Imperial College Union Board of Trustees

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AGENDA ITEM NO.	16
TITLE	**DPE Report - DPE Reflections on 2019-20**
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	• DPE Reflections on 2019-20
PURPOSE	**Information**
DECISION/ACTION REQUIRED	**None**

DPE Reflections on 2019-20

Wow! What a year! They say to expect the unexpected and that no year (*try day*!) is ever the same. Well, I think we can safely say this *really* was a rather unprecedented year! From major restructuring and staffing changes (including change of MD) to global pandemic, we've been put under a lot of stress and strain, as individuals and as an organisation. I'm sure when we look at all the statistics and graphs for 2020, they will be off the chart! If you had warned me about all this at the beginning of the year, would I have still signed up... absolutely, yes (really!)!

Sometimes, looking back at the year, it seems like a blur. Where did all that valuable time go? I certainly appreciate the opportunity to reflect on the year, as so often we are running from one thing to the next with barely enough time to relax and recover, let alone reflect.

In the Beginning

It's almost surreal to think of us taking group photos in the Union and on the Beit Quad, and stepping precariously across each other on a bench (& blindfolded) – this may have to change somewhat this year! From an early stage, it was clear that the sabbs were confident, engaged and committed – it could be argued workaholics, at times, subsequently! I'm sure they can all be pleased with their work and accomplishments this year, even if, perhaps, not getting to everything they were intending to.

The DPE/Trustee role has been challenging and varied. There's always a lot going on, whether that's College or Union recruitment, review panels (including a trip to Singapore to review the joint medical programme, where I distinctly remember grimacing about 1 metre away from a monkey!), disciplinary panels, Union committees, College committees, the list goes on. The DPE role hits the ground running with preparing NSS and (this year) PRES recommendations. Once these were finalised, an early memory goes to delivering a short pitch to Provost's Board with Abs (and I'm really bad at remembering lines, as Abs can testify!) – this was one of the first of many interactions with senior College staff and was a bit of an unreal moment. As students arrived and as term started this was also a foretaste of the many meetings to come!

Efficiency-Thoroughness Trade-Off

Just to bring in some ideas from systems engineering (part of my PhD research!), that I think most of us can relate to, is the ongoing trade-off between efficiency and thoroughness. (I will spare you the references!) This was, for me, one of the biggest challenges throughout the year – especially coming from PhD research where thoroughness dominates. To be thorough we need time to think, to recognise the situation and to choose and plan. While to be efficient we focus on implementing plans and executing actions. If thoroughness dominates, there may be too little time to carry out the actions. If efficiency dominates, actions may be badly prepared or wrong. Striking the right balance has been incredibly difficult for me. Of course, we often strive for both which inevitably leads to longer working hours (and usually more stress). As our time and resources required increases, we quickly find that our time and resources available decreases.

Going from one substantial and long project/task (i.e. my PhD) to multiple projects/tasks has been refreshing but challenging. I have a tendency toward thoroughness which has made juggling multiple tasks and working efficiently troublesome. (Let alone dealing with difficult personal circumstances on top of this.) The number of meetings to attend, reports/papers to read and projects/working groups I've been pulled into has been formidable. It's been a challenge to navigate this effectively; choosing which meetings to attend, being adequately informed/prepared (again balancing efficiency-thoroughness) etc. This is an area I encourage the next DPE to think about carefully with the rep staff team & rep network. Inevitably, there have been many things I've wanted to do but have found little time for. The balance between thoroughness and efficiency is something I'll continue to be mindful of and fine tune as I work in different situations.

Postgraduates and the Union (*it was only fitting to say something on this*!)

As a postgraduate student and, in particular, a postgraduate research student it's been interesting being a sabb officer. Often called upon, or reminding people to consider, the PGR view, somewhat akin to the lone voice crying in the wilderness! In many ways, it was a good year to have a PGR DPE with the recent Postgraduate Research Experience Survey to process and evaluate, and with the upcoming review of PGR regulations (requiring substantial revision). One of my key promises in my manifesto was to focus on this area, in order to improve the PGR experience and to make it more consistent across the college. I think I was able to leverage my experience/position to ensure the College took the review process for PRES more seriously than before (particularly at a College level), and to ensure the necessary forums/committees had appropriate PGR rep input. On the Union side, a PGR forum (consisting of academic reps) has now also been established which is a positive step forward.

As a PGR sabb, it's hard not to feel slightly out of place. The Union is dominated by a UG mentality and culture. This is apparent in the Union committees and subcommittees with both the people who attend, and the topics raised. The sabb officers are nearly always UG students (and the people who vote predominantly UGs) and many of the more active/involved PGR students (in terms of Union matters) have been UG students at Imperial. Furthermore, most of the staff have also been UG students at some point whereas most have not been a PGT or PGR student. This all leads to a pervasive UG-centric organisational culture, with a focus on the UG experience/journey. One misnomer I've often heard is that PG students don't want to engage for whatever reasons (sometimes followed by, so why should we care?). However, more often than not, it's simply that they think the Union is designed for UGs.

If there is a desire to change this culture, it will require more work. One model of organisational culture, which I think is useful, divides culture into three levels:

- Surface-Level Cultural Artefacts
- Organisational Rules, Values, Practices
- Values and Deep Cultural Assumptions

At the top level are the routine aspects of everyday practice. The middle level consists of the stated rules, values and practices that are used to create the top-level artefacts such as policies, standards and guidelines. At the lowest level is the invisible yet pervasive underlying deep cultural assumptions upon which decisions are made and actions taken that the other levels rest upon. Trying to change the culture by only operating at the top two levels may help somewhat in the short term but is unlikely to be long lasting.

A more permanent shift in culture will be primarily set by the leaders of this organisation. To cultivate a broader UG & PG centred organisational culture requires identifying the desired principles and values under which decisions will be made. All aspects of the Union must be engineered to be in alignment with these principles and the leaders must be committed to them. We might then expect to find the following characteristics:

- PG culture is integrated into the dominant culture; not a separate subculture.
- PG activity is integrated into both development and operations.
- Tensions between UG and PG priorities are addressed through a constructive, negotiated process.
- Key stakeholders (UG/PG) have full partnership roles.

Accountability and Learning

Going through many crises over staffing changes, health & safety, commercial services and, of course, Covid-19, etc. got me thinking about accountability and learning, and continuing to evolve and adapt successfully. All this requires constant attention and mindfulness by leaders, and it's certainly been challenging for me to navigate all this successfully. When we look at problems/failures that have arisen, it seems that there are two possible valid approaches one could take, which will depend on our interpretation of events.

One is backward-looking and retributive, where blame and punishment are prominent, and often follows from a focus on identified individuals concerned. The other is forward-looking where we ask: what should we do with the problem and what changes should we implement? This normally follows when we recognise/notice an organisational or operational issue. Which approach to take (or, indeed, combination) seems not necessarily clear cut as multiple interpretations are always possible, and we are subject to confirmation bias. To maximise learning from such problems/failures it appears that considering all possible interpretations is essential, and this requires appropriate processes and structures to be established and adequate space for open conversations. Undoubtedly this is founded upon good relationships and communication; key factors to ensure continual improvement and desired outcomes.

Finally, it's been fascinating (as well as challenging!) working with so many different personality types, with different ways of thinking and working, and different underlying assumptions of how the Union works (or should work). I have learned that great mentorship and leadership embraces ALL types of people, and all communication styles and personality types. It is important to recognise the power, value and contributions of all styles, personalities and approaches, and help each and every individual to flourish, honouring their own unique style, approach and behaviour. This will ensure the best possible outcomes are achieved for the Union and its members.

Thank you

There are many equally valid ways one could go about writing reflections on the year, and it's a challenge to decide what to reflect on as well as what to write down here. I tried not to overthink it, but I'm not sure I succeeded! In the end, I've touched on the key themes that have challenged me throughout the year, and hopefully have provided some useful insights/food for thought. I suppose this is as much for me as anyone else, and I'm sure my reflections will continue on, well into the future, with so much to process. I wish to thank everyone for the many things I have learned from you, or been inspired by, throughout the year and wish the best of luck for the future.