2020 National Student Survey Response

Imperial College Union | Michaela Flegrová – Deputy President (Education)

Welcome to Imperial College Union's 10th annual National Student Survey (NSS) Response. To mark this anniversary, we are approaching things a little differently this year. After drawing on our experience with the NSS response in previous years, we have decided to change the way we approach this exercise, hoping to make it more effective and more relevant, and addressing some of the problems that have been left untouched in previous years.

The Union's NSS response this year

In previous years, Imperial College Union would come up with a set of recommendations to present to the College following the release of the NSS results. Traditionally, we would put together between 1-3 recommendations for each of the broad NSS categories, regardless of how well or poorly the College scored in the NSS in each of the areas. These recommendations were also targeted at all departments at Imperial College equally, not considering how varied the problems were and what some departments had already implemented in the past to tackle some of these issues. Lastly, despite the historical poor performance of the Union in the NSS, the ICU's NSS recommendations primarily focused on improving teaching and services offered by the College, with limited recommendations for how the Union should change the way it operates in response to the feedback from the NSS.

To address these problems, the Union has decided to produce three separate sets of recommendations based on the NSS results this year.

I.   NSS recommendations for departments

We have worked with the student reps in each department to help them develop recommendations tailored specifically for their courses, based on the most common complaints in the NSS results of the given department. All departmental reps were provided with the NSS scores, sector comparisons, long term trends and free text comments from the NSS for their department. ICU has supported them in the analysis of the above, and in the development of 3-5 recommendations specifically for their departments, encouraging and facilitating the sharing of good practice across departments.

There was a total of 17 different departmental reports developed by the student reps, one for each department, with separate recommendations for the Biological Sciences and Biochemistry (Department of Life Sciences) and the BMB and MBBS (Faculty of Medicine) courses. We have encouraged the reps to present their recommendations to the staff in their departments, and we will be working with them throughout the year to help them keep track of their progress and see the proposed changes through.

Some of the most common problems identified by the departmental reps and addressed in their recommendations included:

1. **Inconsistent marking** and feedback provided (included in 12 departmental reports)
2. **Quality of feedback** or academic guidance, including feedback on lab reports and exams (12)
3. **Wellbeing and support** (10)
4. **Late feedback** (10)
5. **Poor organization**, including late release of timetables and communication of changes (10)
6. **Workload**, including clustering of deadlines (8)

While there was a significant overlap in many the problems identified, with all departments mentioning at least one of these themes, the solutions proposed were often different, depending on what specific departments had already been doing to address these problems, and the nature of the courses.

II.   NSS recommendations for the Union

One of the questions in the NSS asks about the performance of the relevant students' union, specifically if the students believe the Union is effective at representing their academic interests. Since 2017, this question has had a lower College-wide agreement rate than any of the other areas in the NSS. While this is not unusual, and a similar trend is observed across the sector, our 2020 score of 54% is still 2% below the national average, placing us in the 3rd quartile of all sector results.

While the question asks specifically about academic representation, it is evident from the free text comments that student dissatisfaction with the Union goes well beyond just its representative role, with numerous comments about our support to clubs and societies, our venues and our general responsiveness to emails and queries.

After reading through the NSS comments, specifically looking for any mentions of the Union, clubs and societies, representation, or our bars and events, we have identified a number of key problems. The team of officer trustees and senior staff has put together recommendations under the following broad themes to tackle these:

1. Improve our engagement with the student body
2. Improve our volunteer training and support
3. Implement a customer relationship management solution
4. Review our processes for Clubs, Societies and Projects
5. Work on improving our venues, spaces and events

More detail about these recommendations can be found in the separate document **"NSS Recommendations for the Union"**

III.   NSS Recommendations for the College

While many problems raised in the NSS are being addressed by the departmental reports, there are still areas where we feel work needs to be done at College level to ensure real improvement. This year, we have not developed siloed recommendations for different NSS categories for three different reasons:

- Firstly, we feel that focusing just on the NSS questions separately takes away our ability to address some overarching themes and problems which affect different areas of the student experience.
- Secondly, it allows us to distribute effort more reasonably. More focus should be given to areas where there are clear problems (such as assessment and feedback or organization and management) while less attention is needed for the themes where the College generally performs well (learning resources or teaching).
- Lastly, we believe that students don't judge their overall satisfaction just based on the specific areas in the NSS, but there are other complex factors contributing to it. These would not be properly addressed if we were only creating recommendations based on the individual NSS questions.

While we have not been aiming to produce recommendations that exactly fit the NSS categories, we have still made sure these are relevant to the NSS and each linked to one or more of the broad themes.

To ensure we are better at following through with the College-wide NSS recommendations this year, we are in the process of identifying a member of staff for each of these who we are planning to work with to create actionable, measurable and timely plans. We intend to use these plans throughout the year to implement recommendations.

When developing the NSS recommendations for the College, we have analysed all free-text comments submitted by students. Based on these, we have put together 5 recommendations for the College:

1. Review aspects of the support offered to departments by the College
2. Review the management of staff at Imperial
3. Develop and implement a policy on marking transparency in departments
4. Review student welfare support in departments
5. Continue the work on student spaces around campus, including the work on the provision and parity of informal learning and social spaces

With separate documents produced for the NSS recommendations for departments and for the Union, the rest of this paper has been dedicated to properly introducing the 5 recommendations for the College.

NSS Recommendations for the College

1. Review aspects of the support offered to departments by the College

`Organisation and Management` `Academic Support` `Learning Community` `Student Voice`

Some problems within departments are difficult to fix locally, without support or coordination from the College. While the departments might be aware of issues and attempt to address them, they might require additional support from the College centrally, or they may be constrained by "one-size fits all" policies that don't adequately reflect our devolved structure. The three key areas we have identified are Timetabling, Communications and SOLE surveys.

a. Timetabling

One of the major complaints about poor organisation in departments was centred around the late release of timetables and exam schedules. With space being shared around College, departments often find themselves waiting for other stakeholders to agree on who will have access to which space for lectures, tutorials and exams. This is especially problematic for departments without an exclusive access to a building, such as Bioengineering and Life Sciences (both Biology and Biochemistry). These courses were some of the worst scoring ones under Organisation and Management, with all three ranking in the 3rd or 4th quartile of the sector results.

> "Organisation was also a big problem in this course, with us regularly obtaining exam or term timetables a week or so before the events."
>
> A bioengineering student

We want to work on reviewing the process of creating departmental timetables and the support provided to departments. We will aim to determine what makes timetables late in certain departments and how they can be better supported by the CTSO to meet the required targets.

b. Communications

Many free-text comments in the NSS were pointing out problems with poor departmental communications. Some students noted that emails from staff members could be rude,

> "Toxic / Threatening / Condescending replies from lecturers and course directors in either email or person-to-person formats."
>
> A materials student

condescending or unhelpful, and this created a barrier between staff and students. While comments like this were made by students from various different departments, they were a significant theme in Physics and Materials, two of the worst scoring departments. The two courses have one of the lowest overall student satisfaction in College of 62% and 71% respectively, beaten only by BMB, and rank in the 3rd or 4th quartiles under all NSS categories, including Learning Community and Organisation and Management.

In collaboration with the College, we would like to work on a review of the level of support for departments to help them effectively and appropriately communicate to students, and investigate the scope for more support and training which could be offered to key student-facing members of staff. We would also want to review the process of releasing College wide comms to students to ensure departments can feed into those, are not caught off guard, and there is consistency

between local comms and College wide comms. Students pointed out that the conflicting messages they were getting contributed to the poor perception of general organisation.

c. SOLE Survey

At 75%, the Student Voice is the College's third worst category in the NSS and has seen a steady annual decrease of 2% every year since 2017. With the SOLE survey being the main College-wide tool to ensure a systematic collection of student feedback, this system is what we want to focus on as a part of the NSS recommendations. The SOLE survey is regarded as outdated by most staff and students, with both parties often not engaging with it enough and therefore not giving students a proper opportunity to have their voices heard.

> *"SOLE is a useless tool for feedback."*
> A medicine student

While the SOLE survey has been under review for many years now, little has been done to implement changes. In collaboration with the College, we want to commit to the completing and actioning of the review of the SOLE survey in time for the 2021/22 academic year. We want to ensure that under the review we are giving departments more autonomy over the questions and timings of the SOLE survey, to make it a more effective tool in the departments that both staff and students can benefit from.

2. Review the management of staff at Imperial

`Organisation and Management`   `Academic Support`   `Teaching`   `Student Voice`

Staff members play the most important role in shaping the student experience. There are many brilliant staff members at Imperial, working hard to make sure students learn effectively and enjoy their time at university. However, individual problematic staff in the departments, even if in a tiny minority, can cause a significant harm to how the department, and the College more generally, is perceived by the students and how they reflect on their time at Imperial when taking the NSS survey.

> *"Some staff members clearly don't care and are clearly really bad at teaching, marking and/or giving feedback, but this is never fixed."*
> A physics student

Departmental structures do not always lend themselves to addressing issues with individual members of staff. It can take years to remove a problematic lecturer or tutor from their role. Often, this simply entails being moved to a different lecture course, tutorial or lab, which without personal improvement still results in someone's learning experience being detrimentally impacted. While this is only true for a small number of staff members, the inability to deal leads to a poor perception of the management of the department among students.

> *"The department have often not heeded repeated complaints about the poor teaching"*
> A civil engineering student

The departmental structures often do not provide the DUGS (or equivalent) with effective tools to ensure adequate performance of the teaching staff. If a staff member is higher up in the research structure than the person supervising them in the education structure, it is difficult to effectively manage their teaching performance.

We want to review the key aspects of staff management at Imperial, ensuring that an individual's ability to teach and support students is of equal importance to their research prestige, and that there is focus on education from the moment they are being recruited. To ensure our great staff members are not being unfairly overworked, we also want to review how the workload of staff is monitored and what can be done to ensure lecturers and tutors have enough time to do their job properly.

Under this recommendation, we would like to collaborate with the College to focus on the following four areas:

- **Recruitment:** Review the recruitment criteria for academics to ensure there is focus on their willingness and ability to teach and tutor students.
- **KPIs:** Review the Key Performance Indicators for academic staff to ensure there is focus on teaching and student support.
- **Departmental Structures:** Review the departmental structures and processes to ensure that the DUGS (and similar) are empowered to deal with problematic members of staff.
- **Workload Monitoring:** Review the monitoring of staff teaching workload in departments and develop a strategy to ensure staff members are not overburdened by teaching.

By reviewing the management of staff at Imperial we would be able to not only improve the Organisation and Management category of the NSS, but also ensure better quality of teaching and academic support, and make the student voice better heard.

3. Develop and implement a policy on marking transparency in departments

Assessment and Feedback   Learning Resources

Assessment and Feedback is by far the lowest NSS category at Imperial. While this is the case at many other universities, we still find ourselves in the 4th quartile across the sector, with only five out of over 150 institutions scoring worse. Many of the issues raised with assessment and feedback are addressed in the departmental reports developed by dep reps, addressing the local problems with local solutions. However, there are aspects of assessment that the departments are often very protective about, and it is difficult for reps to get more information about things like exam scaling, marking criteria or exam mark schemes without the support from the College.

> *"The exam marking process is not transparent; I have no idea how 'fair' the marking really is."*
> A computing student

> *"Marking is unfair and very subjective; assessment criteria are unclear"*
> A biochemistry student

Many student complaints about assessment and feedback relate to the transparency of the process, specifically about exams, which often form the majority of their assessment. There is a significant variation across departments, with some students having full access to all marking criteria and the departments being absolutely transparent about the processing of exam results, while other students are left in the dark, not fully knowing how exactly they are being assessed.

This year, we would like to see a policy developed which would establish the basic standards of marking transparency in departments. In collaboration with the College we would specifically like to focus on the following areas:

- **Training of Markers:** Student representatives should be involved in an annual review of the training offered to all staff who mark students' work.
- **Marking Criteria:** Marking criteria for all assessed work should be transparent and available to students prior to starting work on a given assignment; this includes marking schemes or guidance for lab reports, presentations or project theses.
- **Exam Scaling:** Departments should be absolutely transparent about how exam results are processed; which exams have been scaled and what the scaling process entails (if exam scaling is applied).
- **Exam reports and mark schemes:** Relevant examiners' reports should be available to students after they have taken their exams, and at least three past papers with solutions should be released to all students preparing for an exam.

While some of the points raised above are already included in some policies, none of these are implemented uniformly in all departments. After putting together this policy, we will be working with the departmental reps on ensuring it is followed across the College.

4. Review student welfare support in departments

Overall Satisfaction | Learning Community | Academic Support

The National Student Survey does not contain specific questions about student wellbeing, mental health or stress. However, it is clear from the free-text comments that all of these are a significant problem across departments. These are often quoted as the most important contributors to a students' bad university experience, with many respondents claiming they had had an awful time specifically because of high level of stress and poor mental health while studying. To improve the overall student satisfaction, we need to address wellbeing problems effectively.

> *"Very poor student wellbeing support especially regarding mental health issues."*
> A bioengineering student

Student support and wellbeing services are variable across departments, and the support system relies significantly on personal tutors, which means there is little consistency in the help offered to different students. Wellbeing advisors have been introduced in the Faculty of Engineering to offer more support to students, but similar roles have not been uniformly rolled out in other parts of College.

> *"I've felt very alone during my time at Imperial and as if I've had no real support from staff."*
> A maths student

There have been many good recommendations and action plans proposed in the past, aiming at improving student wellbeing and mental health. Some of these have also been proposed in previous NSS recommendations. However, a lot of the recommendations and strategies have not been fully adopted by all departments across College, or they have not been implemented properly.

In this academic year we would like to work on reviewing previous plans and proposals in this area, and working on their implementation in all departments in the College. We would like to work with the College to specifically focus on:

- **Wellbeing advisors:** Review wellbeing advisors in the Faculty of Engineering, and use this to inform how to develop student support roles across undergraduate courses in the College

- **Actioning of previous plans:** Audit previous work done to review and improve personal tutors including previous NSS recommendations, departmental/faculty reviews and EDU research. Use this to produce a coherent action plan around personal tutoring that is delegated to departments and departmental wellbeing reps to see through.

5. Continue the work on student spaces around campus, including the work on the provision and parity of informal learning and social spaces

Learning Community | Learning Resources | Organisation and Management

Student spaces are a recurring complaint in the NSS across most departments. With much of our teaching located in South Kensington, where spaces are limited and there is little room for expansion, this is not surprising. However, insufficient access to places where students could study, eat lunch or just relax with their friends limits their ability to build communities in departments, use their time efficiently and make their timetable work for them.

> *"There is still not enough space for undergraduate students to relax, socialise and work, despite promises made to students."*
> *A computing student*

> *"The study space for undergraduates is not enough. [...] This is extremely unfriendly for students if they want to study during lecture breaks.*
> *A bioengineering student*

Under the Learning and Teaching Strategy, investments have been made into learning spaces across College. Recently, more planning has also gone into converting unused areas in departmental buildings into informal learning and social spaces, creating more places for students to use both for work and to spend time with their friends. Some of these projects have been put on hold following the COVID-19 outbreak.

Furthermore, the College has been working for some years on how to more efficiently take advantage of the limited available study and recreational space, especially in South Kensington. Now more than ever, space sharing must be a crucial pillar of our plans going forward, to better use our finite resources (physical and financial) to address issues with student satisfaction.

We strongly believe that the investment in student spaces and a more efficient overall use of space can have a significant effect on student satisfaction, directly improving the formation of communities in the department and the mental health of students, while also providing students with the space they need to learn. When thinking about whether their timetables work for them, students are more likely to agree if they were regularly able to find a space to work during their gaps between scheduled classes.

We endorse the work the College has done in this area, and hope it continues and expands as time goes on.