

## Imperial College Union GOING BACK TO BASICS: ICU STRATEGY 2021-23

### A. HOW DOES THIS STRATEGY WORK?

Great strategy is easy to understand and straightforward to follow. Which is why this plan is structured into six simple sections.

- B. We identify and understand the **major contextual challenges and opportunities** that we face.
- C. We state what our overall **mission** is and the **theory of change** that underpins all our work.
- D. We define what this means for our students as our **aims**.
- E. We articulate how we work through our **values**.
- F. We identify the **enablers** that will help us to become an effective organisation.
- G. We set **key performance indicators** to measure our performance against clear goals.

We also know that a strategic plan is only useful if it is relevant, refreshed and read on a regular basis. The dynamic environment that we operate in requires us to depart from the standard way of approaching strategy – a revolutionary process that sets a new long-term vision every five to ten years. Instead, our intention is to adopt an evolutionary methodology and refine the plan every two years. This will ensure continuity in the areas where we know a longer-term perspective is required, whilst allowing us to adapt the more tangible aspects in light of changing circumstances and organisational development.

It is also important to understand that this strategy does not exist in a silo. It is an essential component and driving force behind the annual planning and objective setting exercise for the Union. It underpins and works in tandem with our democracy to ensure we develop an annual operating plan and associated individual objectives for all those working within the organisation.

	Staff Objectives	Officer Objectives	
	Union Annual Operating Plan [Departmental Plans]		
	Annual Objectives	Officer Manifestos	Other Democratic Mandates
	Strategy		

## **B. WHAT IS OUR OPERATING CONTEXT? CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES**

This plan marks the start of a new period for Imperial College Union, as we seek to become a more effective and engaging organisation for our members. To do this effectively it is imperative that we identify and recognize some of our big challenges over the coming years, as well as some of our most exciting opportunities.

### We do not exist in a vacuum

We are an essential component of the wider Imperial student experience. With a relaunched College strategy, a professional services transformation project in motion, and a high-profile estates development plan, it is clear that there are major areas where our objectives align closely with the College. There is a real desire across both institutions for our positive transformation, and a real sense of what a successful students' union could look like. We also need to be mindful of the changing external operating environment, responding appropriately to the challenges that Brexit will inevitably pose for both the Union and the College.

### We have exceptional student leadership at all levels

One way of thinking about students' unions is on a continuum on the basis of what they *provide directly* for students versus what they *enable and empower students* to provide for themselves. The nature of Imperial College (for example our longer degree programmes) and the mindset of the students enrolled at the institution means as an organisation we sit further towards the latter end of the spectrum than most other unions. We should support, encourage and celebrate this: giving students the opportunity to co create and lead wherever possible.

### We have a diverse student population with varying levels of engagement and insight

Imperial is a large, diverse educational community that spans a wide range of distinct student groups. A large portion of what creates a sense of belonging and identity is formed in conjunction with academic study, with departments and faculties creating their own unique cultures. Current engagement levels with the Union vary significantly across these different communities, and we know we must do more to reach out to all students on their terms.

### We must rebuild trust in the organisation

We know from our survey data that trust in the organization has diminished over the past three years. We need to reverse this trend and rebuild confidence in the Union. We want students to know that we're here for them and ultimately have their back. Whilst we need the College (and other organisations) to trust us to deliver effectively.

### We have a financial model that must become more sustainable

A strong financial position is critical for us to achieve impact for students. The Union's funding model has historically relied too much on volatile income – making our core purpose engagement activities overly reliant on commercial revenue on a day-to-day basis. This has led to both an under investment in the latter area, as well as a lack of continuity, stability and development in the former. After a number of years of significant budget deficits, our free reserves are also significantly depleted, hampering our ability to invest strategically. There is a clear opportunity to address this challenge as we transform.

### We must respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every area of society, causing us to pause, rethink and deliver our services and activities differently. As we eventually move out of the crisis, we will need to rebuild our operation from first principles, guided by a sense of what we want to become, not what we once were. We must learn the lessons from operating remotely for large portions of time, preserving practices that have proven successful and more effective.

### We need to better engage with the wider students' union sector

Imperial College Union is unique. But that that does not mean we should be isolated. We have become too disconnected from other students' unions, missing out on the significant benefits created by a

sector that continually shares best practice and works together. We have an exciting opportunity to reengage, firstly within the London higher education community, but then beyond on a national level. This will be particularly important in the context of potential further regulation on the sector.

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### C. WHY DO WE EXIST? OUR MISSION

As a membership organisation it is critical that we have a clear, unifying mission statement setting out why the organisation exists. It is our horizon, and ensures we are all heading in the same direction.

**Our mission is simple:** to make a **positive** impact on the experiences and outcomes of **all** Imperial College students from **all** backgrounds.

**Our theory of change** sets out clearly the overarching conceptual framework for how this impact will be achieved.

1. Positive impact is delivered by a combination of service provision (doing things for students, or helping them do things for themselves), and advocating for students (representing their interests to others).
2. Providing services for students can be done via direct delivery (doing it ourselves), in partnership with another organisation (most often the College), or via third parties. The appropriate model will differ depending on the nature of the service and where competitive advantage lies.
3. Advocating for students can be done at both the individual and collective level, using a range of lobbying and campaigning techniques that both rely on a combination of student voice, student insight and student interest.
4. We must be a sustainable, effective and credible organisation in order to provide services and advocate for students' interests successfully. Legitimacy must be earned and will be a key driver for success in both areas of impact.

## **D. WHAT IMPACT WE WILL HAVE ON STUDENTS? OUR AIMS**

The student population at Imperial College is incredibly diverse, with different needs and different expectations of their union. This makes it even more important that we clearly articulate the impact we are seeking to achieve on the holistic student experience. We've broken it down into seven core themes. Some of these ideas will involve delivering things ourselves or in partnership, whilst some will mean advocating for the College and other organisations to do more.

We've called this strategy 'back to basics' for a reason. For each of these aims we will set out why it is important to our members, and then what the core streams of work are within each section – looking at the basics of what students currently expect from us.

### **1. To improve the academic and educational experience of students**

It's the number one reason you're a student at Imperial College, and it's what you've told us you spend most of your time doing. As an organisation we need to significantly increase our engagement and impact in this area, taking into account the diverse range of programmes and modes of study in the institution.

### **2. To support and enhance the wellbeing of students**

We also know it's really important that we play a role in supporting your health and general wellbeing. And that a lack of money during your studies to fund basic living costs is an issue that many students face. Student housing is also a critical area we need to make an impact on, raising the quality and reducing the financial burden. And we've also got a role to play promoting both physical and mental wellbeing, keeping you happy and healthy.

### **3. To strengthen and help create active and inclusive student communities**

The Union – all our spaces, activities and services – should be a place where Imperial students come together. We know that a key part of a positive experience is building connections with other students and staff at the College, and that shared interests and experiences are enablers of strong and inclusive communities.

### **4. To facilitate the personal and professional development of students**

We know that once you've finished studying, the graduate job market is tough. There are so many ways that getting involved in the Union can help you with your eventual career. But at the moment we don't make these clear enough. And we know you expect us to work alongside the Careers Service to make sure the College is supporting you in your professional development.

### **5. To empower students to change the world around them**

Your time at Imperial College should be transformative. It should inspire and drive you to look at how things could be, rather than how they are. We know we need to support you in driving change and making the world around you a better place: in the Union, in the College, in the local area and beyond.

### **6. To challenge and reduce inequalities affecting students**

We know that the student experience at Imperial isn't equal, and that sections of our student population are disadvantaged on the basis of who they are. One of our core values is inclusivity, and we know we have significant and important work to do in order to close these experience and outcome gaps.

### **7. To enable students to have fun**

Whilst the priorities of most students' unions might have changed with the wider sector, we know that students still expect their union to be a source of fun and celebration on campus. As well as engendering this into other areas of our work where appropriate, we know we have more to do in order to help you make great memories from your time at Imperial.

## E. HOW WILL WE BEHAVE? OUR VALUES

We've said what we're going to do for students, but we also need to state clearly how we'll go about doing it.

### 1. We act with **integrity**

Our values should permeate the entire organisation. They should dictate the way we operate, the behaviours we champion, and underpin our culture. We define integrity as our **anchor value** because it is the one that holds all others to be true: being honest and respectful of each other at all times. On a daily basis this means we will:

- i. Hold ourselves to all our values on a daily basis.
- ii. Treat others with honesty and respect, challenging behaviours that fail to live up to our values.
- iii. Place the interests of students above ourselves.
- iv. Regularly talk about our organisational values and celebrate when we are using them.

### 2. We are **democratic** in our approach

We must champion our democratic structures, empowering students to lead, and placing them at the heart of our decision-making. We should look towards codesign wherever possible, and constantly strive to involve those affected by decisions in the development of solutions. On a daily basis this means we will:

- i. Ask first and act later, giving people an opportunity to feed into work at an early stage.
- ii. Understand that we exist to make life better for students, and pro-actively respond to the changing priorities and needs of students.
- iii. Empower student representatives to be engaged in decisions at the right time, with the right level of training and support.

### 3. We are **inclusive** in everything that we do

We should foster a sense of understanding and mutual respect amongst the whole student body, making our opportunities, activities and services accessible for all students from all backgrounds. We must proactively address inequalities that students face, supporting our entire community to thrive. On a daily basis this means we will:

- i. Listen to the voices of all students, actively seeking the views of those who struggle to get their opinions heard.
- ii. Take active steps to remove participation barriers in our activities, ensuring more students from currently under-represented groups can participate.
- iii. Create and support initiatives to create a more diverse organisation, ensuring we reflect the population we are here to serve.

### 4. We are **accountable** for our work

We should be open answerable to each other and our student members to ensure the Union makes a positive impact on their lives at Imperial. We should celebrate our strengths and be honest about our shortcomings, acknowledging where improvements are required and actively build on feedback to consistently improve. On a daily basis this means we will:

- i. Be responsible for ensuring outputs and outcomes are delivered, being clear about our intentions and measures of success.
- ii. Communicate regularly about the work the Union is doing, helping all our stakeholders understand what impact we are having.
- iii. Proactively seek feedback to improve our work, demonstrating how we are responding, and communicating this back to students.

### 5. We are **ambitious** in what we want to achieve

We should be bold and unafraid to challenge the status quo: an organisation that inspires and embraces change with a determination to succeed at every level. Students deserve the very best experience at Imperial College, and we should work every day to deliver this. On a daily basis this means we will:

- i. Reflect on all our activities and ask ourselves the question can we do it better at every opportunity.
- ii. Take managed risks to achieve our aims, understanding that learning from our mistakes is an essential component of long-term success.
- iii. Frame challenges positively, advancing a vision for Imperial that puts the student experience at the heart of its success.

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## **F. HOW DO WE BECOME AN EFFECTIVE ORGANISATION? OUR ENABLERS**

We've outlined what we're going to do and how we're going to do it, but we'll only be able to do this if we're an effective organisation both now and in the future. This means we'll need:

### **1. Great people and culture**

Our organisation should be driven by great people. And great people shape great organisational culture. We must ensure that our permanent and casual staff teams, and our student volunteers, remain at the forefront of our work and are reflective of the diversity of our student population. Working or volunteering at the Union should be a positive transformative experience for everyone.

We need to build a high performing team based on a values framework with a strong commitment to measurement, monitoring and continuous improvement. This should be articulated into behaviours that are encouraged and championed at all levels of the organisation. These values should be front and center of all our recruitment, embedded within our induction and training, and used as a foundation for our reward and recognition schemes. Our working environment should be one of trust and accountability, empowering people to work together and share their knowledge and experience. Transparent internal communication will be critical for everyone to know how their work directly contributes to the overall mission of the organisation, creating a clear understanding that success is rooted in collective endeavor.

### **2. Sustainable resources and infrastructure**

Our resource model and infrastructure should be aligned directly with our strategy. It should be environmentally, ethically and socially responsible. And it should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the changing needs and priorities of our membership. We need to work closely with the College to secure our long-term financial future, agreeing a funding model that enables our core charity to provide the engagement, support and representation services that students rely on. Our bars, retail and events operation should work in partnership with students and the wider campus, rooted in the notion of competitive advantage. It must balance the need to generate a surplus to reinvest in the Union, with a requirement to give students maximum value for money. We need to proactively engage with students about how this model works in different areas and continue to generate funds from other sources where this fits with our primary purpose.

Our student-led clubs, societies, projects and constituent unions also need to be supported to use their own resources sustainably. We should provide training and direct support, balancing the requirement for strategic oversight and financial governance, with a commitment to autonomy and self-ownership.

All of our physical resources need to be managed proactively and maintained to a standard that enables the effective delivery of services and activities for students. As our landlords, we should have clarity over 'who does what' with the College, with an agreed framework to access regular capital refurbishment projects as required.

### **3. Effective governance and strong democracy**

We're a complex organisation: a students' union, part of the College community and a registered charity subject to rules and legislation with which we need to comply. That means we need to ensure our often-complex governance is resourced, robust and transparent. We need the right structures and processes in place to make the best decisions for the long-term future of the Union.

But as a democratic organisation we also need to ensure that our members are engaged with and drive the decisions that we make. Creating continuous opportunities for students to be as involved as possible in the organisation is central to who we are, and we should persistently look to improve the way all voices are informed, amplified and heard within the organisation and beyond. We have exceptional student leaders who should be empowered to help co create the solutions to the challenges we face, and we should provide a range of different routes for different types of students



to do this. We are at our most effective when we can demonstrate we represent the interests of all students.

#### **4. Integrated and innovative technology**

Our digital infrastructure should support our entire operation to be as efficient, effective and collaborative as possible, reflecting Imperial's scientific and technological ambitions. It should anticipate future trends and resonate with our student population. We should procure, design and build our systems using technology that empowers individuals and teams at the local level, but also takes into consideration the ramifications on the wider organisation. This should include the development of support for our various student leaders and student groups, enabling them to undertake their own activities successfully.

We must work closely with the College to strike the balance between using hardware and digital solutions that (a) might already exist within the institution, (b) are purchased 'off the shelf' for our bespoke needs, or (c) where our needs are so distinctive, that a custom build is required. We should be mindful of the sustainability of our infrastructure, mitigating the risk of single points of failure and putting in place documented operation and development plans to ensure their long-term success.

#### **5. Engaging communication**

We must actively listen, learn from feedback, and understand how students want to engage with us. As a membership organisation our approach to communication must be rooted in the desire to build a meaningful relationship with all our stakeholders. Our messaging, our channels and our brand should be authentic and reflective of our values, reinforcing the notion that the Union is there for students, and building trust in what we do. We must take into account the diversity of the student population at Imperial, adapting our techniques and language appropriately, and keeping up to date with the channels that students are using.

Keeping students informed about the Union, the College and the wider national context, and articulating the impact that we have in a clear and purposeful manner is crucial for our success. We also need to support and empower students to communicate with each other, creating spaces for discussion and collaboration.

#### **6. Comprehensive research, evidence and insight**

Research, evidence and insight should underpin our organisational development and support our student representation and democracy. This means sourcing and conducting high quality research regularly and using it to inform decisions made at all levels. We need a holistic approach that fuses quantitative and qualitative techniques and creates democratic spaces for interpretation and deliberation to unpick complex issues.

Our research should deliver impact for students. We should collate and manage data securely in a way that enables the organisation, student groups and student leaders to become more effective and report regularly on performance. We should be clear about what we are measuring and why, and open about our progress and the challenges that we face.

#### **7. A constructive relationship with the College and wider sector**

The Union is an essential part of the Imperial College community. Our relationship with the institution should be one of mutuality and respect and should exist at multiple levels throughout both organisations. As our primary funder and regulator, we must hold ourselves accountable for delivering key aspects of the student experience, demonstrating our impact, our effectiveness and our value. But we also need a relationship that empowers and respects our right to constructively disagree with and challenge the College in a positive and productive way. We should be a critical friend to the institution, advocating for positive changes on behalf of students, and championing best practice where relevant.

We also need to engage more fully with the wider students' union and higher education sectors. Collaboration and partnerships make us stronger and more effective.

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## G. OUR KEY PERFORMANCE MEASURES: A BALANCED SCORECARD

Our scorecard will be developed once the wider plan is agreed and will include a range of 'output' and 'impact' measures – ensuring we are tracking both our leading and lagging factors. We will build up a longitudinal record of our progress over a number of years.

Mission	A positive impact on the experiences and outcomes of all Imperial College students from all backgrounds.							
	For example 80% of students agree we have a positive impact on their life during their time at Imperial College							
Aims	To improve the academic and educational experience of students	To support and enhance the wellbeing of students	To strengthen and help create active and inclusive student communities	To facilitate the personal and professional development of students	To empower students to change the world around them	To challenge and reduce inequalities affecting students	To enable students to have fun	
	For example 80% agree we represent their academic interests (NSS)							
Values	For example 80% of students associate us with one of our values when asked to describe the organisation in one word 100% of staff can identify and explain at least one value and how it's directly relevant to their role							
Enablers	Sustainable resources and infrastructure	Great people and culture	Strong democracy and professional governance	Integrated and innovative technology	Effective and engaging communication	Comprehensive research, evidence and insight	A constructive relationship with the College at all levels	Other
		For example 90% of all staff would positively recommend ICU as a place to work						