

Board of Trustees - One-Page Summary

AGENDA ITEM NO.	14
TITLE	Advice Centre: Review for the Trustee Board
AUTHOR	Andrew Keenan, Education & Welfare Manager Nigel Cooke, Student Adviser
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	<p>This review sets out a number of objectives for development of our Advice Centre, chiefly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A deeper, more targeted relationship with relevant College services - Integration of Advice Centre casework & experience with campaign planning and academic representative work - A number of operational changes, such as to opening times, publicity and training
PURPOSE	<p>Objective SC2 of the Strategic Plan calls for a review of the Advice Centre to be held, with recommendations made to the Board of Trustees; this is that review.</p> <p>Other objectives of the Plan are supported, including SC1 (Advocacy to Action) and SO2 (customer services).</p> <p>The recommendations will be tracked and enacted through fortnightly working group meetings of the E&W Manager, Student Adviser and Deputy President (Welfare).</p>
RISK IMPLICATIONS	No major risks anticipated.
FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS	No changes to the 2013/14 budget as relating to the Advice Centre or Education & Welfare are proposed here, although there may be long-term resource implications if footfall increases.
LEGAL REVIEW REQUIRED?	No.
DECISION/ACTION REQUIRED	A list of the recommendations and actions is given at the front of the document.

Advice Centre: Review for the Trustee Board

The Advice Centre (AC) offers free, confidential and impartial expert advice, on a range of issues, to the membership of Imperial College Union. It has one full-time member of staff (the Student Adviser), an office with an interview area, a range of print and screen publicity, and online content in a dedicated section of imperialcollegeunion.org. In the coming year, it will play an increased role in supporting our campaigns, liberation officers and our Advocacy to Action work.

To give an idea of the scale of the AC's services, we saw approximately 570 cases & enquiries in the 2012/13 academic year - an increase of 5% from 2011/12. Our services are broadly divided into academic, housing, money, consumer rights, employment rights and 'miscellaneous' categories.

The Operating Plan 2012/13 stated that "we will review the scale and scope of the Advice Centre to ensure that it continues to provide a valuable support to our members", with a series of recommendations to be made to the Trustee Board for the Centre's development.

After a review of survey data concerning the AC, interviews with key College staff, a number of trips to peer ACs in London, and comparisons of working practices and online content with other students' unions, our recommendations are presented throughout the review below.

The first section covers strategic options around our relationship with College and our future staffing & resource needs; the second discusses the operational changes, proposed and underway, to develop our working practices and improve the service we offer our members.

Nigel Cooke, Student Adviser

Andrew Keenan, Education & Welfare Manager

Action/Recommendation	Owner	Date
Strategic recommendations		
Analyse the trend of Imperial's complaints to the OIA annually, using their annual OIA summary letter and sector-wide statistics.	NC	Nov 2013
Arrange quarterly staff meetings with College services, centred on operational changes and collaboration	AK	Mar 2014
Implement a service-level agreement with Student Hub.	AK	Mar 2014
As part of the upcoming rewrite of the Welfare & Advice section of imperialcollegeunion.org, agree content and key messages when appropriate with College services.	AK	Dec 2013
Arrange cross-service referral and signposting standards by March 2014, designed for the students' benefit rather than organisational ease; included in SLA and reviewed annually.	AK	Mar 2014
Monitor caseload on the Advice Centre, amending working practices where necessary. If usage does increase as predicted, assess whether there is a need for extra staffing, potentially on a part-time basis, in the medium to long term.	AK/NC	Ongoing
Resolve to continue supporting students on a wide range of topics, even if our service is to give students basic advice and signpost them to more specialised advisers – and make this decision clear to College.	AK	Dec 2013

Promote 'one-stop shop' as a selling point of the Centre. If extreme pressure is applied to our resources, we will consider suspending certain topics for short periods, but only as a last resort.	AK	Ongoing
Operational recommendations		
The switch to casework management software has been made for the 2013/14 academic year; termly reports of AC cases & enquiries will be produced for internal use. These will also support the planning of campaigns and the annual Advocacy to Action Report.	AK/NC	Completed
The Student Adviser, Education & Welfare Manager and Deputy President (Welfare) will meet at least fortnightly to identify new areas to campaign on, monitor ongoing projects and share relevant information about Union and College policy.	AK	Ongoing
The Student Adviser successfully trialled working in the Floor 2 open-plan office when not in private consultations with students, and this arrangement will continue indefinitely; he will also attend Community & Welfare Board regularly to update the student members on current work.	NC	Ongoing
Online content will be redrafted and expanded, with new features added throughout the year as needed. Case studies for common student experiences will be included on the website and in the Welfare Handbook. The online content will be reviewed annually for accuracy at the end of each academic year.	AK	Dec 2013
A standard satisfaction survey will be drafted and sent out to all users of the Centre within two weeks of their visit; results of the survey will be used by staff to maintain service standards.	AK	Nov 2013
The Student Adviser will help create and deliver training for liberation & welfare officers, as well as offer support on signposting, mental health, and policy/ legislation changes throughout the year.	NC	Ongoing
The current paper & screen publicity will be kept for at least the current academic year. The Welfare Handbook will be redrafted and renamed as described above and made available to incoming students, as well as prominently featured on the website.	AK	Completed
The Student Adviser will allocate periods through the working week when he is available for drop-in appointments; these times will be consistent week-to-week and clearly advertised on publicity material and agreed with Reception beforehand. This preserves the ability of students to attend the Advice Centre without prior appointments at predictable times, but also gives the Adviser the flexibility to complete other work free from interruption.	NC	Nov 2013
All Advice Centre supporting documents will be reviewed annually at the end of each academic year. Expectations of users and of the Centre, as set out in the Code of Standards and 'Customer Promises', will be displayed in the office and online.	AK	Dec 2013
The Student Adviser, Deputy President (Welfare) and Education & Welfare Manager will reassess the value of each affiliation each year, to ensure we are getting value for money. The Adviser will also look at the feasibility of affiliating to Shelter Legal for housing advice. We will look into joint affiliations together with College services, to see if costs can be reduced.	AK	Dec 2013
The Student Adviser will aim to take part in meetings of student	NC	Dec 2013

advisors from across London and the South East two or three times a year, with some meetings hosted at Imperial College Union.		
The Student Adviser will explore the tasks and costs associated with gaining the AQS mark.	NC	Dec 2013

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STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

National context

The recent annual report from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) revealed that the number of academic appeals they received increased by 25% from 2011 to 2012, which it attributes to “an environment where the student experience is at the heart of the higher education system and where the higher education system itself is expanding and changing”.¹

The new tuition fee settlement is specifically singled out as a cause of the increasing number of complaints, and the report states that postgraduate and international students are proportionately more likely to make a complaint than home or undergraduate students, and male students are more likely to make a complaint than female students.

Conclusion: Considering the makeup of College’s student body in comparison to the UK higher education sector in general, we can assume that Imperial will also experience an increasing number of student appeals and complaints.

Advice Centre recommendation: Analyse the trend of Imperial’s complaints to the OIA annually, using their annual OIA summary letter and sector-wide statistics.

¹ <http://oiahe.org.uk/media/88650/oia-annual-report-2012.pdf>

Local context: collaboration with College services

The AC interacts with a number of College's units and services, including the following:

- Student Hub
- Disability Advisory Service
- Student Finance
- Credit Control
- Personal Tutors
- College Tutors
- Residences
- Wardens
- Student Counselling Service
- International Student Support

For this review, our brief asked that we engage with the future plans and development strategies of the above services and for College's welfare and student support provisions as a whole. This proved challenging for a number of reasons – the most important being the existence of a deep organisational split in College's student support services, with some housed within various parts of Campus Services,² others within Registry³, and the rest in their own disparate sections of College. Possibly as a consequence of this, various units have different levels of detail and vision for their future activity, which restricts the AC's ability to engage with and influence their plans.

The recent College-run Welfare Seminar heard a speech from the Dean of Students at the University of East Anglia, who heads a single department that unites all of the above services - and some that don't exist at Imperial – in one clear management structure. While Campus Services through the Student Hub plans to co-locate some of the above services in one physical space, it is not clear that this will tackle the issues of having different management and reporting systems in place for services that need to work collaboratively. In the absence of a pan-College plan for student support and a singular management structure, 'mission creep' and conflicting agendas have developed.

Risk: The fragmented and somewhat closed nature of College's support services, spread across different areas of College and reporting to different managers, complicates AC planning and has led to 'mission creep' in the larger units – particularly the Student Hub.

Our approach to managing the relationship between the AC and College services is to promote a collaborative, rather than a transactional relationship. A number of students' unions have ceased to offer advice or support to their members in certain subject areas, such as housing or personal budgeting; a number retain only academic appeal/complaint advice as their only service. We consider this to be an undesirable strategic move as any reduction in AC services is not beneficial to members; it degrades that AC's ability to train student officers and support campaigns in that subject area, and presents individual members with fewer options if they are seeking advice or advocacy.

Conclusions: Future negotiations with College should be built on an explicit foundation of mutual development and provision of services and advice, with the AC's independence from College and liberty to contradict or oppose College advice maintained.

Any discussion about reducing the range of topics handled by the AC must also consider the effect on the Union's capacity to campaign, advocate for our members and lobby College and other authorities. College plans for service development will be monitored and any risk to the AC's role as advocate challenged.

² Wardening, Residences, Student Hub

³ International Student Support, Student Finance (Hardship Funding & Loans), Personal Tutors

As part of this review, we arranged recorded interviews with the key members of staff from a number of these areas.⁴ The participants were given preparatory questions asking about their long-term plans and anticipated risks for their services, their view of the AC's role in their subject area, and what changes they would like to see in the AC's provision.

As mentioned above, each service interviewed had different levels of planning for their future development and of their ideal working relationship with the Advice Centre. When a service provided us with a clear development plan, we are able to engage with it, but if no plan existed, the conversation centred on operational items rather than future plans. However, a number of general themes emerged from our discussions. These themes are summarised as follows, with the outcomes from each interview explored below.

Themes for engaging College services:

1. *Opening up lines of communication*

While there is presently irregular contact between the AC and each service, it is almost exclusively during inter-service referrals (for example, Student Finance suggesting to a student that they arrange to see the Student Adviser about personal budgeting advice).

All services (including the AC) meet as part of College's Welfare Committee, but it is large, meets infrequently and does not generate much useful, specific discussion. No conversational space exists at present for the Advice Centre to meet with each service to discuss operational practices (for example, in what circumstances Credit Control should involve the AC in cases with a welfare or mental health element) or the effects of changes in College policy, among other things.

In our discussions, the idea of 'service-level agreements' was mentioned on occasion. We are reluctant to call for these as the complex nature of student appeals and complaints requires tailored cooperation on a case-by-case basis rather than standardised inter-service agreements. However, an SLA may be appropriate for our relationship with the Student Hub in particular, and the process of exploring what each SLA would involve could be a useful scoping exercise for AC relationships and responsibilities.

Recommendation: AC to arrange quarterly staff meetings with College services, centred on operational changes and collaboration; implement an SLA with Student Hub.

2. *Working across College divisions*

As mentioned above, College's services are not housed in one management structure, but are contained within other units with potentially conflicting business aims. This complicates long-term planning as there is no single individual with line management responsibility for a majority of the services.

3. *Agree publicity and key messages*

Several units agreed that the quality of the AC's online and printed content has an

⁴ *Interviewed:* Gerry Greyling, Student Finance; Mary Bown, Disabilities Advisory Service; Simon Archer, College Tutor; Charles Gallagher & Kelly MacKenzie, Student Hub; Sharon Bolton, International Student Support; Graham Woodward & Nick Rogers, Credit Control

effect on College services as well as our own. Jointly agreeing key messages, answering simple questions and presenting case studies of student experiences

Recommendation: As part of the upcoming rewrite of the Welfare & Advice section of imperialcollegeunion.org, agree content and key messages when appropriate with College services.

4. *Standardise referrals between services*

At present, students with similar cases can receive varying information about what support the AC can offer them. For example, the AC has an informal agreement with Student Finance (Hardship) that any applicants to the Access to Learning or Hardship funds will be directed to the Student Adviser for money & budgeting advice; however, no such arrangement exists with Credit Control when they pursue students for unpaid tuition or accommodation fees. Putting these referrals on a solid basis will help us predict user numbers, and have confidence that our members are being signposted to our services when appropriate.

Recommendation: AC to arrange cross-service referral and signposting standards by March 2014, designed for the students' benefit rather than organisational ease; included in SLA and reviewed annually.

5. *We need to define and protect our role as advocate as well as adviser*

There is a spectrum of support that an individual student can be given in any situation, ranging from 'information' through 'advice' to 'advocacy'. The AC offers the full range of the spectrum on almost every topic we cover, while College does not provide advocacy on any issue.

However, the line between 'advice' and 'advocacy' can become blurred and is not necessarily understood by student service users, and can be threatened by mission creep. An example is the 'May Housing Mayhem' programme organized by Student Hub and Residences, which mixed commercial advertising for College and private accommodation with the offer of advice such as contract-checking – a service that can slip easily from advice to advocacy and support, which is usually considered to be the AC's role rather than that of the College.

Risk: Our role as providers of advocacy, support and representation to students may be undermined by mission creep in College. This will be countered through closer working relationships and a robust defense of our role as advocates in any planning contexts.

Local context: outcomes of interviews with College services

The interviews held with College staff generated a large number of ideas and possible areas of joint work with each service, which will be fed into our Departmental Operating Plan. The underlying themes have been explained above; the key outcomes of each meeting are summarised below:

Service	Relevant trends	Key outcomes/recommendations
Student Hub	Offering more advice and increasing capacity; looking for	- Possibility of service level agreement to be explored - Hub on Tour collaboration to continue

	physical co-location; new staff training programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hub role in advocacy to be monitored and challenged by ICU if necessary
Disability Advisory Service	Disability needs of international students posing resource challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training to be given to DAS staff on AC services - Referral flowchart to be written - Disabilities info on .org to be written collaboratively - Student Adviser to be trained by DAS on assisting students in applying to Disabled Students' Allowance - Joint campaigns on declarations and mental health first aid to be organised
Credit Control	Not receptive to AC collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No plans to expand their staffing or number of cases seen - Against idea of credit control case studies on AC website - Will refer students to AC on occasion but unwilling to formalise relationship
Student Finance (Hardship)	Increasing pressure on limited hardship funds - 16% increase in each of the last two years in intake of students from low- income backgrounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agreement that all hardship fund applicants should have AC session on personal budgeting - Will create mechanism for flagging up students in debt to College and offering them budgeting advice - Supportive of budgeting tools on Union site
College Tutors	Academics less willing to become personal tutors due to experience & time required; finance and mental health- related issues are increasing in number	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Desire to play role in ICU advocacy-to-action work, by feeding through their experiences to our campaigns - Consider themselves clear on where advice ends and advocacy begins; always refer to AC in such cases - Supportive of more communication with AC and other services
International Student Support	Now organising social events for integration purposes; working with student parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Diversifying from visas to integration and social activities - Agree to retain visa-checking solely within ISS but ask that Student Adviser receive training to be able to give information

Staffing and resource

There is currently one full-time member of staff employed in the Advice Centre, present 10am-5pm Monday to Friday. This gives us a poorer ratio of advisers to students than our peer ACs, as demonstrated below. The SUs on this table have ACs that cover a broadly similar range of topics as our own.

SU	AC Staff (FTE)	Students	Ratio of Students/Advisers
KCLSU	3	24550	8183:1
UCLU	3	24680	8226:1
EUSA	6	31323	5220:1

Warwick SU	2.5	23420	9368:1
York SU	1	15265	15265:1
Imperial College Union	1	15989	15989:1

Looking ahead, we predict a number of drivers of increased AC usage in the next academic year:

1. Completion of referral agreements with College services
2. Planned 2013/14 Union-led campaigns – including but not limited to mental health, alternative accommodation information, disability provision for international students, and PhD/supervisor expectations.
3. Improved online resources and publicity of our services
4. National increase in number of student appeals and complaints

We also predict a number of factors that will put pressure on the time available to the Student Adviser:

1. An increased role in student officer training and regular campaign planning
2. Administrative overhead of meeting College staff for operational meetings
3. Time required to attend training

Taking these factors together and looking at the caseloads and resources allocated by our peer students' unions, we expect that over the coming three terms, we will approach the maximum capacity of the AC as it is currently resourced.

Advice Centre recommendation: The Student Adviser and Education & Welfare Manager will continually monitor the caseload on the Advice Centre, amending working practices where necessary. If usage does increase as predicted, we will assess whether there is a need for extra staffing, potentially on a part-time basis, in the medium to long term.

Portfolio of topics

Looking at a sample of SUs from across the sector, individual ACs handle different 'portfolios' of topics – ranging from the UELSU Advice Service, who only accept academic-related cases, to the UCLU Rights & Advice Centre, who accept cases relating to academic, consumer, employment, finance, housing & immigration matters.

Our AC currently accepts a wide range of cases, and is able to refer students with questions outside of its remit to appropriate organisations.

Having a Centre with a wide range of topics presents challenges in staying up-to-date with legislation, policy and practice across each area. On the other hand, having a permanent member of staff with expertise in multiple areas enables the AC to support sabbatical and non-sabbatical officers on a wide range of campaigns.

We consider that any reduction in the categories of cases accepted in order to free up adviser time would be a false economy, weakening the Union's overall capacity for campaigning and supporting individual students. Often, service users present with multiple issues stemming from one root cause; for example, mental illness that has led to financial, housing and academic issues simultaneously. Maintaining and publicizing the 'one-stop

shop' ethos of the AC will better serve our members than specialising in a smaller range of topics.

One partial exception to this approach is practiced by a small number of ACs – temporarily reducing the topics covered at high-traffic times of year. For example, if we are under heavy load during the exam/results period, we could consider reducing the time we give to money or housing issues.

Advice Centre actions: Resolve to continue supporting students on a wide range of topics, even if our service is to give students basic advice and signpost them to more specialised advisers – and make this decision clear to College.

Promote 'one-stop shop' as a selling point of the Centre. If extreme pressure is applied to our resources, we will consider suspending certain topics for short periods, but only as a last resort.

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Casework management and reporting

The AC currently records the details of cases and enquiries on paper, using a form designed in-house. Peer advice centres use commercially-available software such as AdvicePro or Caseworker Connect; we used AdvicePro until mid-2011, but this was discontinued due to cost.

Paper-based logging of cases makes it difficult and time-consuming to produce regular reports analysing the trends in cases & enquiries over a specific period of time. Such reports, produced on a monthly or termly basis, will allow the AC to better monitor developing trends in the categories of cases seen and the demographics of students using the service. They will also help inform student representatives, both academic and welfare, of recurring problems that could be addressed at source through lobbying College staff or running campaigns – such as calling for better plagiarism advice targeted specifically at international students. The use of a single set of categories for AC cases & enquiries, welfare campaigns and academic representative work will also allow more effective planning and monitoring of the Union's efforts across these areas.

A brief was written for Central Services requesting the development of new functions in eActivities specifically for the Advice Centre with the above features, and a beta version of the service has now been completed. The switch from paper to the online system is underway.

Advice Centre actions: The switch to casework management software has been made for the 2013/14 academic year; termly reports of AC cases & enquiries will be produced for internal use. These will also support the planning of campaigns and the annual Advocacy to Action Report.

Advocacy to action: supporting campaigns

Due to extra staffing and funding, the Union is now in a position to run a greater number of campaigns than before, across education, liberation and welfare topics. The operational detail of how these campaigns are managed is still being determined but a distinction of 'student-led' and 'Union-led' campaigns has emerged.

Student-led campaigns are, in short, when the Community & Welfare Board grants a group of students a small sum of money to support an initiative that the students plan and execute, without their goal becoming Union policy – such as “Action Syria”.

Union-led campaigns are when Union staff and sabbatical officers organise and carry out campaigns ‘in-house’, often to enact Union policy – such as the Stress Less, #AgainstActon or Alternative Accommodation campaigns. Union-led campaigns will generally be identified and budgeted for before the start of the financial year, while student-led campaigns will be funded throughout the year from a dedicated pot allocated within the budget.

The AC and Student Adviser, due to the wide range of topics they handle, are in a strong position to support Union-led campaigns – through their policy and legal knowledge, and by advising on emergent problems (such as an increase in PhD students submitting their theses late, or one department with a high number of students failing exams). Lines of communication between the AC and the Deputy President (Welfare) and non-sabbatical liberation & welfare officers have been inconsistent in previous years. To have confidence that we are choosing the most effective campaigns, and using all available staff expertise in campaign planning, regular contact must be maintained.

Advice Centre action: The Student Adviser, Education & Welfare Manager and Deputy President (Welfare) will meet at least fortnightly to identify new areas to campaign on, monitor ongoing projects and share relevant information about Union and College policy.

The Student Adviser successfully trialled working in the Floor 2 open-plan office when not in private consultations with students, and this arrangement will continue indefinitely; he will also attend Community & Welfare Board regularly to update the student members on current work.

Welfare & Advice website

‘Welfare & Advice’ is currently a top-level menu option on imperialcollegeunion.org, visible from any page of the website. Each page within the section displays contact details and a link to the Welfare Handbook PDF to the right of the content. There is also a standalone site provided by the AC, yourlimits.co.uk, which presents drug & alcohol advice on a separate website of completely different design.

While the content currently available was new for the 2012/13 academic year, there are several large gaps in its content, and it presents most of its existing content in text-only format. A new menu and content structure has been drafted which creates new high-level menu options, allowing a greater amount of content without overly-complex navigation.

This new content is being drafted and introduced in phases from July onwards, with completion intended December 2013. The yourlimits.co.uk site will be deactivated and the URL, which is shown at the bottom of all Imperial College Union event publicity, will redirect straight to the redrafted Drug & Alcohol content on imperialcollegeunion.org.

As well as a greater volume of text content, the website will host ‘widgets’ – online tools for functions such as finding local health centres or understanding student finance. Proposed widgets include:

- Interactive map of London with overlaid rent levels, student population centres, travel times, and other datasets (as part of an Alternative Accommodation section)
- NHS service locator using postcodes
- 'Money Doctor' budgeting tool
- Student finance explanation tool
- Alcohol unit calculator

Feedback from students and examples from other SUs' websites suggests that case studies are effective ways to explain College or Union services. For example, the services offered to students by the Disability Advisory Service or Counselling Service can be illustrated through an example from a student – whether anonymised or fictionalised – alongside descriptions of what they offer.

Our conversations with College services also highlighted the importance of accurate, detailed and accessible content on our website, as it helps to reduce their workloads by providing otherwise hidden or inaccessible information in a student-friendly location.

Some of these widgets are available commercially, and some will be coded by the Union's web developer and systems coordinator.

Advice Centre actions: Online content will be redrafted and expanded, with new features added throughout the year as needed. Case studies for common student experiences will be included on the website and in the Welfare Handbook. The online content will be reviewed annually for accuracy at the end of each academic year.

Feedback and quality monitoring

There is an identified need for a continuous feedback mechanism for the AC, asking its users about their experience. The annual Union Survey and i-Barometer surveys ask about the Centre, but are sent to all students. Only a small percentage of results are applicable and there can be several months between the student's experience of the service and the survey being distributed.

Other ACs ask their users to complete a short satisfaction survey within a few days of using the Centre; we will adopt this and begin distributing them at the start of the next academic year.

Advice Centre action: A standard satisfaction survey will be drafted and sent out to all users of the Centre within two weeks of their visit; results of the survey will be used by staff to maintain service standards.

Training for officers

Developing support for our liberation & welfare officers is a key priority for the 2013/14 academic year, as they are undersupported and undertrained compared to club, society & project officers or academic representatives.

Advice Centre action: The Student Adviser will help create and deliver training for liberation & welfare officers, as well as offer support on signposting, mental health, and policy/legislation changes throughout the year.

Publicity

The Centre's publicity materials were redesigned at the start of the 2012/13 academic year, with a single design used on flyers and the TV screens in the Union building. A slightly different image is used on all pages of the Welfare & Advice section of imperialcollegeunion.org.

A 'Welfare Handbook' was produced for the 2012/13 academic year, which goes through the support services that the Union and College provide – including units such as Disability Advice and the Student Hub as well as the Advice Centre. The Handbook was sent out to incoming first year students before the start of the academic session.

In terms of design and style, the Welfare Handbook is similar to the training handbooks the Union provides for student officers and representatives – rather than the informal, accessible style of the Freshers' Handbook or Postgraduate Handbook that are produced annually for incoming students.

The Welfare Handbook is a useful resource, but could be more effective. A redesign with the intention of making it more accessible and 'entertaining', rather than the drier tone of an instruction manual, will give the handbook greater impact.

Advice Centre action: The current paper & screen publicity will be kept for at least the current academic year. The Welfare Handbook will be redrafted and renamed as described above and made available to incoming students, as well as prominently featured on the website.

Opening times and appointments

The Student Adviser is employed on a full-time basis and receives students seeking advice through appointments and unscheduled visits, meaning students can access in-person advice 10am – 5pm during the working week. Appointments can be made through phone, email or the Union Reception.

While an open-door policy is important for students in urgent need of advice or otherwise unable to make appointments, this must be balanced with the Adviser's need to block out periods of time to prepare for and attend meetings (often on behalf of students), and to work on cases, campaigns, and other administrative tasks.

Advice Centres at peer SUs balance drop-in periods with appointment-only periods. Centres with multiple staff stagger the availability of each member of the team, ensuring all staff have blocks of time dedicated to administration, research or case follow-ups.

Advice Centre action: The Student Adviser will allocate periods through the working week when he is available for drop-in appointments; these times will be consistent week-to-week and clearly advertised on publicity material and agreed with Reception beforehand. This preserves the ability of students to attend the Advice Centre without prior appointments at predictable times, but also gives the Adviser the flexibility to complete other work free from interruption.

Supporting documents

A number of supporting documents and policies are in place to underpin the work of the Advice Centre. They include confidentiality statements and a Code of Practice. They have all

been reviewed recently and amended to reflect changes in the Union's staffing and organisational structure.

Advice Centre action: All Advice Centre supporting documents will be reviewed annually at the end of each academic year. Expectations of users and of the Centre, as set out in the Code of Standards and 'Customer Promises', will be displayed in the office and online.

Affiliations & subscriptions

The Advice Centre currently pays annual subscriptions to:

- Advice UK (who also provide the Advice Centre's professional indemnity insurance)
- London Nightline
- National Association of Student Money Advisers
- UK Council for International Student Affairs

These organisations offer various forms of support to the Student Adviser, such as helplines for questions about policy and legislation, access to annual conferences, training, and briefings. An annual fee is charged for each, determined by the size of the student body.

The Student Adviser also subscribes to relevant mailing lists, where advisers from across the UK pool questions and best practice. In past years, student advisers from various SUs have met regularly; this seems to have fallen out of practice.

Advice Centre actions: The Student Adviser, Deputy President (Welfare) and Education & Welfare Manager will reassess the value of each affiliation each year, to ensure we are getting value for money. The Adviser will also look at the feasibility of affiliating to Shelter Legal for housing advice. We will look into joint affiliations together with College services, to see if costs can be reduced.

The Student Adviser will aim to take part in meetings of student advisors from across London and the South East two or three times a year, with some meetings hosted at Imperial College Union.

Quality marks

The Advice Quality Standard (AQS) is "the only sector-owned, independently audited standard that focuses on advice".⁵ As stated on their website, "organisations are audited every two years and have to demonstrate that they are accessible, effectively managed, and employ staff with the skills and knowledge to meet the needs of their clients".

The AQS process assesses all aspects of the Advice Centre's service, including policies, staff training, client referrals and supporting documents. The process is labour-intensive; however external approval of our working practices and an accreditation mark will help ensure the Centre is trusted by students and staff.

Advice Centre action: The Student Adviser will explore the tasks and costs associated with gaining the AQS mark.

⁵ <http://www.advicequalitystandard.org.uk/>