

# ICU Postgraduate Engagement Report

Author: Dr Lloyd James, ICU President

PG Contributors: Michaela Flegrova, Milia Hasbani, Leonie Stromich, Ceire Wincott

Staff Contributors: Diptasri Basu, Cat Turhan

## Executive Summary

Imperial College Union does not serve the interests of Postgraduate students as well as it could. Or, in fact, as well as it serves the interests of Undergraduate students. In the 2021 Student Experience survey, only 33% of Postgraduates agreed that ICU makes a positive difference to their life, in contrast with over 50% of Undergraduates. The difference between UG and PG engagement and satisfaction with the Union, across a wide range of metrics, is stark – and unacceptable. The mission of the Union is to make a positive impact on the experiences and outcomes of **all** Imperial College students from **all** backgrounds, and until we accommodate our PG members as well as our UG members, we are failing in that mission.

Undergraduate and Postgraduate students undertake very different kinds of study and are at different stages of their lives. What they want from their Union is not likely to be the same, and there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach that will work for all students. Unfortunately, there is a wide gap in our collective understanding of how Postgraduates engage with the Union, and what a good quality of provision for Postgraduate representation, community, and wellbeing looks like. This Report describes the Union’s Postgraduate Engagement Review, undertaken from July-December 2021, with the aim of bridging this knowledge gap. Steered by a PG Engagement Review Working Group composed of experienced PG volunteers, a set of recommendations have been produced for how the Union can improve its Postgraduate provision.

The most significant, and potentially controversial, of these recommendations is the disestablishment of the Graduate Students Union (GSU), which has been the Union’s primary PG representation and community-building structure for the last ~10 years. The GSU has had a mixed track record – it has attracted some exceptionally capable and hardworking volunteers, it has won some tangible improvements to the College’s PG offer, and it has organised some very successful events. But it has done none of these things consistently, it has never had a fully-functioning committee, and it has not achieved a significant overall level of impact on the PG experience.

A key aim of this Review has been disentangling the extent to which issues with the GSU have been down to a lack of support from ICU centrally, versus disadvantages intrinsic to the GSU structure. After careful consideration of a large body of evidence, the Working Group concluded that instead of investing more heavily in the GSU, it is right to consider an altogether different approach. After all – the Union would not leave representation and community-building for all the College’s Undergraduates to a single volunteer committee, so why should we do this for Postgraduates?

Taken together, the Working Group’s recommendations set out what this alternative approach would look like. It is an approach which recognises that (at least for the time being) engaged

Postgraduates are a precious resource, and elected PG volunteer roles should offer high impact – not be doing tasks that could be straightforwardly done by paid Union staff. This approach also defines the role of the Union in developing Postgraduate community: not building it from the top down, but supporting it from the bottom up, ensuring that students have the resources and knowledge to build their own communities within their department, faculty or campus.

Under these recommendations, the GSU representation structure would be replaced by a central ICU Postgraduate Representation Committee feeding directly into the Deputy Presidents for Education and Welfare. Responsibility for organising College-wide PG events would be taken over by the ICU Venues team, with Postgraduates shaping the events provision through an advisory committee instead of administrating all aspects of the events themselves. This central events provision would no longer be seen as core to PG community development – instead, it merely supplements the more essential efforts within departments, faculties, and campuses which the Union will be taking a more active approach in supporting.

The full set of recommendations extends far beyond these structural changes. The implementation of these will not be trivial and will require significant further work in the coming 18 months. Indeed, the clearest result of this work is how little we understand about certain aspects of the PG experience, and how these aspects vary significantly between faculties and departments. But this work is not merely worthwhile – it is essential to the delivery of the Union’s 2021-23 [Back to Basics Strategy](#). This work must be done, if we wish our Union to live up to our values, to fulfil our mission, to get the basics right for all students. Postgraduates included.

Dr Lloyd James

President, Imperial College Union

## **Research Methodology**

The PG Engagement Working Group examined a range of data sources, including pre-existing data and data collected for the purpose of this Review. These data sources include:

### **Postgraduate Engagement Survey**

A detailed 40-question survey covering engagement in the Union and the GSU, representation, community, and wellbeing. The survey ran from 20<sup>th</sup> August – 7<sup>th</sup> September 2021, and had 237 PhD respondents and 36 Masters respondents. The skew towards PhD respondents was due to targeting of communications on returning students entering their 2<sup>nd</sup> or above academic year. 72% of survey respondents were based at South Kensington.

### **Postgraduate Engagement Focus Groups**

Respondents to the survey were also given the option to sign up to join one of two focus group sessions for more detailed discussion. 7 students attended these focus groups, which entailed a more free-form conversation around the topics of representation, community, and wellbeing.

### **GSU Volunteer Interviews**

Four formerly engaged GSU volunteers kindly offered their time to be individually interviewed: Dr Luke McCrone (GSU President 2017-18), Dr Mohit Devgan (GSU President 2019-20), Ashley Brookes (GSU Vice-President (Representation) 2018-19), and Emma Couves (GSU FoNS AWO 2018-20). These discussions covered the function of the GSU in more detail – how well the GSU functions, how it is supported by ICU, and what might be done better.

### **Working Group Written Contributions**

Four members of the Working Group provided written contributions, responding to the same questions as were asked in the interviews: Dr Lloyd James (Physics PG Department Rep 2017-20), Michaela Flegrova (ICU Deputy President (Education) 2019-20), Milia Hasbani (GSU Vice President (Representation) 2019-20), and Ceire Wincott (GSU FoNS AWO 2020-22). This enabled their own experiences with the GSU to be formally included in the evidence base.

### **GSU Reports**

The Graduate Students Union is routinely expected to submit a report to Union Council (the Union's highest democratic policy-setting and accountability forum). These reports detail their activities, including events they have organised, and general reflections by the GSU President on their performance. These reports from the last three years have been considered.

### **Postgraduate Space Review Survey**

The PG Space Review was a consultation that took place in 2019-20, including a survey with 1612 respondents. This survey focused on the sense of Postgraduate community that students experienced, suggestions they had for improving the community, whether students would welcome additional dedicated PG space on campus, and what this space could look like.

### **Student Experience Survey**

This is an annual survey run jointly by the Union and the College, which focuses on students' opinions on life at Imperial beyond academic experiences alone. This survey is quite extensive and

reaches many Postgraduate Taught (PGT) and Postgraduate Research (PGR) students (as well as Undergraduates) each year and so is a rich source of data.

### **Elections Data**

The Union organises multiple elections each year for various elected roles, and records data on both numbers of candidates for roles, and numbers of voters. This data can be segmented by UG/PGT/PGR to better understand PG engagement with elections.

### **Events Data**

The Union organises ticketed Postgraduate events, and records the number of attendees at these events, which can be used to gauge PG interest in ICU events.

### **Review Process**

Throughout July-December, the Working Group met roughly every two weeks. July and August were used for shaping the overall scope of the review and formulating the questions that would be asked in the PG Engagement Survey, Focus Groups, and Interviews. The three key themes of the Review were identified as representation, community, and wellbeing.

September and October were then used for data collection, with the Survey, Focus Groups and Interviews conducted over this time. In October, a preliminary analysis of the results of these three data sources was done to steer the ongoing direction of the Review, and determine what further data was required to answer key questions.

November was then used for collection and analysis of supplementary data. In December, the Working Group met for several protracted discussions concerning the interpretation of the data, what 'good' Postgraduate provision should like, and what recommendations should therefore be made by the Group.

## Postgraduate Representation

### How are PG students currently represented?

Postgraduate students are currently represented primarily by the Graduate Students Union (GSU). The GSU is a Constituent Union of ICU. To quote the GSU page of the ICU website:

*“The Graduate Students' Union (GSU) is the representative body within the Imperial College Union for the postgraduate community across all Imperial campuses. The GSU President speaks on behalf of all postgraduates at important College working groups and decision-making bodies. The GSU also works alongside Imperial College Union President to ensure that the diverse needs of postgraduate students are being addressed.”*

Within the GSU Committee (see Appendix 1), there is an ‘Education and Welfare Subcommittee’ led by the GSU Vice President (Representation) and reporting to the GSU President. There are eight Academic and Welfare Officers (AWOs) on this subcommittee, representing each of the four Faculties at both PGT and PGR level. The Vice President (Representation) can be either PGT or PGR, but, based on the timing of elections is usually a PGR student.

Outside of the GSU, there are also Departmental PG representatives, who engage with the Union through our Taught and Research Academic Rep Forums, as well as dedicated PG Representatives on Union Council representing their Faculty.

#### *Role of the Academic and Welfare Officers:*

The AWOs are responsible for representing the interests of PGT/PGR students within their Faculty. They do this within the GSU, at College meetings such as the Postgraduate Research Quality Committee, and at Union meetings including Union Council, the Education and Representation Board (ERB) and Community and Welfare Board (CWB). Most of the AWOs also chair Student Staff Committee (SSC) meetings within their Faculty.

The AWOs are also responsible for meeting with the Departmental Representatives within their constituency, taking feedback from them and coordinating their efforts. However, in recent years it is not clear that these meetings take place outside of ~termly SSC meetings.

#### *Role of the GSU President and Vice President (Representation):*

The role of the GSU President is considerably wider than just representation – they oversee the entire GSU committee, including its Communications, Events, and Sponsorship operations. However, the GSU President is also a key representative and is a member of a range of College meetings including Senate and the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC). This significant burden of work was a key motivator for the decision to secure a £10k annual salary for the GSU President’s part-time work.

The Vice President (Representation) is responsible for coordinating the work of the PGT and PGR AWOs. In a sense, they share the role of ‘top PG rep’ with the GSU President. This arrangement has led to some confusion in how representation was split between the two roles [MH].

### *Interface between GSU and ICU:*

The manner in which GSU representation structures interface with ICU structures / staff varies from year to year. In one year, the DPE worked closely and directly with AWOs, with little involvement of the GSU VPR and President [MF]. In another year, the VPR acted as an effective bridge between the AWOs and the DPE and as an effective top-level PG representative [MH]. In other years, interface between the GSU and ICU has been relatively weak, and insofar as it existed the GSU President acted as the bridge [MD, LM].

### *Campus Representation:*

In addition to the Faculty representation, there is also a structure for campus representation within the GSU. There are elected officers for the White City, Silwood, and Hammersmith campuses who sit on the GSU committee.

### **How do ICU staff support PG representation?**

ICU employs four members of staff to support representation. All elected academic and wellbeing representatives are offered training and support from the Representation Coordinator – including specific training sessions for postgraduate reps. There is also additional training offered to Postgraduate representatives with the Graduate School and ICU combined. In addition to the training, PG representatives have access to the representation newsletter which informs them of opportunities and activities which may be of benefit to them.

To ascertain what specific issues are affecting PG students, the ICU staff team hold Academic Rep Forums (ARFs) which are chaired by the Deputy President Education.

A key aspect of supporting representation is rewarding reps for their hard work. To acknowledge this, ICU run a 'rep of the month/year' award, with a specific category for PG reps.

Currently, there are no specific KPIs for the ICU representation team around supporting Postgraduate representation. Developing targets, and strategies for meeting those targets, could support the staff team to deliver a more holistic approach to delivering support to Postgraduate representatives.

### **How do Postgraduates engage with elections?**

Postgraduate students have the opportunity to run, and vote for, all campus-wide positions, as well as for roles which are elected by their cohort (e.g. their course reps, PG positions on Council, AWOs and, previously, GSU positions).

#### *Running*

ICU does not currently hold data on students who run for positions in elections, as it runs a blind nominations process. However, it is possible to see the numbers of candidates for PG-only positions.

Table 1 shows that the number of candidates in the Autumn elections has decreased significantly between 2021 and 2020. There has also been an increase with positions with no candidates, and a decrease in the number of contested positions. This trend is worrying, but may have been impacted

by a new staff team, the Covid-19 pandemic and the lack of GSU candidates elected in this election.

**Table 1: Numbers of candidates running for PG positions**

	Actual numbers of PG candidates	Available PG positions	PG positions with no candidates	Number of contested PG positions
<b>Autumn 2020 (includes GSU)</b>	155	288	109	38
<b>Autumn 2021</b>	63	263	194	16

### Voting

The tables below explore the turnout in the two main election cycles – Autumn (traditionally where most voluntary academic and wellbeing reps are elected) and Leadership (where full-time positions and major voluntary positions are elected e.g. Constituent Union leadership positions and Liberation Officers). It is evident from these tables that:

- turnout across all students has decreased since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic,
- turnout is generally lower in postgraduate students than undergraduate students, and
- PG research turnout tends to be lower in Autumn elections, and PG taught turnout tends to be lower in leadership elections.

Many Postgraduate students elect course reps within their academic departments. This may account for the low turnout in the Autumn elections. PG Taught students, who tend to only study at Imperial College for a year, may not feel as motivated or connected with the students' union, and therefore do not engage with the leadership elections. However, more work is needed to ascertain why PG students are not voting in all elections more significantly.

**Table 2: Autumn election turnout over six years (including 2021 – no GSU positions in this election)**

	Total		UG		PGT		PGR	
Year	Voters	Turnout	Voted	Turnout	Voted	Turnout	Voted	Turnout
2016	2569	26.10%	2569	26.1%	414	9.5%	154	3.6%
2017	3886	38.91%	3886	38.9%	844	17.4%	385	8.7%
2018	4358	42.81%	4358	42.8%	1413	27.5%	799	17.8%
2019	4792	45.20%	4792	45.2%	1442	26.5%	892	18.8%
2020	3219	27.88%	3219	27.9%	697	10.6%	186	3.6%
2021	3003	24.86%	2825	23.4%	491	7.5%	229	4.2%

**Table 3: Leadership election turnout over six years (including 2021)**

	Total		UG		PGT		PGR	
Year	Voters	Turnout	Voters	Turnout	Voters	Turnout	Voters	Turnout
2016	7966	45.5%	5820	61.3%	1117	28.6%	1029	25%
2017	6704	36.8%	5296	54.6%	635	14.5%	773	18.6%
2018	6810	35.7%	5587	56.7%	494	10.4%	729	16.2%
2019	8121	41.2%	6194	61.4%	848	16.9%	1079	23.6%
2020	6104	29.6%	4761	45.5%	722	13.8%	621	12.5%
2021	6212	27.22%	4634	40.9%	866	13.5%	712	14%

### **How do other Students' Unions manage PG representation?**

Sixteen of the twenty-three other Russell Group Universities (who define themselves as 'Research Intensive' and are of a comparable size to Imperial College London) have students' unions with full-time postgraduate officers.

These students' unions also have voluntary postgraduate academic representatives, and many have postgraduate networks and hubs on their websites.

### **What are the issues with our current approach, and what does 'good' look like?**

#### *All-campus representation:*

Postgraduate students are based at a range of campuses outside of South Kensington, with the White City and Hammersmith campuses in particular hosting a large number of PG students. These students are less likely to feel they understand what ICU does for students (4.2/10 vs 5.0/10) and less likely to know how to contact their academic representatives (25% vs 39%) [PGES]. The ICU presence at other campuses is quite weak (the main exception being the Charing Cross campus which is primarily UG), and survey respondents frequently mentioned lack of ICU presence at their campus as an issue [PGES].

Good PG representation requires that:

Students across all campuses are effectively represented. There are structures enabling campus-specific concerns affecting students outside of South Kensington to be tackled locally and escalated within ICU and the College where appropriate.

#### *Communication:*

Issues with communication within our representation structures were frequently raised by those reps that were interviewed or contributed written statements. In particular, a lack of communication



between PG Departmental representatives and Faculty AWOs has left Departmental reps feeling isolated and unaware of the wider issues facing PG students across departments [LJ]. Communication issues between GSU committee and ICU officers / staff have also been raised – both in terms of weakness of ICU in reaching out and responding to the GSU [MD, LM] and in terms of inconsistency of GSU officers in engaging with representation [MF]. When the primary ICU-GSU relationship has been held between the ICU and GSU Presidents, the manner in which PG issues should be raised at the College level has become confused (where Undergraduate Faculty reps would normally raise issues directly to the DPE, Postgraduate Faculty reps would raise them with the Union President via the GSU Vice President (Representation) and/or the GSU President).

Good PG representation requires that:

There is clear, frequent, bi-directional communication across all levels of representation – College, Faculty, Department, and below. Representatives are promptly introduced to those responsible for coordinating them, and to any they might be responsible for coordinating. Reps are comfortable seeking feedback from those ‘under’ them, and escalating concerns to those ‘above’ them both directly and through rep meetings.

*Taught and Research student representation:*

Respondents to the PG Engagement Survey made clear that they felt the Taught and Research Postgraduate experiences were substantially different and should not be lumped together [PGES]. There are two areas in particular where merged PGT and PGR representation cause issues. Firstly, within departments where there may be a single ‘Department Rep’ who is either PGT or PGR, and who struggles to represent the issues of the other type of PG student. Secondly, at the very top level of the GSU President and Vice President (Representation), who are generally both PGR students and are less capable of representing PGT issues at College level.

There can also be a lack of clarity around how Research Masters (MRes) students, PGR students who share much in common with PGT students, should be appropriately represented.

Good PG representation requires that:

Taught and Research Postgraduates, who have distinct challenges and representational needs, have separate representation structures all the way from Department to College level.

*Democratic Engagement:*

PG engagement in elections is disconcertingly low, and worsening year-on-year, both in terms of numbers of candidates and of voters. It is well understood that numbers of candidates and voters are positively correlated, given the tendency of candidates to act to persuade their peers to participate in voting. This points to the Union’s ability to make PG elected roles attractive to students as a key area for improvement. Outside of elections, there is also a lack of awareness of representational structures among students - only 35% of PG students surveyed indicated thought they knew how to get in contact with their academic representatives at course, department or faculty level.

Good PG representation requires that:

Postgraduate students are engaged with their own representation – they know who their reps are, and how to contact them. When elections come around, many are interested in standing to represent their peers, and many more take part by voting. These elections are democratic and open to all constituents.

*ICU Support for PG Representation:*

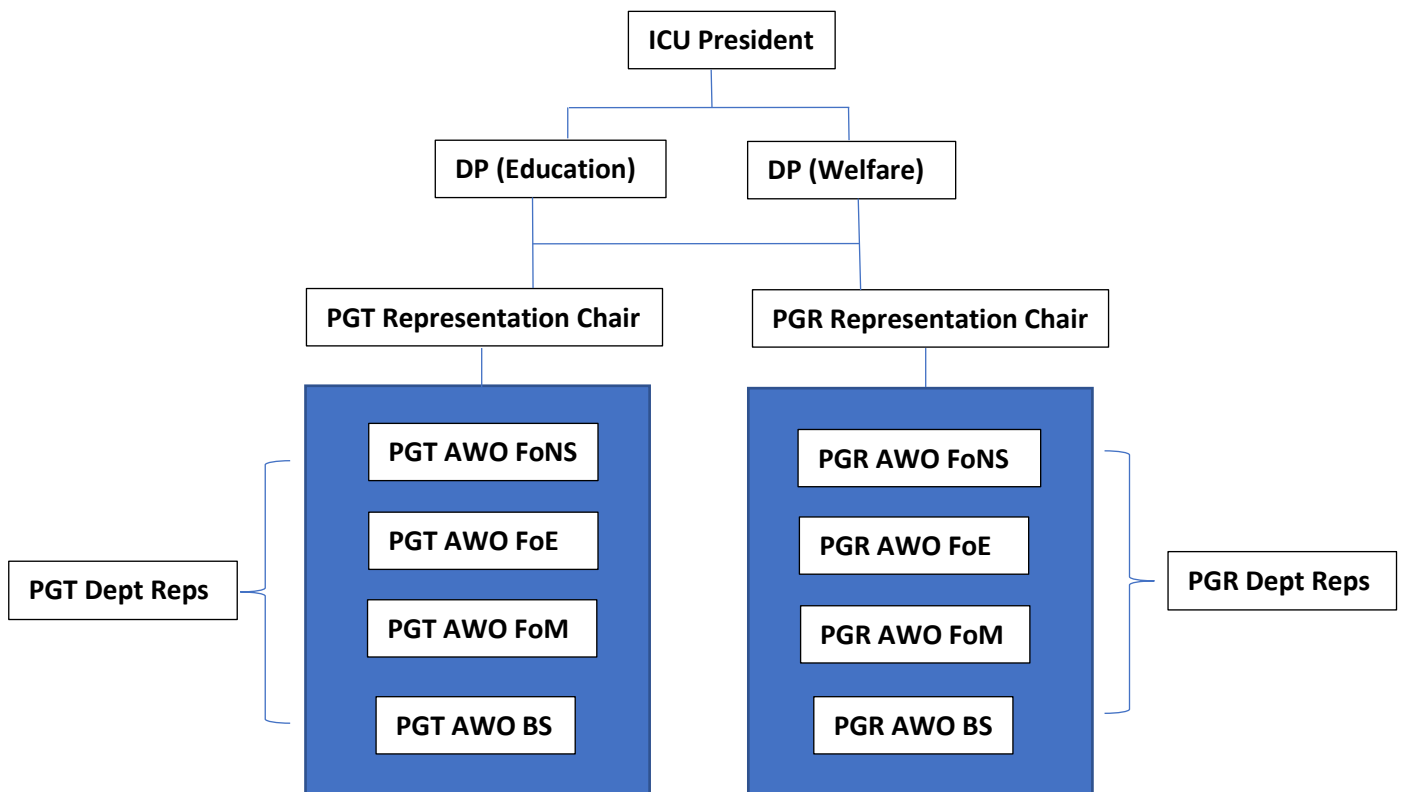
A common thread among interviews and written statements of past GSU committee members is that the support offered by ICU centrally for Postgraduate representation was insufficient. Concerns included a lack of staff support, a lack of coordination of handover and continuity between years, a lack of technical support (e.g. for role email accounts), no provision of space for meetings, and a low quality of induction at the start of the year which was not well-tailored.

Good PG representation requires that:

Postgraduate representatives receive holistic support from the Union, including training, marketing and communications, research, and signposting. PG reps have a complete understanding of their roles, including who their key points of contact are, and which committee meetings they should be attending.

**To improve PG representation, we will:**

- Implement a revised top-level PG representation structure that is not part of a GSU Committee. There would be separate top-level PGT and PGR representatives, reporting directly to the ICU Deputy Presidents (Education) and (Welfare), and would oversee the PGT and PGR AWOs respectively.



This structure has two main advantages:

- It separates PGT and PGR representation up to the College-wide level, enabling a more effective allocation of representatives to College-level Committees. This better distributes the time burden of top-level College representation.
- It establishes clear lines of communication/reporting between PG reps and the Union. (Previously, the CU structure with the GSU President made these lines of reporting less clear)
- Ensure that principal campuses outside of South Kensington (for these purposes, in particular the campuses with significant PG presence – White City, Silwood Park, and Hammersmith) have representation networks. The form of this network will vary from campus to campus, however there are required features:
  - Each campus will have a single principal representative who represents the interests of students on that campus, and advocates for them within the College and Union on issues that relate to their being based at that campus (they do not advocate on academic/wellbeing issues that relate to students' courses, departments, or levels of study and that are not unique to students at that campus).
  - The principal campus representatives should attend relevant campus-level committees (eg White City Engagement Group), as well as Union meetings that are relevant to them such as Union Council, PG Rep Network meetings, ERB and CWB.
- Initiate a project to develop a comprehensive map of Postgraduate representation across all Departments of the College, so we know exactly who our reps are, who they represent, and what routes they have to effect change within their department.
- Require Departments to designate a single primary PGT representative and a PGR representative for each Department, who are the main points of contact within the Department for the Union and for PGT and PGR AWOs.
- Improve our training program for PG representatives, with support from the Graduate School. This should include enhanced training for AWOs and the PG Representation Chairs, to develop an understanding of Union and College staff, committees and structures. These key volunteers should understand who in the Union they can go to for support with undertaking a research project, communicating with students, lobbying the College, or in any other area.
- Clearly designate staff resource specifically targeted at supporting PG representation, and map the different ways in which PG representatives are supported by ICU.
- Better target communications at Postgraduates around elections, with a focus on increasing the number of candidates standing for roles by clearly articulating what our roles involve and how they are rewarding for students.
- Identify where our PG representatives have successfully won improvements for students and highlight these on the Union website and elsewhere as appropriate.
- Undertake a mapping exercise of College and Union committees with PG representation (or where PG representation might be beneficial) to better understand the total time commitment that is called for from PG representatives, and to develop a process for allocating any new committee memberships.

## **Postgraduate Community**

### **Insights from the PG Engagement Survey and focus groups**

Only 9% of surveyed students felt that ICU helps to foster a sense of community amongst PG students, with 39% feeling that it does not, and the remainder unsure. On the same question, the GSU performs only marginally better, at 11% and 33% respectively. Those that felt that ICU does foster PG community mainly attributed this to clubs and societies, and ICU-organised PG events. Students felt that the most important factor in forming a strong community with others was shared interests outside of studies, closely followed by course / area of research, and then level of study (PGT/PGR).

When asked what ICU could do to better support PG community, the most common response by far was to organise more PG events. There were requests for both more in-department events and more inter-departmental events and, in particular, for events throughout the year rather than just during academic term-time. Other comments included making better use of h-bar (with food service), making clubs, societies and projects (CSPs) and events more PG-inclusive, having more dedicated postgraduate spaces, and better targeting of emails towards PG students. There were also numerous requests for more PG events and spaces at non-South Kensington campuses. Overall, there was an emphasis that community-building should be targeted at the departmental level rather than at the wider College level.

Focus groups with PG students reinforced the points raised in the survey responses. There was clear emphasis on the importance of events that are not based at South Kensington, that are PG-focussed/PG-exclusive, and that build connections between students within a department at the start of the year.

### **How are College-wide PG events currently organised?**

There is a shared responsibility for organising PG events between the GSU and the ICU Venues Team. ICU organises events that take place in our bars, principally in h-bar for PG-specific events. These are generally more frequent, and smaller scale events such as karaoke, wine-tasting, or food-based. When PG events have been organised at peak times (such as Welcome 2021), h-bar is filled to capacity, signalling that there is plenty of demand for these events [EVD]. The planning of these events is done by permanent staff in the ICU Venues Team.

GSU organises events that are less frequent and can be larger in scale. These have included ~one large off-campus social event per year for several hundred students, and ~one large on-campus academic-related event (such as a hackathon) per year, alongside a handful of smaller events [GSUR]. These events are generally planned by the whole GSU committee rather than just the Events subcommittee.

### **How are Departmental PG events currently organised?**

This is not fully understood. The organisation of PG events varies from department to department but is often undertaken by the Postgraduate representatives in the department. These events are generally paid for by the Department, but the amount of funding available and the way in which it is accessed varies substantially.

Each department has a Departmental Society managed by ICU, of which PGs in the department are members. However, Departmental Societies are uniformly run by Undergraduate students, and often do not advertise to, or engage with PG students.

### **How do PGs engage with ICU Clubs and Societies?**

We do not currently have complete data on PG membership of CSPs, though we are hoping to obtain this in advance of the final publication of this report. However, from the Student Experience Survey we can see that Postgraduates are substantially underrepresented as CSP members relative to their overall population in the College, with only 23% of PGT and 37% of PGR students having been members of a CSP, compared to ~60% of Undergraduates. PGs are even more significantly underrepresented on CSP committees, with only 4% of PGT and 11% of PGR students having been elected CSP Officers, compared with 21% of Undergraduates. Anecdotally, those PGs that do engage in CSPs often do so to continue participating in activities in which they were active as Undergraduates.

### **What are the issues with our current approach, and what does 'good' look like?**

#### *Lack of departmental focus:*

Our approach to supporting PG community through social events provision is currently a 'College-level' approach, wherein ICU and the GSU organise events open to all PGs across the College. However, we know that PGs are primarily interested in forming communities within their own Departments. It is easier to form strong communities at the 'smaller scale' among students who are co-located and who share common academic/research interests.

Good PG community support requires that:

Students first and foremost feel part of a strong and supportive community within their Departments and research groups, that are developed and sustained through social events.

#### *Clubs, Societies and Projects:*

We would not necessarily expect total parity in engagement with CSPs between Undergraduates and Postgraduates, if a disparity indicated a genuine lack of interest rather than barriers to inclusion. However, this is anecdotally not the case. Rather, PGs are put off engaging with CSPs, which are primarily run by Undergraduates, and which focus their activities on UG students. For instance, many CSPs entirely cease activity over the summer break, despite Postgraduates remaining on site.

Good PG community support requires that:

Clubs, Societies and Projects (CSPs) are inclusive to Postgraduates, and Postgraduates who participate in CSPs feel a sense of belonging. Postgraduates feel empowered to become actively involved in CSPs, such as by running for committee roles.

#### *ICU Events Provision:*

It is clear that there is a demand for a greater number of social events organised for PG students. The current provision of PG-specific events organised by ICU is not meeting the demand in a few different ways: the smaller events run in h-Bar are not sufficiently frequent or varied, there are no large PG-specific events of the scale that might be run in Beit, and there is little-to-no events provision over the Summer break between academic terms. These issues are likely due in part to a lack of Postgraduate students engaged in shaping ICU's events provision.

Good PG community support requires that:

Imperial College Union provides opportunities to Postgraduates to have fun, and meet PGs from other Departments, through a provision of events (social, wellbeing, and academic-focussed) which are developed in partnership with PG students. These include both all-student events which should be welcoming to PGs, as well as specific PGT/PGR-targeted events. These events should take place year-round, and not be confined to term-time when Undergraduates are on campus.

#### *ICU Communications:*

Postgraduate students feel that the communications they receive from ICU are not well-tailored to them. According to the Student Experience Survey, there are differences between how Postgraduate and Undergraduate students wish to be communicated with [SES]. Postgraduates have a strong preference to be communicated with by email and are less interested in communication via social media. Among social media platforms, PGRs continue to prefer communication on Facebook, in contrast with Undergraduates for whom Instagram is preferred. PGs also are more likely to want to find information about the Union via our website.

Given that email is the main communication channel for PGs, it is unfortunate that our email comms have historically not been well segmented to ensure that they receive only relevant information. For instance, PGs have often received emails discussing key Undergraduate milestones such as end-of-term and exam periods, which are not relevant to them.

Good PG community support requires that:

Postgraduate students feel like they receive an appropriate amount of communication from the Union, which is suited to their interests. It is easy for PGs to find information that is relevant to them on the Union website.

#### *Cross-Departmental interactions:*

As well as forming communities within their departments, PGs would like opportunities to meet students in other departments. This has been done well in the past by the GSU through events such as hackathons, which bring together students across the College. However, these kinds of event have not been particularly frequent or reached a majority of students [GSUR]. This current approach misses the opportunity to organise events at a slightly lower level, taking advantage of areas of commonality between students such as co-location on the same campus, or proximity of research interests.

Good PG community support requires that:

Cross-departmental interactions between PGs are fostered, focussed on areas of commonality such as within the same Faculty or on the same campus.

#### *Community at non-South Kensington Campuses:*

Both ICU and GSU-organised activities have generally focussed on the South Kensington campus. This can leave Postgraduates at other campuses feeling excluded and isolated. We do not do enough to empower students based outside of South Kensington to come together and build their own campus communities and event provision.

Good PG community support requires that:

Every campus features a strong community and programme of social events organised by students at that campus. No student feels excluded or isolated because of their place of study.

#### **To improve PG community, we will:**

- Recognise that the primary role of the Union in developing PG community is in supporting 'grassroots' Department-level community-building events and initiatives. To better support these initiatives, we will:
  - Initiate a research project to determine how organisation of PG events is handled by each Department across the College.
  - Where PG committees are responsible for this, ensure that they are being adequately resourced by their Departments and lobby Departments/Faculties if this is not already the case.
  - Ensure that those responsible for organising events within Departments are given any training/support needed to empower them to do this. Highlight facilities offered by the Union, such as the option to book spaces like the Union Bar.
  - Encourage Departmental Societies to better cater for Postgraduate students, giving them advice on how to make their all-student events more inclusive to Postgraduates, and connecting them with PG students in the Department to host PG-targeted events.
- Explicitly mandate the new Events Committee under the Services and Sustainability Board to shape a PG events provision, including both regular small-scale events (e.g. in h-bar) and occasional, larger events during key periods such as Welcome. This committee will also have dedicated PG representatives as members.
- Integrate some 'PG awareness' into the training for CSP leaders, helping them understand how to better make their clubs accessible and inclusive to PG students.
- Improve tailoring of comms (particularly email newsletters) towards PG students, so that they receive content which is targeted and relevant to them. Include a PG landing page on the Union website, which contains key information for PGs including PG-targeted events.
- Better our understanding of the 'informal' PG societies that exist (many of which are Department-specific) and investigate how they can be better supported by the Union, potentially with official recognition and/or promotion to students outside the Department.
- Promote organisation of interdepartmental events within Faculties via the Faculty Constituent Unions. This will be done initially by ensuring that each CU has a dedicated PG

Officer who is principally responsible for coordinating joint events between Departments in that Faculty by liaising with the relevant events organisers in Departments. This role can also support the CU more generally in ensuring that their events and comms are inclusive towards PG students. The precise title and job description for this role should be developed in consultation with CUs but should be consistent across Faculties.

- Empower the aforementioned campus representation networks to organise events for students at their campus. The appropriate form of this representation network will vary between campuses (Silwood Park, for example, has a very well-developed and longstanding 'Constituent Union' network). However, all should:
  - Have access to Union training and resources (e.g. financial management through eActivities).
  - Receive funding from the Departments based at that campus to pay for events.
  - Coordinate with representatives from those Departments based at the campus in organising cross-Departmental events at the campus.
- Review how Felix, the student newspaper, engages Postgraduate students both as contributors and as readers, and develop a plan for how this engagement can be furthered.



## **Postgraduate Wellbeing**

### **What are the main wellbeing concerns reported by Postgraduate students?**

Respondents to the Postgraduate Engagement Survey were asked to indicate whether they thought particular wellbeing issues were prevalent amongst the PG community, outside of the Covid-19 pandemic. In descending order, the most frequently identified were: stress/workload (64%), uncertainty about the future (55%), isolation/loneliness (54%), lack of work-life balance (51%), and impostor syndrome (48%). Other issues identified included issues with a supervisor, issues with a department or campus, and financial / funding stress.

It is worth noting that there is only partial overlap between the main Undergraduate and Postgraduate wellbeing issues, and PGs require a different approach to supporting their wellbeing. Certain key PG issues, such as poor supervisory relationships, are quite individual in nature and often require intervention at the individual level. Other issues, such as workload, work-life balance and impostor syndrome, relate to the wider research culture existing within the College and beyond. Most of these issues are deeply embedded, sector-wide issues to which there are no straightforward solutions, but which can be ameliorated through development of a stronger, more supportive PG community, coupled with individual support and wellbeing campaigns.

Not asked about in the PRES, but clearly extant, are particular wellbeing issues affecting students from underrepresented groups, such as women and nonbinary students, BAME students, LGBT+ students, disabled students, working class and first-generation students, and students who are parents or have caring responsibilities. Students in many of these groups are even more significantly underrepresented at Postgraduate level than at Undergraduate level due to barriers to inclusion.

### **What support do ICU and the College offer for Postgraduate wellbeing?**

Postgraduate students have access to the Union Advice Centre, which offers impartial and confidential advice to all students who are experiencing issues with their course or issues pertaining to student life. ICU Postgraduate reps also hold responsibility for collating and communicating issues PG students are having around wellbeing. This could include work-life balance, access to support services or employability concerns.

The College has a number of support services which could provide help to Postgraduate students with their wellbeing. These include the Counselling Service, the Graduate School, Chaplaincy, Disability Advisory Services, Careers Service, and Sexual Violence support. Some PG students have access to staff resources. However, there are few services which are specific to PG students.

### **What support do Departments offer for Postgraduate wellbeing?**

This is not entirely understood, as support for PG students varies between departments and faculties. Departments will usually have a Postgraduate Senior Tutor with overall responsibility for pastoral care of students in the department. There may also be tutors for particular years, courses, or research groups, though the level of engagement these tutors have with students' pastoral support can vary significantly.

In many departments, as well as campaigning around student wellbeing issues, student representatives will be involved in running events in support of student welfare and signposting students to appropriate resources.

Some departments have networks supporting particular groups of students, such as ‘Women in [Department]’ groups, or similar groups for BAME and LGBT+ students.

### **What are the issues with our current approach, and what does ‘good’ look like?**

#### *ICU Advice Centre:*

Currently, the Advice Centre does not collect data on how Postgraduate students are using the service, although ICU can ascertain that some PG students are evidently using the centre by the nature of the queries that are received.

The recent SES survey shows that many Postgraduate students are not aware of the Advice Centre.

<b>Study Level</b>	<b>Heard of it and visited this academic year</b>	<b>Heard of it and visited but not visited this academic year</b>	<b>Heard of it but never visited</b>	<b>Have not heard of the advice centre</b>
PGT	1.4%	2.1%	44.9%	51.6%
PGR	1.4%	3.6%	24.1%	70.6%

Formalising this data collection, as well as developing a communications strategy which includes comms to different cohorts, will ensure that the service is an effective resource for postgraduate students. In addition to this, ICU commits to offering staff specific training to ensure that they are well equipped to deal with issues that are unique to postgraduate students.

Good PG wellbeing support requires that:

PG students are aware of the Advice Centre and confident that they would receive helpful, relevant advice if they sought support from the Advice Centre.

#### *Student Services:*

It is not clear whether the current range of student services are able to support Postgraduate students, and whether there is much thought given to how services should be adapted to support Postgraduate students, particularly PG Research students who have a very different kind of experience to Undergraduate and PG Taught students. ICU will work with the College to better understand how they tailor their support, and to recommend where they could cater differently to postgraduate student needs.

Good PG wellbeing support requires that:

Student Services in the College effectively support PG students, and ICU is well equipped to appropriately signpost students to these services. PG students are aware and make use of the services and support offered by the Graduate School.

#### *ICU Officer Trustees:*

Officer Trustees have a responsibility for improving the Union's support for student experience and wellbeing and lobbying the College to do better for students. However, OTs have only rarely undertaken Postgraduate study at Imperial. This means that there is a knowledge gap, with OTs not having an initial awareness of the particular wellbeing issues affecting PG students. This impedes their ability to effectively advocate on behalf of PGs.

Good PG wellbeing support requires that:

ICU Officers are cognisant of the wellbeing issues affecting PG students (eg workload, supervisory relationship, impostor syndrome) and can effectively lobby the College for changes that positively impact PG student wellbeing.

#### *Dedicated PG Space:*

The only dedicated space on the South Kensington campus open to all Postgraduate students is h-Bar. While this space is valuable for socialising outside of work hours, it does not accommodate other functions for which PGs might want dedicated space, such as socialising/relaxing during the day, or meeting and collaborating with other students. There is a clear, strong demand from PG students for additional PG-dedicated common space [PGSR], both at South Kensington and at other campuses.

Good PG wellbeing support requires that:

PG students have dedicated spaces at their campus available for work, relaxation, socialising and community-building. This includes Student Union spaces at non-South Kensington campuses.

#### *Parity of experience:*

Data from the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) and Student Experience Survey (SES) suggest significant differences in PG student satisfaction between Departments and Faculties within the College. There are a number of attributes to which this variation could be attributed, but clearly important are disparities in the space, resources, and support provided to students by their Department. It is clearly important to acknowledge and understand these disparities which can be obfuscated when looking at overall College-averaged student satisfaction results, and which lead to enhanced dissatisfaction when students compare their conditions with those of students in other departments.

Good PG wellbeing support requires that:

There is a parity of experience across Departments – the space, resources, support, and other provision made available to PGs should not vary significantly between Departments.

#### **To improve PG wellbeing support, we will:**

- Ensure that advice caseworkers are trained to understand College systems and processes as they apply to PhD students. PG use of the Advice Centre should be tracked and monitored,

with KPIs set on the awareness and use of the Centre by PGs. The Advice Centre should ensure it has a presence on campuses outside of South Kensington.

- Provide Officer Trustees with training on the PG experience as part of their induction, so they are better equipped to lobby the College around PG issues.
- Prioritise analysis of the PRES and PTES surveys on par with analysis of the NSS survey. Department-level analysis of these surveys should be used to inform Department-targeted initiatives to ameliorate disparities in student experience.
- Help protect PG students from sexual harassment and sexual violence by implementing the recommendations of the Union's Sexual Misconduct Survey.
- Work closely with College partners including Student Services, Campus Services, the Graduate School, and the Associate Provost (Academic Planning) to ensure that services and spaces available for PG students are of high quality. Support medium-long term plans for increases in dedicated PG spaces across campuses, and Union-managed spaces at non-South Kensington campuses.

## **A New Approach to Postgraduate Engagement**

In the previous sections of this report, we have analysed a range of data sources and identified where our provision for Postgraduate students is inadequate, and what 'good' provision for PG students would like. We have made recommendations for how our overall approach, and some of our specific structures, processes, and services, can be modified to steer us in the direction of this good provision. These recommendations are based on the evidence in our data sources, the voice of Postgraduate students engaged by this process, and the experience and knowledge of members of the Working Group.

If all of these recommendations are implemented, it is unclear in what position this would leave the Graduate Students Union. If representation is taken out and placed directly under the ICU Deputy Presidents, the GSU would no longer have any meaningful representative role. If the Union starts to take a serious responsibility for supporting PG community, through organising PG events in our venues, supporting Department-level and campus-level community building, and more, then the added value of the GSU's events provision would become relatively minimal. This calls into question whether the GSU ought to continue to exist in any meaningful capacity.

The recommendation of the Working Group is then that the remainder of the GSU structure should be eliminated and the GSU should be disestablished as a Constituent Union. There are two strong arguments in favour of this approach. First, as demonstrated in Appendix 2, doing so reduces the number of PG-specific roles that are up for election, and therefore focuses those PGs interested in elected positions into roles where they will add the most value. Second, this would eliminate any potential confusion between the roles of ICU and the GSU, and make it easier to communicate the role of the Union to Postgraduates. Implementation of these changes will require amendments to the Union's Bye Laws, as well as to College Ordinances and Terms of Reference where the GSU President is explicitly listed as a member of a College committee. There should also be a review of what, if any, remuneration is appropriate for elected PG roles.

Some of the changes recommended by this report are more wide-reaching than can be implemented without further discussion. Particularly, the changes to the way that students at non-South Kensington campuses are represented, potential changes to PG representation on Council, and the addition of PG role(s) within Faculty Constituent Union committees, will need further consultation. Conveniently, there is currently a plan for a full review of the Union's Democratic structures, to take place January-July 2022. These changes will fit nicely within the scope of this Review, ensuring that certain changes might come into effect for Autumn 2021.

It is the hope of the Working Group that the recommendations of this Report will be implemented fully and effectively, and that this will subsequently have a positive impact on Postgraduate representation, community, and wellbeing support. To ensure this, the implementation of these recommendations should be monitored both by Union Council and the Union Management Committee. There should be a target of successful implementation of all recommendations within 18 months, or by the end of the 2022/23 academic year. In 24 months (January 2024) there should be a follow-up review, smaller in scale, with the purpose of investigating whether the implementation of these recommendations has had the intended positive effect. This review should be overseen by Union Council, and if it is not clear that the situation has improved for Postgraduates then a fuller review should be re-initiated.

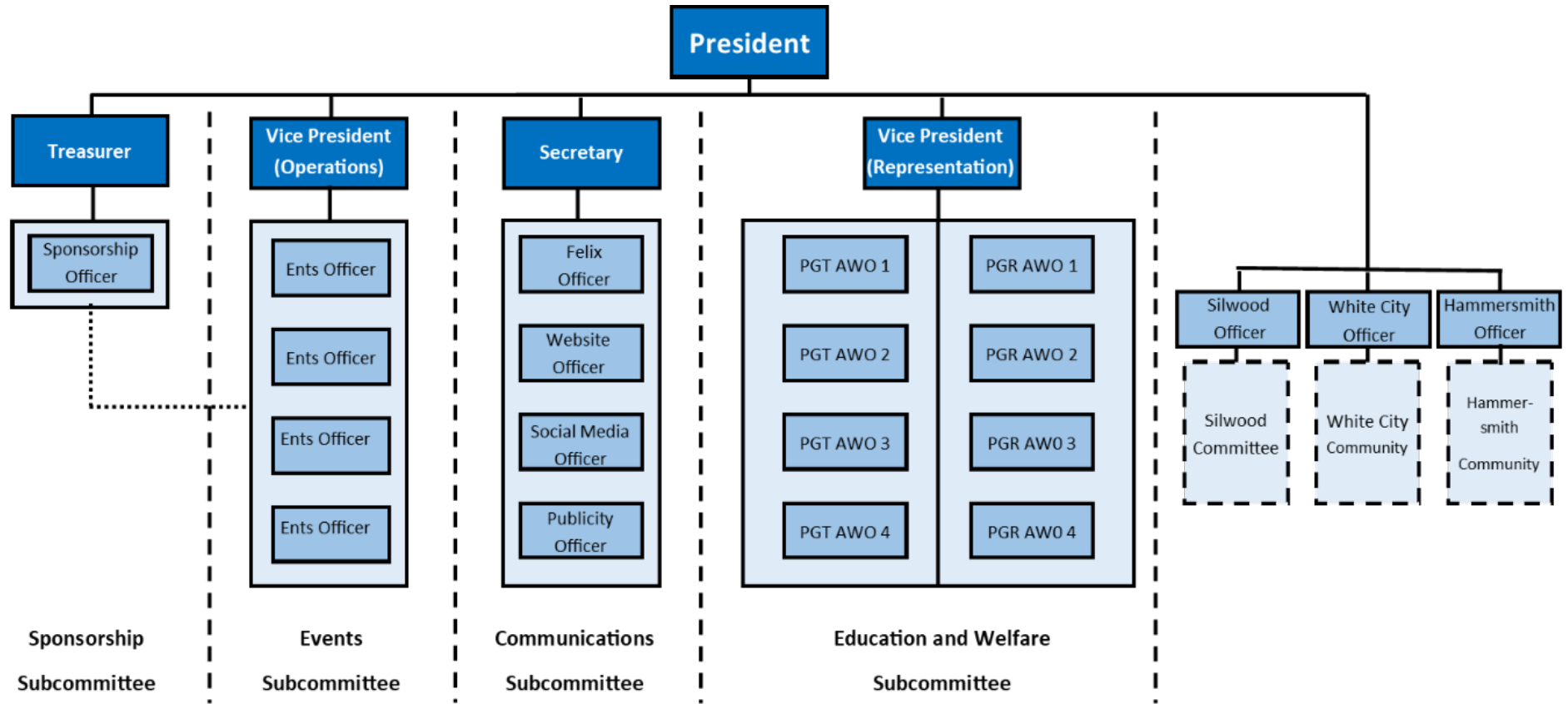
## Summary and Tracking of Recommendations

Action	OT Accountable	Staff Accountable**	Complete By**	Status (RAG)
<b>Representation</b>				
New PG Rep Structure	DPE	Advice and Rep Manager	July 2022	
Campus Rep Networks	President	Advice and Rep Manager	October 2022	
PG Representation Map	DPE	Advice and Rep Manager	July 2022	
Departmental Single Points of Contact	DPE	Advice and Rep Manager	October 2022	
Comprehensive PG Rep Training & Support*	DPE	Advice and Rep Manager	July 2022	
Dedicated PG Representation Staff Resource	President	Advice and Rep Manager	July 2023	
Tailored PG Elections Comms*	President	Director of Marketing & Comms	February 2022	
Website "You Said We Did"	President	Director of Marketing & Comms	July 2023	
Union & College Committee Mapping	President	Advice and Rep Manager	April 2022	
<b>Community</b>				
Departmental Events Support*	President	Director of Membership Services	July 2023	
PG Role of ICU Events Committee	DPFS	Director of Finance & Resources	March 2022	
PG Awareness in CSP Training	DPCS	Student Opps & Dev Manager	July 2022	
PG-tailored Comms Plan	President	Director of Marketing & Comms	July 2022	
PG Society Map	President	Director of Membership Services	July 2022	
Faculty Interdepartmental Events Provision	DPCS	Student Opps & Dev Manager	July 2023	
Campus-based Events Provision*	DPFS	Director of Membership Services	October 2022	
Felix Engagement Review	President	Director of Membership Services	July 2023	
<b>Wellbeing</b>				
Advice Centre PG Support*	DPW	Advice Manager	December 2022	
PG Awareness in OT Induction	President	Director of Membership Services	July 2022	
PRES/PTES Parity with NSS	DPE	Advice and Rep Manager	September 2022	
Implementation of SMS Recommendations	DPW	Advice and Rep Manager	December 2022	
Lobbying around PG Services and Spaces*	DPFS	Managing Director	July 2022	

\* These actions will require further work on more detailed 'action plans'

\*\* These are recommendations which may change on implementation

# Appendix 1: Graduate Students Union Committee Structure



## Appendix 2: Overall View of PG-Specific Elected Roles

Under the current structure, an example PGR student based on the South Kensington campus would see the following available PG-specific roles during an election:

- Year/group/course rep (generally elected 'offline')
- Department rep (Not all Departments)
- Faculty PGR AWO
- GSU Vice President (Representation)
- GSU President
- GSU Treasurer
- GSU Secretary
- GSU Vice President (Operations)
- GSU Ents Officer x4
- GSU Sponsorship Officer
- GSU Felix Officer
- GSU Website Officer
- GSU Social Media Officer
- GSU Publicity Officer
- Union Council PG Representative (Autumn elections)

Under the new structure, the same student would see:

- Year/group/course rep (generally elected 'offline')
- Department PGR rep
- Faculty PGR AWO
- Faculty Union PG Officer\*
- PGR Representation Chair
- Union Council PG Representative (Autumn elections)

\*The title, and job description, of this role should be developed in consultation with the Constituent Unions.

Under both structures, students at other campuses would see additional role(s). Under the new structure, there are also PG representative roles on the Events Committee; however, these roles should be lower time commitment and can be recruited from the pool of existing PG elected volunteers.



## **Appendix 3: Job Descriptions for Representative Roles**

### **Department PGX Representative**

The Department PGT Representatives shall:

1. Be responsible to their Faculty's PGT Academic and Welfare officer for the academic and wellbeing representation of students in their constituency,
2. Represent the views of PGT students in their Department at Union and College meetings,
3. Co-ordinate the activities of, and hold regular meetings with, the PGT representatives within their Department,
4. Chair the Staff-Student Committee or Staff-Student Liaison Group for their Department and level of study if such a committee exists,
5. Feedback all relevant decisions and information to students in their constituency,
6. Liaise with the relevant Departmental Society to ensure that PGT views are listened to by the Society,
7. Carry out such duties as may, from time to time, be laid down by the Union Council, the Education & Representation Board, the Community and Welfare Board, or the PG Representation Committee.

The Department PGR Representatives shall:

1. Be responsible to their Faculty's PGR Academic and Welfare officer for the academic and wellbeing representation of students in their constituency,
2. Represent the views of PGR students in their Department at Union and College meetings,
3. Co-ordinate the activities of, and hold regular meetings with, the PGR representatives within their Department,
4. Chair the Staff-Student Committee or Staff-Student Liaison Group for their Department and level of study if such a committee exists,
5. Feedback all relevant decisions and information to students in their constituency,
6. Liaise with the relevant Departmental Society to ensure that PGR views are listened to by the Society,
7. Carry out such duties as may, from time to time, be laid down by the Union Council, the Education & Representation Board, the Community and Welfare Board, or the PG Representation Committee.

### **Faculty PGX AWO**

The Faculty PGT Academic and Welfare Officers shall:

1. Be responsible to the PGT Representation Chair for the academic and wellbeing representation of students in their constituency,
2. Represent the views of PGT students in their Faculty at Union and College meetings,
3. Co-ordinate the activities of, and hold regular meetings with, Department-level representatives in their constituency,
4. Chair the Staff-Student Committee or Staff-Student Liaison Group for their Faculty and level of study if such a committee exists,
5. Feedback all relevant decisions and information to students in their constituency,

6. Carry out such duties as may, from time to time, be laid down by the Union Council, the Education & Representation Board, the Community and Welfare Board, or the PG Representation Committee.

The Faculty PGR Academic and Welfare Officers shall:

1. Be responsible to the PGR Representation Chair for the academic and wellbeing representation of students in their constituency,
2. Represent the views of PGR students in their Faculty at Union and College meetings,
3. Co-ordinate the activities of, and hold regular meetings with, Department-level representatives in their constituency,
4. Chair the Staff-Student Committee or Staff-Student Liaison Group for their Faculty and level of study if such a committee exists,
5. Feedback all relevant decisions and information to students in their constituency,
6. Carry out such duties as may, from time to time, be laid down by the Union Council, the Education & Representation Board, the Community and Welfare Board, or the PG Representation Committee.

### **PGX Representation Chair**

The PGT Representation Chair shall:

1. Be responsible to the Deputy President (Education) for the academic representation of students in their constituency,
2. Be responsible to the Deputy President (Welfare) for the wellbeing representation of students in their constituency,
3. Represent the views of the College's PGT students in Union and College meetings,
4. Co-ordinate the activities of, and hold regular meetings with, the PGT Academic and Welfare Officers,
5. Co-Chair the PG Representation Committee with the PGR Representation Chair,
6. Feedback all relevant decisions and information to students in their constituency,
7. Carry out such duties as may, from time to time, be laid down by the Union Council, the Education & Representation Board, the Community and Welfare Board, or the PG Representation Committee.

The PGR Representation Chair shall:

1. Be responsible to the Deputy President (Education) for the academic representation of students in their constituency,
2. Be responsible to the Deputy President (Welfare) for the wellbeing representation of students in their constituency,
3. Represent the views of the College's PGR students in Union and College meetings,
4. Co-ordinate the activities of, and hold regular meetings with, the PGR Academic and Welfare Officers,
5. Co-Chair the PG Representation Committee with the PGT Representation Chair,
6. Feedback all relevant decisions and information to students in their constituency,
7. Carry out such duties as may, from time to time, be laid down by the Union Council, the Education & Representation Board, the Community and Welfare Board, or the PG Representation Committee.

## **Appendix 4: Standing Orders of the Postgraduate Representation Committee**

### **Purpose:**

1. The Postgraduate Representation Committee (PRC) is a subcommittee of the Education and Representation Board (ERB).
2. The purpose of the PRC shall be:
  - a. To act as a forum for discussion of matters relevant to the academic and wellbeing representation of Postgraduate students.

### **Membership:**

3. The Voting Membership of the Committee shall be:
  - a. The Postgraduate Taught Representation Chair
  - b. The Postgraduate Research Representation Chair
  - c. The Postgraduate Taught Academic and Welfare Officers
  - d. The Postgraduate Research Academic and Welfare Officers
  - e. Representatives of Silwood Park, Hammersmith, and White City Campuses
  - f. The Deputy President (Education)
  - g. The Deputy President (Welfare)
4. The Non-Voting Membership of the Committee shall be:
  - a. All other Officer Trustees

### **Structure:**

5. The Postgraduate Taught Representation Chair and the Postgraduate Research Representation Chair shall co-chair the Committee.

### **Powers:**

6. The Committee's powers shall be:
  - a. Determining Policy governing Postgraduate representation, and Union stances and procedures around Postgraduate academic and wellbeing matters, referring decisions to Council where appropriate.

## **Appendix 5: Acronyms, Initialisms and Abbreviations**

FoNS – Faculty of Natural Sciences

FoM – Faculty of Medicine

FoE – Faculty of Engineering

BS – Business School

SSC – Student Staff Committee

GSU – Graduate Students Union

ICU – Imperial College Union

ERB – Education and Representation Board

CWB – Community and Welfare Board

AWO – Academic and Welfare Officer

### **Data Sources**

PGES – Postgraduate Engagement Survey

EVD – Events and Venues Data

GSUR – Graduate Students Union Reports to Council

PGSR – Postgraduate Space Review

SES – Student Experience Survey

PGED – Postgraduate Elections Data

LJ – Lloyd James Written Contribution

MH – Milia Hasbani Written Contribution

MF – Michaela Flegrova Written Contribution

CW – Ceire Wincott Written Contribution

MD – Mohit Devgan Interview

LM – Luke McCrone Interview

AB – Ashley Brookes Interview

EC – Emma Couves Interview

All data used in the development of this Report may be found here:

<https://imperiallondon.sharepoint.com/:f:/s/PostgraduateengagementGSUreviewgroup-SU/EtnDmvwfvkpJmykeOxziljoBtZw0PvqxdWc6-3dKzr96sQ?e=8vritV>