

Deputy President (Welfare) – Council report

Shervin Sabeghi – 20th July 2021

Introduction: C'est la fin

Hi friends. After having done so many of these over the past two years, it's very strange writing my last ever Council report. I hope my strong base of loyal readers have enjoyed my internal dialogue. The last month in role has been extremely busy trying to finish up projects, recruiting and inducting new staff, preparing for handover, and some end of term fun. For this report, I've provided some of the usual updates and also added in some personal reflections over the last two years. Let me know if you want me to set up a blog or Tumblr or something if you miss hearing from me. Bye luvs x

How I've spent my time since the last report (7th June – 14th July)

College Meetings and 121s	Union Meetings	Desk work (day-to-day)	Time with students + comms	Project work	Recruiting
15%	20%	20%	10%	30%	5%

Key latest updates

- Representation work: the main focus of our representation work is still looking to next year. We're aware that some questionable comms around online lectures went out on Instagram and we're working through this.
- Rep activities: we held our Rep of the Year nominations and voting and our winners are Sefano Fiocca for Academic RotY, Anthea MacIntosh-LaRocque for Wellbeing RotY, and Giorgios Pampalis for PG RotY – congrats all! We also held our **in-person** Rep Celebration event at the end of last month which was great fun and we're so glad to have met some reps in person.
- After 3 years working on it, the College's application to the Race Equality Charter is going in this month. It'll be in the hands of Nathalie, my successor, to hold the College accountable to implementing it.
- We've recruited another staff member! We've recruited another really amazing person to start with us from mid-August. She'll be taking on the Representation Coordinator role so helping the rep networks, doing training, supporting reps with meetings and the like. We also have additional funding from the College to hire **two more** staff members in the representation team – the current planning is to have one that focuses on Liberation & Campaigns, and another on Policy & Research. Exciting times ahead.
- Discipline project work: this project work has reached a large milestone with the bye-law changes we're considering today. For the fuller updates on this, please look at [this Board paper](#) and [this Board paper](#).
- Tying up many many loose ends...

- I got a job! I'll be going to work at King's College as their Academic Support Officer (Transitions). Yep it's a lot of the same kinds of things I've been involved with in the last two years here. Student support, training on wellbeing issues, comms about services, projects to improve services etc etc.

Reflections on the last two years (taken from my Board reflections paper):

Introduction

I don't really know where to start, so I guess I'll start by saying 'Boy, I have no clue where to start!'. Tomorrow will mark 2 years since I started at the Union and it's been quite the personal, organisational, and global whirlwind. The phrase 'unprecedented times' has been thrown around a lot over the last year, and that's been quite relatable in this role even before the pandemic. Only about the first 3 of 24 months in this role are what you might call precedented times. Since then, it's gone: MD departure, restructure 1, lockdown 1, restructure 2, lockdown 2, lockdown 3, restructure 3. Slightly tumultuous, but, of course, circumstances that many found themselves in this year, including to different extents everyone who's worked at ICU in that time.

In general, I'm happy with the way I've responded to the challenges over the last couple years and think the organisation is generally on a better track now than what it was before. Both personally and organisationally, there is a lot that could have gone better and still needs improvement. I apologise if these reflections are quite rambling, but it's more natural and authentic if it's a bit of a raw internal dialogue, right?

Personal/DPW Reflections

What went well:

- Representation wins for students: probably my proudest area of achievement has been the various successes in representing students over the last two years. I feel I've played an instrumental part in a lot of the wins the Union has had for students:
 - Getting the £3m reduction in hall rent from negotiations.
 - Securing (and personally half writing) the safety net for students for their remote exams last year after putting together a survey that got 7,000 responses.
 - Securing automatic rent waivers for students during the second lockdown.
 - Various ongoing smaller successes with COVID related challenges.
 - More recently getting support for improving the financial support for MBBS students in their final two years.

I'm aware that a lot of these successes wouldn't have happened the same way without my proactive involvement and, particularly with the safety net, students have explicitly said the impact these have had/will have on them which makes me feel like I'm doing exactly what these roles are meant to do.

- College relationships: I don't think I realised before starting this role that I've got quite a knack for, essentially, getting people to like me. I'm happy with the relationships with people at the College and in the student body I've been able to forge and the credibility this gives to the Union. A big thing to come out of this was the creation of the ESOG – Student Experience group to talk about wider student experience matters when these were being neglected in the early days of the pandemic. It was honestly quite shocking

but quite flattering to be invited to co-chair this with the Vice-Dean of Engineering. I reflect very positively on this whole experience, and really enjoyed being co-chair of this College wide committee for the last 14 months; it's forced me to operate at a different level than I ever did before which has been a good learning experience.

- Some project success: this will feature more in the more negative reflections, but I would like to also reflect positively on some project work. The Liberation Reform work in 2020, though not implemented as fully as I would have liked, has laid the groundwork for a lot of positive work going forward. The long-term work on Discipline and Harassment has yielded results and, if all that has been recommended is implemented, the Union will be so much better placed to deal with these issues (and prevent them from happening).
- Working Class Students Network: sometimes OTs come in with a bit of an agenda they want to push that might not represent a wide student want. I have to admit, this was a bit of one of those for me. Twice as a student, I was part of unsuccessful efforts to introduce this representation at the Union, and as the DPW I used my position and confidence from student reps to do this. I introduced a new Working Class Officer with associated network and, despite some controversy, I'm very glad I did. I can't take full credit for the success – Grace Fisher, who has taken on the role is owed all the credit – but it's amazing to see what results from policy change and the impact of student-led advocacy and representation.
- Keeping things afloat: as will be talked about later, I've been left to plug a lot of gaps in staff support. This is mainly a bad thing, but I'm quite proud of the way I've managed to keep some things afloat and, if I'm trying to look at the positive, it's given me a lot of experience of being a regular staff member in an organisation like this (as well as an OT). Be it writing the fortnightly rep newsletters, doing the halls of residence admin, writing half of the weekly all-student newsletters, or organising rep recognition events, I've done a lot of things that I'm not elected to do, but are still important and would not be done by anyone else if I hadn't picked them up.
- Personal and professional development: I feel like I have developed in a number of areas personally and professionally over the last couple of years. I think I'm generally a lot more self-aware than I was and able to approach things in a far more constructive manner – two areas where I believe (on reflection) I needed to grow when I started. I believe I let small things get to me a lot less than I used to, which has made room for making more constructive professional relationships. Writing these reflections aside (it may or may not be 2am as I type...), I've got a far healthier relationship to work than I used to. Long gone are 7am-7pm days, with work on most weekends too. Maybe this is because I just haven't been as motivated as I used to be, but I think I've also developed a much-needed ability to accept that you can't do everything and some things will always get left undone.
- Casework: something that has ramped up over the last year has been dealing with individual student matters. This isn't really directly in my job description, but I recognise the role I have in this and have embraced it. In the strangest of ways, I've enjoyed dealing with difficult issues students have faced and feeling like I was having a direct 121 impact. In a similar vein, I was glad to have done the club disciplinary case a number of months ago and learned a lot from the process.

What could have gone better:

- Objectives (nearly) all unmet: this is a fact I need to face head-on. For both years, I set myself achievable objectives and have nearly exclusively not met them. That's not to say I didn't achieve anything, but not the things I set out to achieve. There is a plethora of reasons for this. The objectives were probably realistic but not in the circumstances we were in in either year; being reactive and putting out fires took over in so many cases. I undoubtedly needed to prioritise better, say no to more things, and be more productive with my time. Also undoubtedly, I needed more support to achieve them. The problem with there being no staff support for OTs is, not only do they not receive support to do their objectives, they lose a lot of time that they could spend working on the objectives solo instead picking up the work that's been left by absent staff. I reckon, over the last 2 years, about 25% of my time has been spent doing work that is explicitly a permanent staff member's job, and that's probably been closer to 35% over the last 6 months. The opportunity cost is, resultingly, massive.
- Losing touch with students/volunteers: in my reflections last year, I talked about having lost touch with the student body and the volunteers directly under me and wanted to ensure that improved going forward. Unfortunately, I'd say this has gotten worse over the last year. Naturally, it's been a bit partly a product of the pandemic where keeping in touch with anyone has been very difficult. It's also a product of not having time, but, regardless of why, it's disappointing that it's happened again. When we've done surveys to bring us more in touch with students, we've seldom had time to then look over the results properly to make the most of it. I've not spent much time interacting with the senior volunteers under me and that's a shame because so many of them have been amazing this year and deserved so much more support from me to be able to do great things they had a lot of potential to do.
- Wellbeing Representation Network: I've spent 2 years saying I'll review the WBRN. It ain't happened. This is a big personal failing (one of the unmet objectives) and, given it was on the agenda for 2 years, I don't think I can blame anything else apart from myself here. Sure, it would have been good to have some staff support to do this, but I was also the best placed person at Imperial to do it. Particularly with a lot of experienced reps leaving the university, there will be a massive knowledge gap going forward so I'm going to do my best to hand things over as much as possible.
- Stewing in negative corner: I can't deny that this calendar year has taken its toll and I have found myself stewing in negativity at various moments over the past few months. I hate it when this happens more than anyone else, but it's a bit of a downward spiral that's difficult to get out of when things don't improve despite asking for help. The feeling of 'we're all in this together' has kind of passed, and the disparity in attention different areas of the Union has received over the last year has been difficult to deal with. It used to feel like we were all in the same boat, but now it feels like there are people in shiny motorboats – the kind rich people ride on holiday – whereas others are desperately paddling in their own battered canoes. All of that said, I wish I was more able to rise above it all and stay more positive. Even writing this, I feel like I'm being dramatic and it's not really that bad. I want to work on being able to spin things more positively. I maintain that I'm a very optimistic person – I always believe things can, should, and will be better. However, I want to be able to be so in a more positive way, because my optimism often comes out as frustration that things aren't better.

- Liberation & Community: another one of the unmet objectives was developing the Liberation & Community networks. I made a good start; there now exist policy that didn't before and structure that didn't before. And it's had spotty success – particularly with the Working Class Network as I talked about above. However, I wish I paid a lot more attention to developing and embedding this over the last year. My impression is that our Liberation efforts fall far behind those of other SUs. I will be doing all I can over handover to ensure that the progress made doesn't die with me and it gets developed further like I hoped it would.