Decision: Once a petition garners 1000 signatures, the Union will be expected to act upon the aims of the petition to the best of their ability. When the petition is addressed to College, the Union will be expected to take a public stance on the matter.

Although it is expected of the Union to support the petition, Trustee Board will retain power and will have to come to a decision on whether to support or to ignore the petition (as Trustee Board have the power to overrule a Council vote). Trustee Board should come to a decision within 10 working days.

Reasons for the decision should be provided at the Union President’s next Union Council report.

Petition Expiry: All petitions will expire six months after the creation date. Expired petitions will be removed from the usual petitions section.

Petitions Archive: Expired petitions will be publicly available in a Petitions Archive on the ICU website. Archived petitions cannot be signed by any more people.