

Brand Understanding

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This paper aims to establish an initial understanding of how Imperial College Union (ICU) is currently perceived by a range of stakeholders. This is in order to enable a more detailed analysis of the current brand perception, consequently a desired brand perception, and finally a communications & engagement plan that enables a journey from the current state to the intended one.
- 1.2. In this paper, 'brand' is taken to mean not only our logos and visual identity, but what our stakeholders understand to be our purpose, 'personality' and qualities as an organisation.
- 1.3. Findings will be given below each set of results; recommendations for further research and analysis are collected at the end of this paper.
- 1.4. This paper is a preliminary set of exploratory ideas and suggestions, intended to generate discussion points that will help set the scope and intended outcomes of a more rigorous analysis of our current and future brand perception.

2. Approach

- 2.1. A small set of key stakeholders were asked to complete a brief qualitative survey (<http://goo.gl/forms/Klx5pjT28w>), which queried:
 - 2.1.1. Their perception of ICU against a number of desirable adjectives
 - 2.1.2. Their agreement of a number of overlapping definitions of 'ICU'
 - 2.1.3. Their opinions of our logo, visual identity and social media usage
- 2.2. Stakeholders included all Union staff; Officer Trustees; Constituent Union Presidents and Felix Editor; College Communications staff; and the College Secretary and Vice-Provost (Education).
- 2.3. Ratings are average scores out of ten, with one being the worst and ten being the best.

3. Results

3.1. Perception against selected desirable qualities

<i>Adjective</i>	<i>Rating</i>
<i>Friendliness</i>	9.1
<i>Professionalism</i>	7.6
<i>Competence</i>	7.6
<i>Democratic nature</i>	7.8
<i>Energy</i>	8.4
<i>Radicalism</i>	5.4
<i>Impact</i>	7.2

3.1.1. Findings

- Perceptions of *friendliness* were marginally higher amongst student volunteers and College staff (9.5) than Union staff (8.8); this possibly reflects how staff perceive the organisation ‘unvarnished’ from the inside while College staff are shown an externally-facing organisational personality
- Perceptions of *professionalism* and *competence* (7.6 for each) are relatively weak for both internal stakeholders (Union staff and student volunteers) and external (College staff)
- Perceptions of our *democratic* nature were considerably weaker amongst College staff (6.0) than Union staff (8.4) and student volunteers (10), indicating a need to both strengthen messages of democracy and expose its workings to external stakeholders
- Perceptions of ICU being an *energetic* organisation were positive (8.4) but the contrast between this score and those for impact, professionalism and competence is striking.
- Perceptions of impact were varied but consistently below what we would like to see, including a rating of 5 from a College staff member and 6 from a Union staff member.

3.1.2. Respondents were asked to suggest comparator organisations that they perceived to be successful or unsuccessful in projecting the desired qualities.

<i>Quality</i>	<i>Examples</i>
<i>Friendly</i>	Leeds University Union, Oxfam, Whole Foods, BuzzFeed, Disney, Virgin Trains
<i>Unfriendly</i>	BBC, NHS, Goldman Sachs, JobCentre, Argos, Student Loans Company, Scotrail
<i>Professional</i>	Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Waitrose, British Airways, PwC, Accenture
<i>Unprofessional</i>	Ryanair, energy companies
<i>Competent</i>	Caltech, Boots, Virgin Trains
<i>Incompetent</i>	Autoglass, Royal Mail
<i>Radical</i>	Migrants Welcome

<i>High impact</i>	Cancer Research UK
<i>Energetic</i>	Innocent, Apple, Ryanair, Merlin
<i>Lethargic</i>	Electoral Commission, Royal Bank of Scotland

3.2. Agreement with proposed definitions of ICU

	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Rating</i>
	<i>ICU is a building that houses the student bars and nightclub</i>	5.3
	<i>ICU is the organisation that funds clubs, societies and projects</i>	7.9
	<i>ICU is the group of staff that keeps students in line</i>	3.0
	<i>ICU is the collective name for students who run extra-curricular activities</i>	5.0
	<i>ICU is a place for students with political beliefs to gather</i>	5.6

3.2.1. Findings

- The low ranking for the definition of ICU as a building rather than an organisation is encouraging, as this reductive understanding develops easily
- A relatively high understanding that ICU funds clubs, societies and projects is also welcome, although a future brand and organisational identity will need to conclusively tackle any perceived 'division' between ICU and the student activities it supports; a healthier identity may be to understand that ICU does not *support* activities, but *is* those activities and events as they happen.
- The low understanding of ICU as 'keeping students in line' is welcome, and demonstrates the importance of maintaining an identity that is focuses on supporting and developing students and their activities, rather than an easily-formed view of ICU as a 'bureaucratic barrier' to such activities.
- The middling understanding of ICU as a collective name for student activities shows that if we are to continue to reposition 'Imperial College Union' not as a building or location, but as something more conceptual – perhaps as a collection of activities, campaigns and opportunities that promote personal development and wellbeing – there is considerable work left to do.
- A decision yet to be made is whether, or how, ICU is repositioned as a political organisation (in the sense of a campaigning, reforming, change-making organisation) rather than one that focuses on activities or internal issues. The relatively low score for *political beliefs* demonstrates that a decision will need to be made about whether we assert ourselves as *political* or not – and how exactly any such message is clarified and communicated.

3.3. Perceptions of our brand and visual identity

Question	Rating
<i>ICU's logo is effective and appropriate for the organisation</i>	6.4
<i>ICU has a consistent visual identity across its publications</i>	8.3
<i>ICU expresses its values through its brand and visual identity</i>	6.3
<i>ICU expresses a distinctive personality through its website, publications and social media</i>	6.9

3.3.1. Findings

- Support for the logo was lukewarm at best, with its strengths attributed to familiarity rather than inherent style or effectiveness.
- There was little written comment about our visual identity; the perception across all stakeholders is positive, with one comment to the effect that we successfully link together differing services such as Imperial Plus with one visual identity.
- There was not a sense that our values are effectively communicated through our brand or identity
- There was not a consensus that we express a distinctive organisational personality, with comments to the effect of relatively flat social media content in the long term contrasting poorly with the responsive and media-rich content broadcast in the Leadership Elections.

4. Recommendations

4.1. Qualities

- We should generate a selection of desired organisational qualities, with example organisations that we believe demonstrate those qualities and an exploration of how they could be demonstrated here
- We should decide which of the above qualities are to be emphasised in contact with key stakeholder types (for example, *professionalism* when interacting with College staff, or *friendliness* when interacting with students) and incorporate any intended brand identity into communication expectations
- Plans for reform of our democratic structures should take into account how our democracy is communicated to stakeholders, including justifications of its existence and purpose
- Qualities such as *energy* and *friendliness* are beneficial but unless we are already perceived as exhibiting more fundamental qualities, such as *high impact*, or *competent*, then they are unlikely to offer any help to our mission or objectives.

4.2. Definitions

- The existing goal – widely understood but not explicit – of repositioning ICU as an organisation rather than a building needs renewing and detailing in any future branding and engagement plan
- Similarly, the existing goal of widening the understanding of our services beyond solely Clubs, Societies & Projects should also be explored in detail
- Negative perceptions that are at risk of forming should be identified and actively managed; such as the ‘ICU as bureaucracy’ and ‘ICU as a bar’ frames, that are reinforced by disciplinary incidents, controversies and societal understandings of students’ unions.
- The manner by which we communicate our role as engines of personal & professional development and of activism should also be determined, and our appetite for political discussion and campaigning also explored.

4.3. Identity

- We should considering commissioning an external analysis of the strength and value of our existing logo and imagery, to help us decide about the costs and benefits of a wider rebrand as part of a brand repositioning campaign.
- A specific plan for communicating our values, and also deciding and portraying a ‘personality’ through our social media, should also be generated.

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