The Culture of Student-Led Groups at Imperial College Union

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Abstract—**This study employs grounded theory to examine power structures and mechanisms of change within student-led groups at Imperial College Union (ICU). Transcripts from focus groups were analysed, categorising them into 20 groups. The study identifies power structures that favour privileged individuals, hindering engagement for those with fewer resources. These structures reinforce Imperial's version of hegemonic masculinity, rewarding traits such as sports participation, confidence and financial privilege. These norms are deeply ingrained in the Union's cultural beliefs.**

Individuals and groups lacking these characteristics face challenges in participating fully in student-led activities. Factors like financial disadvantage, caring responsibilities, introversion, and limited experience or skills further impede their engagement. The study highlights two mechanisms of change: "welfare" and "hiatus." "Welfare" refers to advocating for needs, challenging the status quo, and questioning existing power structures. "Hiatus" represents forced breaks from student-led activities, creating space for the emergence of new beliefs and values.

These findings underscore the importance of addressing biases and power imbalances within ICU's student-led groups. The study calls for interventions to foster a more inclusive and equitable environment. By challenging prevailing norms and providing opportunities for diverse participation, the Union can create a transformative and inclusive space for all students.

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I. INTRODUCTION

AT the time of writing, Imperial College London and Imperial College Union (ICU) are on parallel transformational journeys. A new President arrived at Imperial at the beginning of the 2022-23 academic year, resulting in changes to the management structure of the university, the development of three new strategies (an overall strategy, a mental health and wellbeing strategy and a sustainability strategy), and an upcoming review of the university's brand. The Office for Students has started introducing new requirements for access and participation for higher education institutions in the UK which involves taking a risk-based approach that addresses the idiosyncrasies of each institution as well as a greater focus on participation [1]. At the same time, the Union is undergoing its own consultation for the development of its new strategy on the back of Back to Basics (2021-23) and has dedicated a significant amount of resource towards development of a new Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) strategy. Both the College and the Union would benefit from understanding barriers to participation of marginalised students at Imperial. A key element of participation is participation in Union activity, including activity that is organised and led by students themselves.

Imperial College London is a Russell Group university with a high percentage of international and postgraduate students[2], where internatioanal students comprised 51.4% and postgraduate students comprised 48.6% of the Imperial student population in 2021-22 as shown in Table I. It also has a lower percentage of minority ethnic and women students than what is represented in the local community. In the 2021 census, Black people comprised 13.5% of the London residents [3], but only 5.9% of Imperial undergraduate entrants in the 2021-22 cohort [4]. Similarly, only 42.3% of members logged on eActivities identify as women (compared to 55.0% identifying as men) as shown in Table II. There is evidence to suggest that the underlying demographics of the Imperial student population are not reflected by the membership and leadership of student-led activities in the Union, otherwise known as a Club, Society & Project (CSP). This raises the question of what barriers prevent students from marginalised backgrounds from participating in Union activities. The focus of this study is on the culture of student-led groups and its impact on engagement and participation within these activities. The aim of this study will be to feed into the development of the College's 2025 Access and Participation Plan and the Union's new strategy.

Course Type	% Students
PGR	25.1%
PGT	23.5%
UG	51.4 %

Tuition Fee Classification	% Students
Home	43.9%
International	56.1%

TABLE I
DATA PROVIDED BY COLLEGE STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR THE 2021-22 ACADEMIC YEAR [5].

Not all the conclusions and findings this report will be reflected in the reader's own experience. Every member of the Union will be faced with a unique set of circumstances that will impact their sense of belonging and perception of student-led activities. The purpose of this study is not to summarise what these experiences look like for the "average" Imperial student, but rather to highlight cultural mechanisms that operate in the background. Whilst these mechanisms will have an impact on every student's experience, the nature of this impact is not uniform.

II. METHODOLOGY FOR FOCUS GROUPS

For this project, it was decided to use an interview-style, semi-structured discussion with questions asked in a mostly fixed order. This method allowed us to easily recruit participants and gain insight into pre-selected groups of students. We held ten focus groups, attended by 30 participants. This method of holding focus groups incorporated principles of Participatory Action research, as the facilitators of the focus groups were drawn from the groups with lived experiences and occasionally included their own perspectives. In addition, we completed two surveys, and the total number of respondents was 725. No incentives were provided for participants or survey respondents. The number of participants that attended each focus group are shown in Table III.

The research design was completed over two Microsoft Teams calls, where dates were decided for the groups, a list of questions was drawn up and the purpose was defined. Participants were recruited by setting up an open invitation for students interested in the topic to join a call, the organisation of specific workshops with marginalised students and CSPs, Constituent Unions, and Management Groups (MGs), and an invitation for students to discuss the themes during CSP drop-ins. It was decided to run separate workshops for students with similar backgrounds rather to mix students with different backgrounds.

Data collection consisted of in-person, hybrid and online workshops. The workshops included the following elements:

- Introduction;
- Recording of workshop for transcription purposes;
- Introduction and ground rules;
- Icebreaker;
- Discussion;
- Tracking questions for completion and follow up;
- Conclusion.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The researchers used a grounded theory framework to gather insights from the transcripts that had been cleaned up by assistant student staff. Theorising occurred interview-by-interview in an iterative process to build a theory from the very first interview that evolves with richer insights. The first step of coding is *open coding* where the transcript is interpreted line by line to find loose categories and themes. This generates *memos* –insights that accumulate over time that provide a starting point for theoretical concepts (also known as *axial coding*). These memos are then *sorted* into logical chunks

Group	Total Count	Male	Female	Unknown	% Male	%Female
All UG	12777	7225	4931	621	56.5%	38.6%
All PG	11421	6087	5299	35	53.3%	46.4%
All PGT	6389	3181	3194	14	49.8%	50.0%
All PGR	5032	2906	2105	21	57.8%	41.8%
CSP Members	13206	7485	5498	223	56.7%	41.6%
CSP Committee	2282	1209	1070	3	53.0 %	46.9%
All Students	24198	13312	10230	656	55.0%	42.3%

TABLE II
MEMBER STATISTICS EXPORTED FROM EACTIVITIES JUNE 8, 2023.

Focus Group	Number of participants
Carers	2
Staff	3
Constituent Unions	1
Disabilities	1
Gender Equality	1
LGBTQ+	5
Medical Students	5
Recreation	3
Tie clubs	2
Facilitators	7
Total	30

TABLE III
FOCUS GROUPS

through a process of *selective coding*, where the memos are consolidated and a narrative is chosen. After *writing up* the analysis, insights from literature were used after the initial theorising was completed.

These were the themes that we coded and consolidated are shown in Table IV.

A. Drinking

Drinking is seen as a source of pressure that drives people out, but members have difficulty in identifying the source of the pressure as coming from themselves. Characteristics that indicate higher prevalence include age, experience, participating in socials, and sports. Characteristics or contexts that indicate lower prevalence include youth, lack of experience, new members, and demanding periods of coursework.

B. Welfare

Welfare is a catch-all term that refers to openly discussing problems with club leadership, interpersonal problems and mental health. When it comes to having specific needs, the burden of communicating these needs is often on the person with the needs, and this can be a difficult and vulnerable thing to navigate. To counteract this, members look up to committee members and rely on them to take positive steps to make their spaces feel inclusive and welcoming.

C. Social Hierarchy

Hierarchy can be conceptualised as a pillar. As you a member moves up in age, experience in the club, and year, so does their place on the pillar. What moves a member down the hierarchy is being a Fresher, inexperience in the club, not drinking, not joining socials, not being liked by older members, and introversion. Being a committee member places a member near the top of the social hierarchy.

D. Privilege

Smaller or less well-known student groups have a harder time gaining access to knowledge and financial resources than older and more established groups. Members place importance on having equal access to opportunities regardless of their status – this is seen as an essential component of social mobility.

E. Communication

Amongst marginalised groups, there is a desire to have more visibility in mainstream communication channels – this seems to come from a deeper desire to feel seen and understood by one's peers. In this way, they may hope to communicate their need to feel accepted and understood as an alternative to direct confrontation, which can feel vulnerable and difficult. Essentially, this desire for visibility in communication may also come from the desire to influence existing social structures from the top of the hierarchy, as communication flows in the same direction as hierarchy. Two examples of using central communication to affect social change are using information gathering exercises (e.g., questionnaires) and the implementation of policies.

F. Secrecy

Secrecy is used as a tool to maintain the status quo. It is also seen as a marker of privilege – those who are privy to knowledge that isn't widely known are more likely to be of higher status – for example, being on high level committees or being older both predispose someone to having this type of "forbidden" knowledge.

G. Masculinity

A useful way to conceptualise the discussion around drinking, pressure, welfare and discourse around social issues is to look at what is coded as masculine and feminine in the participants' conversation. Drinking alcohol, peer pressure and the pursuit of sexual encounters are constructed as masculine behaviours, whereas prioritising welfare is seen as feminine.

H. Hiatus

Prolonged periods of inactivity can disrupt the status quo and the passing on of traditions. The most mentioned form of hiatus was the COVID-19 pandemic.

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective coding
Drinking	Drinking	Funding and finance has a dialectical relationship with social hierarchy
Hierarchy	Welfare	Uneven allocation of resources reinforces existing power structures
Socials and influence	(Social) hierarchy	The most dominant power structures are hierarchy and masculinity
COVID Impact	Privilege	Welfare and hiatus are mechanisms of change for the status quo
Going against people higher up	Communication	
Boys will be boys	Secrecy	
COVID hiatus	Masculinity	
Masculinity	Hiatus	
Pressure from older years	Social Influence	
Sexual stuff	Lack of influence	
Anxiety to fit in	Infrastructure	
Sharking	Separation	
Not participating enough		
Cliques		
Committee behaviour		
Money		
Freshers		
Time in academic year (seasons)		
Year of study		
Traditions		
Social secretary		
Club captains		
Elitism		
Policy		
Questionnaires		

TABLE IV
OPEN CODING, AXIAL CODING AND SELECTIVE CODING.

I. Social Influence

There can often be a pressure to conform with a code of behaviours that is shared by members of each group. Conforming with these codes of behaviour is rewarded by moving up the social hierarchy, whereas there is a perception acting against the status quo (either intentionally or unintentionally) can do the opposite. Older members exert influence on younger members to conform to this code of behaviours, but younger members do not influence older members in this way.

J. Infrastructure

Whilst some themes focus on a club level, there are also problems with ICU-provided infrastructures. Many issues can be exacerbated by inefficient support infrastructure, whilst others (e.g., provision of relevant services to less engaged groups and access to year-round activity for postgraduates) can be ameliorated with an increased provision of centrally run services.

K. Separation

A key theme raised by both students and staff was this idea of separation between the Union and CSPs. Student participants constructed the Union as a monolith that had changed over the past couple of years, and now felt impersonal, unresponsive, and overly bureaucratic.

IV. POSITIONALITY

A. Nathalie's statement

I have been the Deputy President (Welfare) at Imperial College Union (ICU) from 2021-2023. Before this, I completed a BSc in Physics at Imperial College London from 2015-2021. Both of my parents are from the medical field and are from different racial backgrounds. Having a background in physics and being raised around medical professionals lends me to having an analytical view of the world, where I continuously seek to "diagnose" problems and methodically work through them. I am an international student from an ethnically diverse publicly educated school system in the United States and I do not drink any alcohol – this led to a difficult in transitioning to higher education in the UK, as many of my peers at Imperial had a background of private education, I sounded and looked different from a lot of my peers, and I initially found it difficult to find social settings that did not involve alcohol. It took 6 years for me to complete my degree, as I needed to take 3 interruptions of study due to medical issues relating to multiple disabilities. This led to changing cohorts multiple times, thereby compounding the difficulty in establishing a sense of belonging. In Year 3, I joined a student-led group and started to feel a sense of identity because of my extroversion and age, but this positive development came to a halt when the social norms of the group became more heavily associated with drinking and the pursuit of sexual relationships amongst its members. As a result of these adverse experiences, I identify strongly with focus group and survey responses that express a feeling of discontent with the status quo and I feel compelled to call attention to them to address inequalities that are perpetuated by the current power structures in the Union. At the same time, I also identify with the feeling of intimacy that comes with belonging to the "in" crowd, having experienced it myself for a period – this has led me to feel tension between the needs of the "in" group and the "out" group.

B. Sophie's statement

As a former sabbatical officer and current staff member at Imperial College Union (ICU), and a former staff member at

two other students' unions, a former pre-sessional teacher and University staff member, I am thoroughly familiarised with the status quo at universities in the UK and the Netherlands. My experience at students' unions has led me to understand the processes at work 'behind the scenes' for students, and in these are usually at the forefront of my mind, as well as how students experience students' unions. My primary lens as a researcher is a feminist one, as a former activist and graduate of an MA course in Gender Studies. As a former first generation and international student, I understand first-hand the sense of confusion that these groups of students often experience when interacting with universities and unions. Grounded theory requires using one's subjectivity to make meaning out of a text, and as a researcher I am likely to find salient experiences that match my own (as former international and first gen student) and can draw on my understanding of gender. This is part of the reason why this analysis focuses on masculinity, privilege and hierarchy.

C. Christian's statement

During my sabbatical year and previously, I have had a particular interest in Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity, particularly focusing on financial accessibility and barriers to inclusion. I have previously worked extensively on supporting students from a widening participation background to successfully apply to medical school. I am acutely aware of the role of privilege in allowing engagement in both CSPs and leadership positions; particularly in the position of being a straight, white male with privilege. I believe that awareness of privilege, or lack thereof, is a key driver in the maintenance of status quo and lack of desire for change, both within ICU and the wider world.

As such, I view many decisions and actions by those in power to have been inherently shaped by privilege within leadership. I have also been directly involved in CSPs at Imperial as a member (six years), committee member (five years) and as a volunteer officer on a management group (two years), particularly Imperial College School of Medicine (ICSM) sports and arts societies. Therefore, from personal experience I have been a very engaged, alcohol-drinking member of societies, whilst on a professional level I am very aware of the barriers faced by those without various forms of privilege.

D. Dylan's statement

I am 22 years old and grew up in Belgium and Wales, with German Welsh heritage. I identify as a straight white man, and have the stereotypical associated interests, such as football.

Prior to my role at Imperial College Union (ICU), I studied Aeronautical Engineering, choosing to do so at 17. In the 5 years since then, however, my interests and outlook have changed enormously, so I now wish to pursue a career in an area where I could make positive impacts on the environment and society (the aerospace industry is limited in this area).

At Imperial College, I am a very active member of Imperial College Union (ICU) Men's Football Club. I was heavily involved in the Club's governing committee, presiding over it

for a year, and have been lucky to meet many fantastic people and encounter excellent opportunities, such as my current role as Deputy President (Clubs & Societies).

As a result, many of the power structures and dynamics that are mentioned throughout this report are extremely familiar to me and my background is such that these have directly and indirectly benefitted me and my development. It is clear to me that the structures in place provided me with these advantages whilst excluding others. My involvement in this report and the associated work is an attempt to alter these structures, being useful where I can as an ally to those less privileged by the current structure.

V. BACKGROUND

Imperial College Union (ICU) is home to around 380 Clubs, Societies & Projects (CSPs). Each club, society or project (CSP) has its own committee and president. There are also 6 management groups (MGs) that govern CSPs that share an area of interest (Arts and Entertainment, Sports, Recreation, Knowledge, Culture, and Community) and 5 additional MGs that form part of constituent union (CU) committees that govern student-led activity that is specific to an area of study within the College. Not just any member of a CSP can vote for candidates running for an ordinary MG committee position – successful candidates must be elected by the MG committee (which consists of MG executive representatives and a representative from each CSP in the MG). This is different from MGs within a CU, however, as these committees are elected by all members that belong to that constituent union.

During our research, we conducted ten focus groups with members of CSPs, primarily consisting of committee members. The findings revealed that CSPs can be broadly classified into distinct categories. One category comprises CSPs that revolve around specific activities, such as Sports, Recreation, and Arts and Entertainments Management Groups (MGs). The other category consists of CSPs that attract members based on their personal identities, falling under Community, Culture, and Knowledge MGs. It is worth noting that there is some overlap between these categories. For instance, active participants in sports clubs may consider their club involvement as part of their personal identity. However, students who join organisations like the Imperial College LGBTQ+ (IQ) or the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) primarily do so because of their personal identification with the CSP.

Further division of these CSPs can be made into the following subgroups:

1) **Large Activities CSPs:** These are CSPs with a membership of over 75, displaying high engagement among their members. Participants in the focus groups considered these CSPs to be at the top of the social hierarchy. They expressed dissatisfaction with the Union's processes due to their size and high expectations. However, they exhibited strong social cohesion and extensive engagement with the Union. Their main concerns revolved around communication and infrastructure issues.

2) **Marginalised Identity CSPs:** These CSPs tend to be smaller and perceived themselves as occupying a lower

position in the social hierarchy. Less resource allocation (both financial and time) leads to dissatisfaction with Large Activities CSPs and criticism towards ICU.

3) **Low-cost, high-membership CSPs:** These CSPs charge less than £5 for membership and have more than 100 members. Their engagement with ICU is relatively low, and they often feel disconnected from the Union. Year-to-year, they may lack social cohesion and perceive their influence within the Union's formal structures as limited. Within this category, there is a subgroup known as cultural CSPs, which charge around £5 for membership and primarily focus on organising large annual events.

Projects and political CSPs, for the most part, exhibit a lack of consistent formal leadership from one year to the next.

VI. Existing power structures: financial accessibility, hierarchy and masculinity

Spending a significant part of annual CSP funding on groups with expensive activities or on groups with a high membership reinforces existing power structures. We chose two kind of power structures to analyse further: hierarchy and masculinity. A common thread that exists across the transcripts with student-led groups is the role of power structures in shaping social norms and shaping a member's sense of belonging. Power structures can be either explicit (formal structures that centre around elected roles) or implicit (characteristics relating to a gender, age, experience, extraversion) that affect their social standing within a group. The more a member aligns with the demands and expectations of these power structures, the greater their sense of belonging and inclusion within a group [6].

Power structures are self-perpetuating and self-fulfilling; conforming to social norms serves to elevate members within social hierarchy [7]. Examples of these characteristics include, but are not limited to: hegemonic masculinity (an idealised set of masculine traits and behaviours within an Imperial-specific context), being older or more experienced (either through learned or innate skills that are of benefit to the purpose of the group, or through being part of the group for a number of years), and being outgoing. Financial accessibility is an overarching factor affecting students' access to CSPs and leadership positions.

"Once I knew how expensive it would be to engage with the Club, I had to work late nights to earn enough to be able to take part. My sleep and my degree definitely suffered as a result." –2nd Year Imperial student, anonymous

Paying high tuition fees engenders an expectation in students that they will be provided with high quality services. The funding for these services is mostly spent on clubs that have expensive activities or societies with a high membership, reinforcing existing power structures. As well as this, Imperial College's Centre for Higher Education Research [8] has shown that the pressure to perform on a degree, especially one that costs money, often draws certain individuals away from engaging in community.

This is a phenomenon which is also observed in academically competitive community colleges in Hong Kong, thereby demonstrating that this issue is not unique to Imperial, nor even the United Kingdom.

"I didn't join any college activities . . . Every day I got to community college around 8 am and got back home when the library closed at 10 pm . . . My daily routine was basically going to the college, studying in the library, and then coming back home; and this lasted for two years! . . . It's worth it for I score very high marks and finally get transferred."[9]

An individual's access to financial resource adds further complexity to this phenomenon, as shown in the results of the 2021-22 Bursary Survey[10]. As cost of living increased from 2020 to 2021, the reasons why bursary recipients undertook paid part time work changed. In 2020, 61% of bursary recipients undertaking part time work for the purpose of funding CSP activity and 24% did so to support their studies. In 2021, only 52% of bursary recipients undertook part time work to support CSP activity and 28% did so to support their studies. This indicates that as financial pressures increase on the financially disadvantaged Imperial student, they are likely to prioritise their studies and deprioritise participating in CSPs.

These existing power structures, both within and outside Imperial, in turn reinforce the financial means people have available, creating a self-perpetuating cycle. Those able to take advantage of certain characteristics they possess are able to translate this advantage into greater financial means, consolidating their position within existing hierarchies. Prominent positions in power structures often translate to increased opportunities for the individual, promoting their presence in situations and interactions that are beneficial to their current means and their development, as well as giving influence over others. Individuals who rise to the top of a power structure hugely affect the culture that is connected to that structure, and the group through which said culture permeates. This can create long-term cycles where CSPs promote "similar" people through social hierarchies, even if the needs and desires of ICU members change. Society leadership may host events with a non-inclusive price point, or that are unwelcoming to those who are interested in the society's core aims and objectives but have otherwise different personalities or interests to that society's leaders. This creates a selection pressure within a society, as only those with certain financial means can engage, and later become leaders themselves, reinforcing the price range of events.

Finances are, very often, the first barrier any prospective member will encounter, and immediately attracts people similar to those that are part of the leadership of the activity already. These people are likely to perpetuate similar cultures, beliefs and behaviours to those already in a CSP, which can lead to both positive and negative consequences.

The promotion of individuals through these hierarchies often extends beyond the CSPs into more influential positions, with people from these backgrounds going on to taking senior positions at the Students' Union, or the College.

In this analysis, we have chosen to use the term 'hegemonic masculinity' as first theorised by R.W Connell, and recon-

ceptualised in 2005, to signify a particular kind of idealised and dominant masculinity among many masculinities that is particular to Imperial in this time period. The original description of the term is paraphrased by R.W. Connell and Messerschmidt as such:

> "Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative"[11]

We have found it difficult to discuss a counterpart to this pertaining to femininity, as we did not theorise it as a theme in the open coding phase and have little evidence to support our assumptions. Members who perform hegemonic masculinity are rewarded in the social system in CSPs. There is a sense in the focus group with the facilitators that masculinity at Imperial relates to sports. For example:

> I felt like [a certain sports club] in my first year, the committee of that society was quite masculine in their actions and quite, you know, non-progressive in their views. And I feel like when my year group was then the club captain and all of the high senior committee last year when they're in their fifth year, which is when it often is, that that attitude kind of came back.

The way this participant articulates his idea of masculinity is by relating it to the club and his perception of the leaders of that club, and their behaviours. Another participant later elaborates on these 'non-progressive' views to mean sexist.

In thinking about hierarchy, we found that sports clubs are seen as being at the top of the social hierarchy by other CSP committee members. This has historical roots, as sports clubs were the first clubs to be set up by the College and the Union in the 1920s [12]. It is possible to draw a neat line between the types of masculinity that men performed then to play these sports from the College's early days and now, particularly given that women were only admitted to the College in small numbers later on (ibid). Women members were only formally admitted to Union membership in 1981, when the Imperial College Women's Association was dissolved by a vote of its committee. Currently, 38.6% of all undergraduate students are women, rising to 46.4% for postrgaduate (PG) students. Men make up 53.0% of committee members, and women make up 46.9%. We lack gender identity data for 2.7% of students, as indicated in Table II. This is in contrast to higher education as a whole, as women domiciled in the UK are more likely to access higher education than men [13].

From the focus group with the facilitators, this ratio has an effect on how comfortable women feel to contribute:

> "In [my area of study] which I would say is female-dominated [. . .] based on the cohort and my undergrads. It was like 60/40, which is I guess is flipped because usually it's the other way around. And it was interesting because when it came time for group presentations, a lot of the time a majority of the speakers would be male. . . I've experienced [. . .]

> when the males in the group, will speak over the female members of the group, who are a little more quiet and they don't really say as much. I'm not sure if that's coming from sort of a lack of confidence in the female members of the group or they feel like they can't talk because they're being interrupted."

There is a higher proportion of women in CSP committee positions than in the general Imperial population. However, this research has still highlighted the feeling that masculinity underlies students' experiences of CSPs. This highlights that there is a power imbalance between the influence that women students and men students members have within CSPs.

Masculinity is also associated with drinking alcohol. Recreation participants saw Sports societies' raison d'etre as drinking and observed that they had a reputation for this in CSPs more widely. Drinking is seen as a source of pressure that drives people out, but members are unwilling to identify the source of the pressure as coming from themselves.

The same characteristics that reward an individual within ICU's power structures can serve to disadvantage or exclude individuals with a background of less privilege. Factors that can negatively impact an individual's sense of belonging or identity within a group include: a lack of time or resources which makes it difficult to engage in activities (particularly amongst commuting students, carers, and financially disadvantaged students), being introverted, being new to university, and being younger. It is likely that the last two of these characteristics affect the longevity of activity-centred groups (as opposed to identity-centred groups), as they need to advertise more widely to attract members, whereas identity-centred groups draw in new members more easily.

Many Imperial students value and rely on tradition and seek to uphold it when elected to positions of power. Tradition is inherently associated with remembering a previous time, in a world with systems which gave rise to masculine-centred structures. A consequence of this attitude (unintended or otherwise) is that upholding tradition ensures that the type of hegemonic masculinity that these systems were designed to benefit, is re-created.

Participants in low-cost CSPs felt nostalgic about the way the Union operated previously. They felt the Union used to be more personable and easier to reach, because staff members used to have a drink at the bar after work, and this was a way to informally influence decisions.

> "There was actually opportunity to be colleagues with them. Those water cooler talks that you could have at the bar or things that were happening where they weren't directing people . . . because they're there to chat".

A story that came up repeatedly that was emblematic for this change was how students used to buy a can of beans for £5 which raised funds for Raising and Giving (RAG). This can of beans would then be poured over someone's head. This is similar to how fraternities in the US were established as a space where members could have fun and escape the moral scrutiny of the university [7]. In more recent years, this has not been allowed, and participants of one focus group cited allergy

concerns as the reason why. This illustrated to participants that administration and bureaucracy was too heavy-handed and got in the way of having fun. This story is a stand-in for a host of changes that occurred in recent years and how this felt to students and losing the can of beans symbolises losing an older, more informal culture. This change also mirrors a shift in perception from seeing the Union as a space where students are free to escape the demands and expectations of the university to taking on a more paternal role with its own set of expectations. Participants now feel that they do not have the ability to influence how to Union operates and felt nostalgic for when they did.

VII. Mechanisms of change

We conducted our research about a year after COVID lockdowns in the UK were finally lifted, and to an extent, 'normal' student life resumed. Participants refer to this period in the focus groups and as researchers we coded that theme as 'hiatus'.

Participants discussed that traditions and hierarchy get disrupted from periods of hiatus. There are conflicting views on what impact this disruption had. On the one hand, it can increase pressure to take part in previous activity, but on the other hand it can relieve pressure from taking part in traditions that are no longer able to be passed down by people in positions of leadership (as they left during the hiatus), or by pausing periods of behaviour. Feelings of sadness and missing out are prevalent amongst student leaders, rather than excitement of starting something new. This indicates a level of satisfaction with the status quo.

Another mechanism that changes the status quo is the idea of student 'welfare'. Welfare is used by participants as a catch-all term that refers to openly discussing problems with club leadership, interpersonal problems and mental health. Problems tend to be acknowledged in the past tense, through anecdotes or at a remove from oneself. This means that committee members who are at the centre of issues and problems don't acknowledge this. Discussions amongst leaders around the act of having conversations regarding welfare seem to centre around less engaged or vocal members, which could be one way of distancing oneself from the source of the issue. When considering novel opportunities for communicating welfare concerns, there is some trepidation around getting overwhelmed with negative responses.

It appears to be difficult for members to be direct about their negative feelings around being excluded; rather, they express these negative feelings as concern for Imperial's reputation or concern for younger students. There is also a difficulty in engaging in discourse around the topic of exclusion unless it is overt or targeted. When it comes to having specific needs, the burden of communicating these needs is often on the person(s) with the needs, and this can be a difficult and vulnerable thing to navigate, especially when these needs are complex or stigmatised (as may be the case for some disabilities). To counteract this, members look up to committee members and rely on them to take positive steps to make their spaces feel inclusive and welcoming.

VIII. Counter narratives

It is worth reiterating, as stated in the introduction, that some students might not see their experiences in CSPs reflected in the main argument of this report. We imagine that, on the whole, students have positive experiences of connection and belonging in CSPs. The questions that were asked in the focus groups focused on formulating problems, rather than asking students to reflect on positive experiences.

For example, one participant found the longstanding tradition and cohesive community a very positive aspect of their experience:

> "And I think part of that is because we have such a good - well, I think a good culture – of staying in contact with alumni who will still show up to the big events like on the Isle of Wight that gives like a really nice continuity and you thought to see like a larger family of [activity] that's more than just more than just the people that are working with [activity] now."

For these students, being able to participate in an elitist culture fosters community and creates connections for them beyond Imperial. However, this is not accessible to most students. Those who are privy to knowledge that isn't widely known are more likely to be of higher status – for example, being on high-level committees or being older both predispose someone to having this type of "secret" knowledge. It is used as a blocker against social mobility (new members cannot join groups that they are unaware exists) as well as social change (members cannot call out behaviours that are not visible or that they are not aware of). Furthermore, committee members have a large amount of power to decide the direction that a CSP takes. Committee members influence choice of activities, cost of events and the environment created by the society, which may decrease accessibility and inclusivity. We want to acknowledge that these structures may positively as well as negatively impact members wellbeing depending on their ability to access and participate in these groups.

The culture of student-led groups at Imperial College Union (ICU) was studied using grounded theory to analyse transcripts of focus groups that were broken down into twenty categories of groups and student characteristics within the Union. Some of these groups were identified by the Union's democratic structures. The rest of these groups represented characteristics of students that are currently underrepresented within the Union's structures, as indicated by previous research conducted by the Union's representation team. Grounded theory involves an iterative approach with three phases: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. The open coding phase identified common themes that were present throughout each transcript. The axial coding phase identified connections between these themes. The selective coding phase involved condensing these themes down into as few themes as possible to produce the following thesis statement:

Existing power structures at Imperial College Union (ICU) benefit those with privilege and make it more difficult for groups and individuals with fewer resources to engage. Mech-

anisms of change seek to alter these power structures to create a more inclusive Union.

The power structures in the Union are self-perpetuating. They reward behaviours and characteristics that align with Imperial's own version of hegemonic masculinity by elevating individuals who portray its characteristics to the top of the social hierarchy. Hegemonic masculinity at Imperial is characterised by drinking, participation in sports, confidence and financial privilege. These forms of masculinity echo traditions that were present through the Union's history and are embodied in today's cultural beliefs and values.

Whilst individuals who embody this representation of hegemonic masculinity are rewarded, individuals and groups who lack these characteristics may have a harder time engaging with student-led activities. These characteristics include financial disadvantage, having caring responsibilities, being introverted and having less experience or skills. Welfare and hiatus are coded as two mechanisms which seek to change the power structures that reward these characteristics to create a more inclusive Union. 'Welfare' is a term used by students and student leaders that refers to communicating about one's needs and advocating for them; through this advocacy, the status quo can often be questioned and challenged. A 'hiatus' is a forced, prolonged break from student-led activity which prevents the usual passing on of traditions, values and beliefs from older to newer members, thereby creating the space for new norms to develop. The most recent example of this is the decrease in wet sales across student unions (including ICU) after the post-lockdown return to in person activity [14].

At the outset of this study, the researchers approached the Union's senior management and consulted them on what they believed the key issues prevent students from disadvantaged or marginalised backgrounds in engaging in clubs, societies and projects. Testing these perceptions formed the basis of this research. Hence, the following statements constituted the hypotheses of this study:

1) **Some groups are mostly based around drinking culture which can create an atmosphere that excludes students who are not comfortable in those spaces.**
   Whilst this issue was explored in focus groups, it appears to be a symptom of an underlying cause. The main driver in excluding students is the normalisation of drinking by students that are higher up in the social hierarchy, and this behaviour is consistent with the tradition of masculinity within ICU, as women were not allowed to be served in The Union Bar until 1974 and were not allowed to be full members of the Union until 1981 [12]. Additionally, men see FiveSixEight with higher importance than women or nonbinary students, but the same dichotomy is not true for Reynolds Bar, which is primarily frequented by medics and students based at non-South Kensington campuses [15]. Drinking as a social norm is not a universal experience across all student groups, but some groups may still characterise drinking as a component of hegemonic masculinity within the context of that setting. The decrease in wet sales after lockdown provides further evidence that that a forced break in activity has shifted the modern def-
   inition of Imperial's hegemonic masculinity within the wider student context away from being heavily drinking-oriented.

2) **CSPs are not viewed by many as beneficial overall experiences to their lives. Many assume that CSP activity will reduce their academic performance, without linking the benefit of CSP involvement to their personal development and employment/career prospects.**
   This topic did not come up directly in our analysis, but data from the Union's strategy consultation showed that postgraduate students viewed CSP support with less importance than undergraduates. Additionally, undergraduates are likely to view CSP membership as being an important factor in their identity whereas postgraduates tend to rank it as being less important. Finally, UK domiciled students are likely to see CSP membership as being an important part of their identity whereas non-EU international students see it as less important. [15] A hypothesis could be that the value of extracurricular activity varies according to different cultural backgrounds and differences in age.

3) **Students lack the know-how and cultural tradition to organise events that are accessible and inclusive.**
   There are two types of student-led groups: groups that have a high level of cohesion but have little emphasis on identity, and groups that coalesce around marginalised identities but struggle to pass on knowledge in running and maintaining these groups. The latter group may benefit from upskilling and training in running large events and social spaces.

4) **Mainstream CSP traditions at Imperial have historically focussed on relatively expensive, formal events. Some more expensive groups subsidise these events by corporate sponsors that are not circumscribed by an ethical framework.**
   This seems to be consistent with what is recorded in the Union's history – a key example of this is the hosting of monthly formal dinners in the Union Dining Hall by constituent unions, which all sabbatical officers were invited to on a regular basis. Contemporary examples are still seen in the form of black-tie events and annual dinners. This study did not examine the use of sponsors.

5) **CSP activity primarily takes place in the middle of the week at South Kensington campus; this can make it difficult to access for students with part-time work or caring responsibilities or are based outside of South Kensington.**
   This was confirmed by students with caring responsibilities. Researchers were unable to incorporate the data from this focus group into the grounded theory analysis because of issues with the Wi-Fi connection in the building – however, a participant emailed their recollection of a summary of the conversation to the researchers, which did allow for a limited level of analysis. Their main barrier to participating in Union activity is time. Nonetheless, they expressed a keenness for having a network in which they could raise

representation issues, meet other carers, and host events where Imperial academics could give talks on their latest childhood development research. A need for a route into representation in the Union is also highlighted by the fact that carers were identified by Union Advice Service and representation data as being a vulnerable group in the cost-of-living crisis [16]. Participants also reported having limited success with integrating into the existing carers network for Imperial staff.

6) **Students with disabilities may have access requirements that are not currently being met. These may include physical spaces in the buildings and/or the duration of certain activities.**

Rather than specific requirements around space or timing, the main concern cited by students with disabilities was the level of knowledge and understanding on issues surrounding disability and neurodiversity amongst student leaders. Students with disabilities often feel that the onus is on them to express and explain their needs, and this can make them feel vulnerable. They often rely on student leaders to organise events and social activities that feel welcoming and inclusive.

7) **Imperial students face high academic pressures and workloads; this can discourage them from taking part in extracurricular Union activities.**

There is a difference in the way that students perceive extracurricular activities. Students whose characteristics mirror that of hegemonic masculinity may see participation in extracurricular activities as an essential component of their education and personal development, and therefore may be more willing to try to balance their academic life with their extracurricular life. Union Strategy survey data indicates that culture and level of study may also contribute to differences in perception [15]; to confirm this, focus groups would need to be run with international students and postgraduate students.

8) **Non-traditional CSPs suffer from low membership and engagement.**

On the contrary, cultural societies are not traditional in the sense that they have not been around for as long as sports societies; despite this, they do have a very high membership.

9) **Postgraduate engagement in many CSPs is lower than proportionally expected.**

There are some indications that postgraduate engagement is lower than what is to be proportionally expected. Fewer postgraduates vote in CSP elections than what is to be proportionally expected. In the year 2021-22, postgraduate students accounted for 48.6% of the Imperial College London student population but only accounted for 21.1% of students with CSP memberships in the 2021-22 academic year and 21.3% of voters in the Leadership Elections that same year, as shown in Tables V VI. When these statistics were presented during a Community & Welfare Forum, a postgraduate taught student rep from the Faculty of Medicine gave the following response:

Level of study	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	Total
PGR	10.92%	7.17%	6.77%	8.24%
PGR	12.03%	11.73%	14.62%	12.89%
UG	77.05%	81.11%	78.61%	78.87%

TABLE V
CSP MEMBERSHIPS MAPPED BY COLLEGE REGISTRY JUNE 2022 FROM EACTIVITIES.

Course Type	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	Total
PGR	12.92%	11.07%	8.58%	11.55%
PGT	8.18%	11.50%	12.76%	10.41%
UG	78.90%	77.42%	78.66%	78.05%

TABLE VI
ELECTIONS DATA MAPPED BY COLLEGE REGISTRY JUNE 2022 FROM EACTIVITIES.

"I think the reason is because of study work burden and postgraduate life is much more intense, some studennts[sic] also need time to adapt themeselves[sic] in UK"

IX. FURTHER QUESTIONS

A catch-22 in exploring issues relating to equality, diversity and inclusion is that the groups that are the most important to reach are the same ones that are also the least engaged. To alter the self-perpetuating cycle of power imbalance and privilege, the Union needs to put in the time, resource and effort to proactively continue to reach out to the groups that are underrepresented. Over time, as the Union becomes more inclusive to these groups, it will hopefully become easier to reach them – as such, the insights that are gained from this research need to be revisited and revised with further insights after the recommended changes have been implemented.

The first group that needs to be investigated further is students that are part of the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) network. The current context of Imperial's Access and Participation Plan suggests that the percentage of BME students at Imperial do not reflect the demographics of the local community, and BME students who do study here struggle with a sense of belonging [17]. No participants attended the focus group for BME students; different methods of data collection could be explored, as well as collaboration with CSPs containing a high number of BME students.

The second group that needs further exploration is postgraduate students. There are many ways in which the priorities amongst undergraduates and postgraduates differ in the Union [15]. Despite this, fewer postgraduates have CSP memberships than expected and the voter turnout is much lower than expected.

The third group that needs further exploration is international students. Imperial has a very high percentage of overseas students as shown in Table I; as such, the cultural perception of masculinity may differ for students from different backgrounds. This would help explain the variances that we see in the way that hegemonic masculinity is defined.

X. RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations in Table VII have been presented to Community & Welfare Forum, Union Council and the

Board of Trustees for approval. These should be folded into Annual Operating Plans on an annual basis over the next three academic years in order to match the timeline of the new Union Strategy. Key Performance Indicators should also be developed on the backs of these recommendations and incorporated into the Strategy.

	Quick Wins	Long term goals
Training and Support	Provide awareness training of privilege and power to committee members with the involvement of the liberation & community networks	Create a fund to ensure that all students can participate in high-cost activities
	Continue with accreditation and incentives to encourage inclusive behaviour for Clubs	Provide MG chairs with dedicated staff support
	Direct a more facilitated handover for groups with low membership	Reach out to and cater to the needs of groups that are more disengaged (postgraduates, carers, international students)
	Create specific guidance/templates for non-drinking events	
	Provide mental health awareness training to committee members during induction	
Facilitating social cohesion	Explore the twinning of high- and low-membership CSPs to facilitate peer learning and share best practice around management and communication	Expand the availability of non-drinking social spaces in Sherfield Building and White City.
Encouraging innovation	Identify annual SMART goals to tackling barriers found in this report as set out by student leaders with the support of the Union at MG and CSP level	Create rewards for CSPs to encourage fulfilment of their action plans
	Share feedback comments from membership surveys with committee leaders during induction and training and the development of CSP-specific action plans	Consider integrating the approval of action plans with the funding allocation process for CSPs
Representation & Democracy	Create a new liberation & community network for Parents & Carers	Revise the election rules for MG structures to allow for a wider pool of candidates
	Pilot the removal of personal photos from online voting booth and manifesto pages	Review the Union's democratic structures and examine the siloing and duplication of activity that occurs between Activities and Representation (eg., Projects and campaigns)
	Conduct research on the groups that are outlined in the Further Questions section of this report	
Governance	Collect and report data on the demographics of committee members during induction on an annual basis	Work with the College to create a dashboard that compares the funding and demographics of CSPs. Publish this annually as an aggregate
		Incorporate the use of demographic data into the oversight of funding of student led activities

TABLE VII

RECOMMENDATIONS

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Acronyms

CSP

Club, Society & Project. 2–10, 12

CSSA

Chinese Students and Scholars Association. 5

CU

constituent union. 5

EDI

Equality, Diversity & Inclusion. 2

ICSM

Imperial College School of Medicine. 5

ICU

Imperial College Union. 1, 2, 4–9

MG

Management Group. 5, 12

PG

postrgaduate. 3, 7

PGR

postgraduate research. 2, 3, 10

PGT

postgraduate taught. 2, 3, 10

RAG

Raising and Giving. 7

UG

undergraduate. 2, 3, 10

Special Terms

club captain

An elected student that is in charge of leading a CSP committee. 4

committee

A group of students that are elected to run a CSP, MG, CU, or Liberation & Community Network. 3, 5, 7, 8, 12

Community & Welfare Forum

A forum chaired by the Deputy President (Welfare) of Imperial College Union which is used to discuss and consult on topics relating to liberation, welfare, ethics and campaigns. 10

constituent union

A sub-union of Imperial College Union that is characterised by a particular field of study. There are 5 CUs in total: Royal College of Science Union, Royal School of Mines Union, City & Guilds Constituent Union, Imperial College School of Medicine Student Union, and Silwood Constituent Union. 5, 9

FiveSixEight

One of the bars that is run and operated by Imperial College Union at South Kensington campus. 9

hegemonic masculinity

A form of masculinity which is unique to Imperial College Union and which is rewarded by the social structures present in CSPs. 6, 7, 9, 10

liberation & community network

A network of Imperial College Union that exists to represent and advocate for the needs a marginalised group of students at Imperial College London. 12

management group

A group of CSPs that share a common theme, interest or type of activity. Policy and budgeting decisions for these groups are led by an executive committee that is elected by the current executive committee and a representative from each CSP. 5

masculinity

A term used to describe a group of characteristics which are commonly associated with the male gender. Patriarchal societies tend to reward individuals who embody traits which are characterised as masculine. As a result, any person of any gender can embody these characteristics and be rewarded socially. 5–7, 9, 10

project

A type of CSP which exists with a set goal in mind. Its aim is often to run a campaign or perform an act of service for the community. 6

Reynolds Bar

One of the bars that is run and operated by Imperial College Union at Charing Cross campus. 9

Sherfield

A centrally located building at Imperial College London's South Kensington campus. 12

social secretary

An elected student that is in charge of organising socials (social activity) within a CSP. 4

South Kensington

The oldest campus at Imperial College London, located at the heart of South Kensington's museum district. 9

The Union Bar

One of the bars that is run and operated by Imperial College Union at South Kensington campus. 9

tie club

Also known as a "secret" or "drinking" society, a tie club is a student group that requires new members to receive an invitation from an existing member. New members must also undergo an initiation in order to join, which usually involves drinking a large quantity of alcohol in a short span of time. 3

Union Council

A decision-making body that consists entirely of democratically elected senior volunteers. Council is

responsible for passing motions and policies and has the power to mandate, censure or provide a vote of no confidence against its elected sabbatical officers. 10

White City

Imperial College London's newest campus, located an approximately 5-minute walk away from the White City tube station. 12

APPENDIX

Focus Group Questions

1) Name a cultural problem that exists within clubs and societies.
2) Which of these problems is most important to you?
3) What evidence do we need to measure the scale of this problem?
   a) **What** are you observing?
   b) **When** and **where** does it happen?
   c) **What** additional information do we need?
4) What is the impact?
   a) **Who** does this affect?
   b) **How** does this affect them?
5) What is the solution?
   a) **What** actions should the Union take (if any)?
   b) **What** actions should be the College take (if any)?
   c) **What** actions should CSP leaders take (if any)?

Facilitation Plan

BEFORE you run the focus group
Minimum of 1 week before:

1) Reach out to 5 individuals directly to invite them to the focus group.
2) Log on to the College's Mentimeter platform (use SSO). Nathalie will then give you back-end access to the unique Mentimeter link that is specific to your group.
3) Tell Nathalie the date and time that you wish to run the group (via Teams message or email at dpwelfare@imperial.ac.uk). Nathalie will take care of the room booking and send you the details.
4) Gather the following materials: flipchart paper, pens, sticky notes. You can collect these from the Union Level 2 Office on the day of the focus group.

During the meeting

5) Log onto Microsoft Teams on a laptop/mobile phone
6) Open the PowerPoint (you will have received one by email).
7) Pass out the consent form (provided at the end of your facilitator pack).
8) After all participants have signed the consent form, select "Record & Transcribe."
9) Read the following text out loud to participants:

Thank you for taking part in today's focus group. Today, we will be discussing aspects of student culture that affect our sense of belonging in clubs and societies. Please remember that there are no wrong

answers and it's important to remain respectful and open to other peoples' views as they share their experiences. Let us know if you need to step out or take a break at any point.

10) Do an icebreaker with the group. You can choose from the following list of options, or come up with your own:
    a) Start by asking everyone to turn on their cameras. Then, ask participants to list everything blue that they can see on their screen in their peers' surroundings.
    b) Ask each person to state their name and their favourite thing that starts with the first letter of their name.
    c) Play a game of "never have I ever", where everyone starts by putting up their hand. List off a series of statements/activities (e.g., never have I ever been on a plane), and ask people to put their hand down if it relates to them. The last person with their hand up wins.

DURING the focus group

1) Log on to Mentimeter and present the slide that I have shared with you on a laptop/projector/monitor. (If this doesn't work, get a packet of sticky notes and put a pile in front of each participant. Then, wrote the following question on a piece of flipchart paper and ask participants to writ as many answers as they can come up with and stick them onto the paper:)

Name a cultural problem that exists within clubs and societies.

2) If you used physical materials, take a picture of the flipchart paper and send it to Nathalie. Otherwise, skip to the next step.
3) Ask participants to choose the written problem that is most important to them (Question 2). Then proceed with the rest of the questions (Questions 3-5) as normal.

AFTER the focus group

1) Read the following statement:

Thank you for taking part in today's discussion. Your views and experiences will be invaluable in helping to shape the future of the Union. Keep an eye out in your email for a transcript of today's session and let us know of any corrections that you would like to make within 5 working days of receiving it.

If any part of today's discussion made you feel unwell or had a negative impact on your wellbeing, please don't hesitate to reach out for support. You can do this by referring yourself to the College's Mental Health Intervention Team or speaking to a Wellbeing Advisor.

2) If you need to do further signposting, refer to the list of resources in your facilitator pack. If you have any remaining concerns, please notify the Rep Team and/or the Activities Team.
3) Download the transcript from Microsoft Teams and email it to dpwelfare@imperial.ac.uk (along with a

picture of the flipchart paper, if you used it).