

ICU Christmas Buddy Scheme Report

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Executive Summary

The Imperial College Union (ICU) Christmas Buddy Scheme (the scheme) is a non-academic support scheme coordinated by the ICU. The scheme provides a welcomed opportunity for students to connect and look out for each other during the Christmas holiday, wherever they were at that period. We paired up students based on their indicated preferences, such as interests, location and drinking habits. The scheme was established in winter 2020 by the DPW for a similar purpose. However, due to strict COVID rules, Christmas bubbles (form in groups of 2) were also available for students to sign up. The DPE took this over in December 2021 to facilitate the scheme to review the ICU's Mum's and Dad's (M & M&D) scheme as one of his objectives.

The purposes of this report are to:

- Review our buddy matchmaking progress to determine whether we can perform the matchmaking process for the ICU M&D scheme
- To determine whether the matchmaking process can effectively group people with similar interests
- To determine the necessity of organising similar schemes in the future
- To determine whether the scheme achieves its purpose and bring a positive impact on student's mental health
- To determine whether the scheme allows students to be more engaged with ICU
- To provide valuable insights and recommendations for the operational body of the ICU

The scheme received 140 responses, and it was open to all students who are members of Imperial College Union. We sent out a feedback form for all participants, and we received 14 responses from them. We have carefully analysed the results, and we hope students and ICU staff members find the report useful.

Event timeline

Date	Event
25/11	Scheme proposal and creation of the sign-up form
30/11	Project initiation document approved by the ICU
3/12	Sign-up form opens
16/12	Sign-up form closes [^]
17/12	Matchmaking complete
17/1	Feedback form sent to participants
21/1	Feedback form closes

[^] Plan B was announced before the original form closure time (9/12) so we decided to extend the deadline.

Methodology

The DPE examined a limited range of data sources, including pre-existing data and the feedback form collected for this review.

Sign-up form (2021)

Participants were required to complete a sign-up form to complete the registration. Their names and Imperial email addresses were automatically recorded. 140 participants have completed the form. The form consists of 11 questions, including:

- Faculty, course nature (UG, PGT, PGR)
- Gender
- Location (Zones)
- Interests (12 options) and drinking habits
- User acknowledgements
- Previous engagement with the ICU
- Gender preference (optional)
- Additional requests (optional)

Feedback form

Participants were given feedback form one month after they had notified their groupings. Its purpose is to evaluate the overall satisfaction of the scheme and how it affects their mental health and engagement with the ICU. 14 participants submitted the form. The form consists of 7 questions, and they are:

- Whether the scheme is helpful and necessary
- Whether it provides opportunities to meet with new friends with similar interests
- How satisfied participants were with the matches given
- Any activities held as a buddy group
- Impact on mental health
- Does the scheme increase engagement with the Union

- Additional feedback (optional)

Sign-up data in 2020

Access to last year's data is limited, except we know the total number of participants. 204 students signed up for the buddy scheme, and 134 signed up for the Christmas bubble. We did not collect feedback from participants afterwards. We cannot compare them other than the drafted questions for the sign-up form in 2020. Questions include:

- Name, preferred name, email address
- Location (first part of their postcode)
- Interests (6 options)
- Interest for the Christmas bubble (i.e., in groups of 2)
- Gender and gender preference
- Additional requests (optional)
- An option to join the scheme's FB group and Teams chat

Matchmaking algorithm

The DPE spent around 6 hours completing the process without staff support. Participants were divided into groups of 4 due to recent COVID government guidelines. Students who submitted additional requests and gender preferences were accommodated first. Next, 35 sub-groups were divided into themes according to their preferences, interests and locations. For example, participants who were outside of London were grouped. Most groups are gender-balanced and contain a wide range of faculties. Drinkers and non-drinkers were grouped separately. Those with the greatest flexibility of interests were randomly grouped until all 35 groups were formed.

The ICU is only responsible for notifying participants of the matchmaking outcomes, and there is no guarantee for the scheme's success. It depends whether any participants were keen to organise any activities.

Results

Key takeaways

- There were 140 sign-ups, and they were assigned in groups of 4. 10% of them completed the feedback form.
- UG: PG sign up ratio was approximately 1:1. Sign-ups were most popular within the Faculty of Engineering.
- 55% of them stayed in Zone 1 during the Christmas holidays.
- Festive fun and lunch/dinner gatherings were the most popular choice among participants.
- Over 40% of participants are non-drinkers
- Only 16% of participants joined last year's buddy scheme or the ICU's M&D scheme.

- Most participants did not spend their time with their assigned buddies. Only 2 out of 14 respondents who provided feedback for us indicated so.
- Most feedback from respondents do not feel more engaged with the Union or can meet new friends via the scheme.
- There were mixed feelings about the necessity of the scheme and the buddy matches assigned to them. 8 of them felt it was necessary, and 9 were satisfied with their given buddy.

Sign-up numbers

Date	Number of sign-ups	Date	Number of sign-ups
3/12 (Fri)	24	10/12 (Fri)	2
4/12 (Sat)	7	11/12 (Sat)	3
5/12 (Sun)	3	12/12 (Sun)	1
6/12 (Mon)	16	13/12 (Mon)	2
7/12 (Tues)	10	14/12 (Tues)	46
8/12 (Wed)	3	15/12 (Wed)	8
9/12 (Thur)	0	16/12 (Thurs)	12

Feedback

Participants who had had group activities with their buddies (n=2)

Participants found the scheme necessary and useful – Agree (2)

Participants believe that they have been given a chance to meet new friends – Agree (2)

Participants were satisfied with their matches given – Agree (2)

Participants felt the scheme had a positive impact on their mental health – Agree (2)

Participants felt more engaged with the Union – Agree (1), Neutral (1)

Participants who had not had group activities with their buddies (n=12)

Participants found the scheme necessary and useful – Agree (4), Disagree (6), only necessary due to a lockdown (2)

Participants believe that they have been given a chance to meet new friends – Agree (2), Disagree (9), and Neutral (1)

Participants were satisfied with their matches given – Agree (1), Disagree (6), and Neutral (5)

Participants felt the scheme had a positive impact on their mental health – Neutral (12)

Participants felt more engaged with the Union – Agree (1), Disagree (8), and Neutral (3)

Demographics

<u>Faculty</u>	<u>% of participants</u>
Business School	26.4
Engineering	36.3
Medicine	11.4
Natural Science	25.7
Other	0

<u>Course enrollment</u>	<u>% of participants</u>
Undergraduate	49.3
Postgraduate Taught	41.4
Postgraduate Research	9.3

<u>Gender</u>	<u>% of participants</u>
Female	50.7
Male	47.9
Non-binary	0.7
Other	0.7

<u>Drinking habits</u>	<u>% of participants</u>
Drinker	58.6
Non-drinker	41.4
U18, hence unable to drink	0

Analysis

Scheme rationale

Due to staff changes, we couldn't facilitate the ICU M&D scheme. All the departmental societies (dep socs) have decided to run their own M&D and opted out of our scheme this year. Once enrolled at Imperial, each student will automatically become a member of their respective dep soc. Hence, new students ("kids") are only able to be paired with a non-year 1 student ("parents") within the department. More often, the problem with M&D schemes is the discontinuation of M&D groups, in which some "kids" were abandoned by their "parents". The Union and the DPE felt that the M&D scheme should be a continuous relationship that these groups should be carried over by "parents", and the "kids" can sign up as "parents" while they can still form with their original M&D group. The best outcome would be M&D groups can last until students graduate or continue their studies at Imperial. Also, it could be possible to expand it to PG students.

Of course, for everything above to happen, we need a proper review of the ICU's M&D scheme and work closely with dep socs to better support them instead of controlling how they run these schemes. A project initiation document was presented to Union Council in October, stating the timeline and details of the M&D review. However, the ICU's consultation with the dep soc Presidents was delayed due to the workload needed to organise rep trainings and the referendum related to the UCU strike action. In late November, the DPE came up with an idea to facilitate the Christmas Buddy scheme, which the DPW previously led during the lockdown. While we were in a better situation in December 2021, the Omicron variant presented huge uncertainties that we expected more students to stay in the UK over Christmas. The scheme can

help students stay connected, but it was also a perfect opportunity for the ICU to run as a trial for the M&D scheme. This report helps ICU staff and students to understand the current issue with our M&D scheme and ways we can improve it moving forwards.

Planning and preparation

It took the DPE less than 5 days to plan and prepare for the scheme, given that we have had the experience of organising one in December 2020. Concerning the sign-up form questions, the DPE decided to remove sensitive and unnecessary information and make the scheme more inclusive. For example, participants were only asked for the London zones they were staying in at Christmas instead of their postcodes. The gender question was designed to be an open-text format that helps participants put down whatever they feel comfortable with. In addition, we collected some general information for matchmaking purposes (e.g. faculty, level of study, interests, gender). The Union staff approved the drafted questions, and the Christmas Buddy scheme was made available in early December. I have extended the deadline as the government announced stricter COVID policies in the same period.

Matchmaking

There weren't any staff support during the matchmaking process, and the DPE had spent around 6-7 hours performing the matchmaking. It was a straightforward process to distribute participants into groups randomly, and it should take me less than half an hour. The DPE designed an algorithm to distribute participants into groups better. Firstly, non-drinkers were separated from drinkers. Secondly, the DPE tried to make the groups as diverse as possible. Each group consists of UG and PG students from different faculties and mixing genders. The DPE accommodated special requirements if participants requested a particular gender or group. 59% of participants expressed a gender preference, and 38% made a special request in the matchmaking process. The DPE processed most of the requests, but it took me more time than he thought. After that, participants were grouped according to their location and interests.

We have tried our best to carefully perform the matchmaking, spectating that participants would benefit from meeting new people and did manage to organise in-person or virtual events. Once we had grouped the participants, it was entirely up to them to facilitate any activities. Unfortunately, we cannot ensure participants would have the opportunity to meet new friends. In late January, we sent out a feedback form to all participants, and a few of them returned the form to us in the following week.

Feedback

The feedback we received was not very positive. The main reason for this is the lack of interaction with other participants. Some tried to organise events, but others weren't responsive. In some groups, no one made a move to initiate any events. It was, of course, disappointing to hear as most of them do not find the scheme helpful. We understand that it is entirely student-led, and

we cannot organise events over Christmas that the buddy groups can engage. A limited amount of events were held in the previous Christmas Buddy scheme, but the turn-up rate wasn't good.

One of the major differences between the Christmas buddy and M&D scheme is that "parents" are responsible for organising events or facilitating conversations within the group. There wasn't any designated person for the buddy scheme to organise activities over the holidays. Hence, it was harder to initiate any group activities as it required a participant to make a move. Also, there were no COVID restrictions to limit group activities. As a result, participants can meet their friends and families instead of knowing someone new.

Only 2 out of 14 respondents (14%) responded that they had held activities with their buddies during Christmas. Both of them felt that the scheme was necessary and felt that it had positively impacted their mental health. There were mixed opinions on their satisfaction with the scheme for the remaining respondents (n=12). Most of them did not find the scheme useful or were given a chance to meet other buddies. As expected, they did not feel more engaged with the Union after participation. Even though they did not have the chance to meet up with other participants, none of them had any positive or negative impacts on their mental health. It is evident that the scheme's success depends on students' level of participation, and the scheme did make a positive impact for some participants.

Demographic analysis

There were 140 sign-ups, which was approximately 30% fewer than last year. We have changed the groupings from 6 to 4 to make it easier to facilitate activities in small groups. Most participants are from the Faculty of Engineering (FoE), followed by the Business School (ICBS), Faculty of Natural Sciences (FoNS) and Faculty of Medicine (FoM). The trend is generally proportional to the number of enrolled students at Imperial, except that we had a higher proportion of ICBS sign-ups. Given that all enrolled ICBS participants are PGT students, they formed a majority (64%) of the PGT population for the scheme. 28 out of 37 signed up on the same date (14/12) within 3 hours in the afternoon. We recorded the highest number of sign-ups on that day, partly due to the recent announcement of a switch to Plan B.

In terms of their type of study, UG and PG sign-up numbers were roughly the same, which shows that PG students were as engaged as UG students in this particular scheme. However, extra effort is needed to increase the participation of PGR students, as less than 10% of the participants are doing a PG Research degree.

In terms of activity preferences, festive fun was the most popular choice (71%), followed by meal gatherings (70%) and outdoor activities (61%). Cultural, indoor and recreational activities were also popular among participants, with over 60% of them preferring doing these activities with their buddy group. Note that participants were allowed to select more than one choice as their preferred activities.

In terms of drinking habits, over 40% of participants are non-drinkers, and none of them is under 18. It shows that alcohol-associated activities may not suit everyone, and there is a demand for non-drinking events.

Interestingly, not many participants (16%) participated in last year's buddy scheme or the M&Ds scheme organised by the ICU. This showed that the scheme attracted more students to engage with Union activities, but the effect on student engagement is limited, as reflected in the feedback form.

Recommendation and summary

There is a necessity to review and improve the M&D scheme in the Union. This report provides an insight into the advantages and limitations of our matchmaking process. Although it is manageable to pair up hundreds of participants manually, there is room to explore the optimal way to make the process more effective. Although we may expect a much larger number of sign-ups for our M&D scheme, performing the matchmaking process on software can save us time. Once we can run our scheme, we may consider better ways to support dep socs.

Our demographic data has shown that quite a few participants prefer non-drinking events with their buddies. This shows the demand for non-drinking activities in the Union, and we should consider this when we plan for future events, such as the welcome week. Engagement with our sign-up form shows that the optimal time for student interaction is during the afternoon and evening periods (3 pm-9 pm). Surprisingly, many PG students joined the scheme, which shows that M&D can be expanded to PG students too, although it will be harder for 1 year Master's program. PG engagement is vital, and we can explore ways to engage with them further.

This report provides an insight into the operational procedures of the Union's buddy schemes. However, there are limitations that not all participants can directly benefit from the scheme. This is likely caused by the participation rate than the scheme design itself. With the given recommendations above, we will take all comments and recommendations into account and improve similar schemes in the future.