

Union Council
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Imperial College Union's Stance on GradPad

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Background

In 2013 a paper was passed in council laying out the Union's view on postgraduate accommodation in the wake of the closure of Clayponds which was the only Imperial owned postgraduate accommodation service offered by Imperial. The paper was based mainly on the financial assistance provided, given that Clayponds was much cheaper than the other postgraduate accommodation service, and the only one offering wardening services.

GradPad is the only provider of postgraduate only halls for Imperial College London. Grad Pad itself is a separate entity but it is run as a partnership between them and Imperial College, and unlike undergraduate accommodation, is run for Profit. It consists of Griffon Studios, Battersea; Wood Lane Studios, White City; and Orient House, Fulham. Their rents range from £210 for standard, single occupancy rooms in Clapham to £385 per week for larger rooms, designed for couples, in White City. In each hall the rents tend to be above the private rental market for their area even after factoring in included bills etc. GradPad is the very first thing advertised to new postgraduate students as an accommodation choice, and is constantly advertised to new students with other options such as private renting taking a "back seat".

Though there is a 24 hour on site security and concierge service Grad Pad has a less robust wardening system than that which serves other Imperial College residents. First year PhD and MSc students share no common classes with each other and sometimes do not even share common space. Moreover, the vast majority of postgraduate students are not from the UK. It is no wonder that the PhD Student Well-being Assessment identified feelings of isolation as the top concerns for PhD students amongst questions pertaining to their social well-being. With the extremely high reviews of Imperial's wardening system and residential communities expressed in the recent Residential Experience Survey, having no postgraduate accommodation options with a similar level of community-building is a wasted opportunity to enhance postgraduate students' experience at Imperial.

On almost any review site for all 3 halls, and from talking to students who lived in Grad Pad last year, there are constant comments about how poorly managed GradPad is, because of the way GradPad is owned and run, problems get passed around a lot between different people not taking responsibility and most problems take a long time to fix, as an extreme example Griffin Studios were without hot water for 3-4 months before they would even acknowledge that there was even a problem.

A list of testimonials is provided as an Appendix to this paper.

It is worth noting that the basic annual PhD stipend of about £16,000 per annum or £310 a week is not enough to cover the rent in any GradPad room (not even including other costs such as

toiletries, medical expenses not covered by NHS, clothing and job-related expenses. Moreover it doesn't factor in any level of enjoyment in life which means either people in these halls take on secondary work purely to pay the rent, or use up savings or a loan, or another avenue of supplementary income. In the testimonials is a budget of a real, long-term GradPad resident and illustrates a monthly deficit of £668 per month, Imperial's own cost of living statistics estimate the typical weekly accommodation cost as £155 and the annual general cost of living as £14828, even the cheapest GradPad room is £55 more than Imperial advises and puts the annual cost of living at £17985 which is greater than the base PhD stipend by almost £2000. Also GradPad only offer 51 week contracts and insist that international students pay all 51 weeks of rent up front & home students have to pay in termly installments rather than monthly.

Rooms offered by each Hall:

Griffon Studios - 566 rooms

Wood Lane Studios - 606 rooms

Orient House - 184 rooms

Overall - 1356 postgraduate students (majority Imperial, minority Birkbeck University, LSE, Queen Mary, UCL & King's College)

Beliefs

1. First year Postgraduates can be as vulnerable as first year Undergraduate students. Entering the private accommodation sector, regardless of age or if the students have never studied in London or the UK, is challenging. PRES survey data indicates loneliness as a huge issue faced by Postgraduates amongst many others. There is no such thing as a typical 'Imperial Postgraduate student'. The Postgraduate accommodation strategy should take into account the welfare of Postgraduate students.
2. Asking an international student to pay 51 weeks rent in advance is unfair; Imperial College does not ask this of international students in Undergraduate halls.
3. A large amount of Post Grads are international and therefore it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to get other housing options because they cannot find UK based guarantors.
4. The relationship between GradPad and Imperial College appears to be a complex one which warrants more investigation, however Imperial College should not be supporting external providers that don't treat students in the same manner as the College do with their halls.
5. Paying in termly instalments puts an unfair financial burden on Postgraduates who receive a minimum stipend in monthly instalments.
6. GradPad could be a great cohort building process, something that postgraduate students desperately need, but due to management and welfare issues is seriously negatively affecting the student experience.
7. College pre-communication with PG students and explaining what accommodation options are available is non-existent and College should offer more support and information in assisting students to find accommodation in the the private sector.

Resolves

1. Action the President and DPW to lobby College and GradPad to:
 - a. Start a discussion between GradPad, College and the Union in order to discuss increasing transparency on GradPad rents, the ownership of Grad Pad, how much Imperial College makes from Grad Pad, and how to increase accountability.
 - b. Develop a Postgraduate Accommodation Strategy that incorporates the welfare needs faced by Postgraduate students, and provides a range of financially viable options.
 - c. Provide information on private accommodation alternatives to Grad Pad, and advertise these alternatives at the same time and with the same vigor as Grad Pad to new postgraduate students.
 - d. Implement a renter survey for those in private accommodation or halls to build a database on good renting practice and good landlord / halls practice.
 - e. Increase education and support for new Postgraduate students, especially international students, on UK renting law and halls of residence accommodation code of conduct.

2. Action the DPFS to lobby College and GradPad to:
 - a. Allow international students to pay their rent in instalments, and allow home students to pay monthly rather than termly.
 - b. To look into College's ability to become a guarantor for international students as other London Universities do.

3. Action the President to Lobby the Student Accommodation Code (a halls of residence stamp of approval):
 - a. To disaffiliate with GradPad and condemn their management style and prices.

Appendix - Testimonies from Tenants:

Kate, Wood Lane Studios:

“my parents paid half my rent (otherwise I would never have been able to eat)”

“I'm lucky enough to have parents that can but I'm sure many parents can't afford to pay”

“I think the total I had to pay for the year was £11,000 + and my parents paid maybe £5,000?”

“I didn't get my deposit back for months after I moved out. The length of time was actually a breach of contract as they didn't notify us until loads of people kicked up a fuss.”

Phoebe Petridis, Wood Lane Studios:

“While the cleaning and security staff are amazing, unfortunately the whole experience was marred by the fact that GradPad management never seems to know what they're doing and simply don't care about following through on their promises and contracted obligations in a professional manner.

I am just in disbelief at how poorly managed GradPad is and although I loved living there because of the friends I made, I would not recommend it to anyone else, because the hassle of dealing with the management is just not worth it.”

Khal Ali, Wood Lane Studios:

“This place, while ideal on the surface, is completely misleading. Management is more than willing to break the terms of the lease they created themselves just because they don't want to deal with any extra work or effort. Not to mention, anything regarding money is absolutely ridiculous. They demand full payment up front, have no problem stopping you to get their money, but when it's time to payback security deposits and subletter rent...good luck.

I've waited a month now to get my security deposit, and they finally deposited it after I threatened legal action. Except now, they owe me my sublet rent, which they haven't even acknowledged. So, they've been paid twice, owe me over a thousand pounds, and have EASILY broken the terms of their own lease MULTIPLE times...and no apologies.

I feel bad for the security guards and maintenance people, who are beyond terrific for the residents, because they have to deal with the absolute bullshit and incompetence of management. Stay away, you can live stress free for less. They'll probably get sued soon.”

Anonymous, Orient House:

“The reason why I chose Orient House is because it is recommended by Imperial. I felt it is safer to book with Orient House than with a private landlord without actually view the room. Orient house make it mandatory for you to pay the full year rental even before moving in if you do not have a UK-based guarantor. So most international students ended up paying the full sum plus 2.5% credit card surcharges (which is a lot, > £500). Because of that, our monthly spending is basically just on food and transport. As 90% of my scholarship allowance went to rental, I am surviving on my personal savings and pay from past part-time jobs. All these are barely enough if you factor in shopping, eating out and travelling. It will definitely be very helpful if Imperial can provide other cheaper housing options for postgrads.

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The receptionists In Orient House are generally very friendly and nice. They attend to you almost immediately. But it does take them very long to solve the actual problem. The ventilator in my kitchen was broken and it is still not fixed ever since last October. Since last week, there have been leaks in the pipes in my neighbouring flat and the dripping water makes a constant noise which is really annoying. It is still not resolved as they cannot really locate the leak. What I personally feel is that Orient House is very short-handed especially for repair and maintenance. There is only one guy doing all the repair work and he happens to be the only cleaner too.”

Anonymous, Griffon Studios:

The following are estimated expenses for someone living in Griffon Studios accommodation based on an average of 3 years living there:

Stipend- £794
Rent- £880
Travel- £ 82
Expenses (All)-£350
Miscellaneous-£150.

When asked if there were any maintenance issues, the following response was received:
“The main maintenance issue I had over my 3 year stay at Griffon Studios was a plumbing issue over the winter period (2013) when there was no hot water. During the early stage of the problem the Gradpad staff was insensitive and rude to students who were inconvenienced. The problem was fixed but not as quickly as I would have liked, even though this was a MAJOR problem.”

When asked about the community environment:

“The community was mainly MSc students who had their own friend circles. No one really tried to get to know their neighbors or befriend other tenants. All attempts tried had failed; it was deemed that the MSc community was too immature for the PhD students who lived at Griffon at the time.”

Other concerns were also voiced:

“Several parties in the courtyard that continued into the night. Several mishaps in the corridor (dirty walls, litter, etc). Overuse of the garbage bins with no regard for sanitation. Destruction of the courtyard seated area due to irresponsible BBQs.”

Anonymous, Orient House:

For the first one, more than half of mine is paid by my parents. There's no way I can afford it myself. Even then it took out pretty much my entire saving account Now I'm doing part-time work as well; and pretty much just hardly eat-out; and buy no snacks. ever. This is way too profit-oriented.

In terms of maintenance, I actually never had major problems. Lucky me. But Kate, my flatmate, I think her light switch broke; the fixer came and pretty much just use a scotch-tape to fix it

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(temporarily) - that 'fix' lasts over a week or two I think. Another friend, Eleanor, has some water-leak problem in their flat. Upon receiving a complaint, they gave her a bowl. I'm not sure how long it took them to fix - 2-3 weeks?

I almost fainted when I saw the price back in Thailand. would have stayed in a flat on my own - but I hardly know anyone here!

1.) As my scholarship only covers part of my tuition fee, I am paying the expenses by my own saving. I was on a part time job at the very beginning of the term. I was supposed to work over all weekends. But then when i realised there is no way that i can manage both, i quitted the job. I will say there is not much option to make ends meet if your are studying at Imperial.

2.) It is not my story, but i have heard that one of my classmate who is also living in Orient House that her safe cannot be opened one day. She then notified the staff and apparently could not help much. It took like a few days that to settle this thing down. As i remember, they called the safe company and ask for my classmate's permission to get into her room to open the safe for her. Because she will not be at home in daytime and the safe company people only can come when she was at school.

The gradpad room I am in is £210 per week, although I think there are some available in the 7 and 8 bed clusters for £200 per week. I don't spend anywhere near £4 per meal and take packed lunches to the lab most days so I find that I just managed to live off and weekends away, holidays etc covered by the stipend and have an annual travelcard. Most of my friends on my course also have the same stipend and live in private accommodation with much lower rental.

1) My parents paid for my accommodation here. Usually I would cook myself for my three meals to avoid eating out. The food outside can easily cost 5 to 10 pounds per meal. Compared to cooking meals myself, I can save quite a bit in this aspect.

2)Till now, I have yet to experience really bad maintenance issues but the people at the reception changes duties at time intervals. There was once I told them about some problems with my heater (near evening time and the maintenance person has already left, and the reception guy said he would relay the message in the morning. He did not and I had to raise the issue again. The maintenance person was efficient, but not the ones at the reception. In general, to get things fixed, you have to keep reminding them.