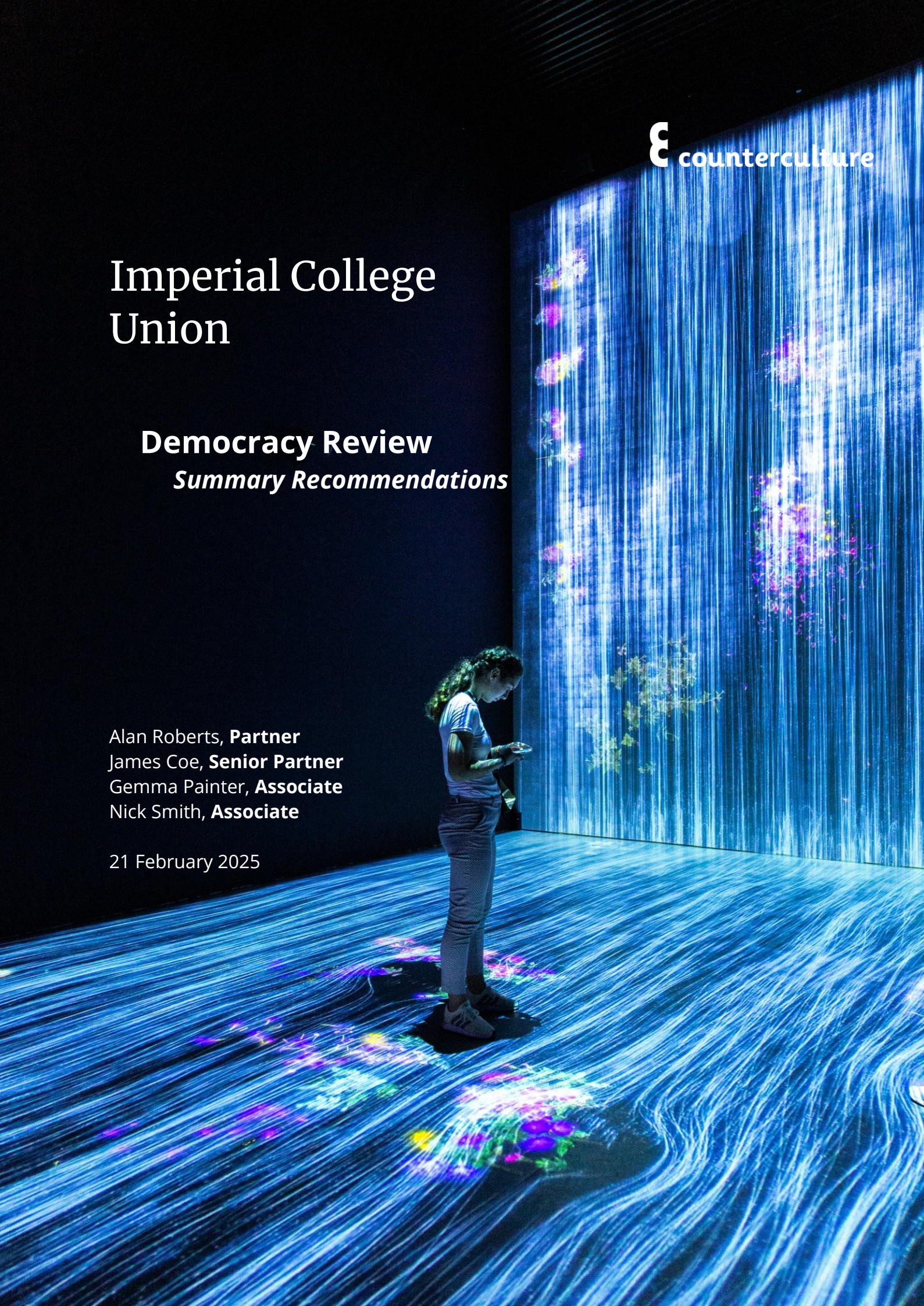
counterculture

Imperial College Union

Democracy Review

Summary Recommendations



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Introduction

Imperial College Union represents and advocates for a diverse student body within a complex institutional structure. This review evaluates ICU's governance, representation systems, and operational frameworks, focusing on opportunities for reform to enhance engagement, advocacy, and effectiveness.

Key areas addressed include:

- Full-time and part-time officer roles and their effectiveness.
- Academic and Wellbeing representation systems.
- Liberation officers and their integration into governance and strategy.
- Constituent Unions.
- ICU Council's purpose, composition, and the development of policy.
- Insight and advocacy strategies to inform and enhance representation.
- Addressing siloing and operational inefficiencies.

Principles

Insight sources

Surveys

- Student Survey: 457 responses exploring representation, decision-making, and engagement preferences.
- Institution Staff Survey: Captured operational challenges and perspectives on ICU's governance and effectiveness.

Interviews

- Conducted with ICU staff, Officer Trustees (OTs), student representatives (academic and wellbeing), Constituent Union leaders, and Imperial College academic and professional services staff.
- Attendance at autumn elections promotion stall, speaking to students about opportunities and their perceptions of them.

Workshops

Five workshops in total: Three workshops with students, one workshop with ICU staff, one workshop with ICU representatives. Three meetings of Student Council.

Desk Research

Review of ICU governance documents, bylaws, and operational frameworks.

Analysis Approach

Survey data was analysed alongside interview insights to identify areas of consensus, challenges, and opportunities. Recommendations address governance structures, operational issues, and student engagement, including specific suggestions for reforms and options where mutually exclusive choices exist.

Thematic Analysis

Representation

Student Representation is a cornerstone of ICU's governance, encompassing full-time officers, part-time officers, Student Councillors, and other elected representatives. ICU has a wide and fairly complex ecosystem of student representation due, in part, to the foundations of the Institution being effectively collegiate. Although the College is no longer collegiate, the college structures still form a strong component to student identity at Imperial, which is historically and operationally locked into the culture of student voice.

Full-Time Officers:

Survey data revealed limited trust in Officer Trustees (OTs). Only 41% of students felt OTs were "somewhat representative," while 49% believed they represented students "to very little" or "not at all". Interviews noted that OTs often prioritise operational over strategic tasks, limiting their visibility and effectiveness as advocates. Stakeholders highlighted the need for clearer role delineation to ensure strategic focus.

The Medical School sabbatical officer operates with significant autonomy, reflecting a more entrenched cultural independence but limiting strategic alignment with ICU governance. They are completely funded outside of the block grant but enjoy the support of ICU in their work and development. They are not a member of the trustee board.

Student Councillors:

Student Councillors are integral to governance but are perceived as disconnected from grassroots representation. Only 18% of students strongly agreed that ICU Council decisions reflect their priorities. Student Councillors themselves seem committed and focussed, although participation typically runs down after the first meeting of the year. The purpose of Student Council at ICU seems to be debate, as opposed to either policy, campaigning or accountability.

Feeback on Council suggests a lot of effort is put into maintaining the form of Council and its processes, with various safeguards to assure attendance and participation, but very little, to no work has historically been done to drive particular conversations or to reach out.

Recent work has attempted to create space within Council to have more ranging and developmental conversations, headed by the chair of Council. Participation in this exercise has apparently been okay, but the tendency is for discussion to pull back to the predominantly fixed business of Council. ICU Council is very internally focussed and seems to see its mission as being about the Union, with

historically limited narratives about the Institution or the student experience, beyond the services offered by the Union.

Academic and Wellbeing Representatives:
Survey data highlighted strong trust in Academic Representatives, with 44% of students reporting that these roles represent them "to a great extent."

However, interviews revealed fragmented systems across faculties, undermining ICU's ability to consolidate student feedback into cohesive advocacy. Welfare representatives reported feeling particularly disconnected from ICU's central governance structures, likely reinforced by the fact that on the academic side, the institution will have multiple rigorous systems to link to student voice at every level, whereas Wellbeing is not as regulated in aspects such as the Quality Code.

Liberation Officers:
Liberation officers and part-time representatives play a significant role in ICU's democratic structures but historically lack adequate training, resources, and integration into strategic advocacy. Recent investment and support in this area is yielding results, but ICU overall still has distance to travel on joining up liberation with its work.

Liberation campaigns are valued but under-resourced, with limited integration into ICU's strategic goals. Interviews stressed the need for alignment between liberation roles and broader policy development.

Medical School Sabbatical Officer:
The role operates semi-independently, creating challenges for cross-campus collaboration. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of aligning this role with ICU's officer team to strengthen advocacy. It also represents an imbalance across CUs.

Management Groups:
A Management Group is a group of Clubs, Societies, and Projects (CSPs) that share a common theme, with an executive committee that guides and supports them. There are six management groups overseeing student activities and informing the support offered to societies as well as funding decisions, working closed through the respective Officer Trustees. These seem to function well as, although in workshops with students, a lot of feedback was around various society related issues, they recognised and made use of these structures.

No service will be delivered perfectly, and in funding distribution, there will always be those that are disappointed. In governance terms, there seems to be no problem with these Committees although support in this area has only recently been improved in the last year in terms of staffing resource. There was some comment that the governance of clubs and societies themselves might warrant attention, but this standards issue is normally something that is developed over time, with a stable student activities team and functioning dialogue between the support systems and service users.

Engagement and Advocacy

Insight and Reporting:
Only 21% of students agreed that ICU advocates effectively based on student experience data. Some stakeholders in our faculty interviews said that the one thing they would want from a students' union is

that it is able to tell them something about the student experience that they don't already know. The staff survey reinforces this
Liberation campaigns and academic representation insights are not systematically captured or analysed, reducing their potential to inform advocacy. With such healthy participation and footfall, the union will hold multiple sources of data which it doesn't seem to use in a joined-up way.

Policy Development:

Students expressed strong support for participatory decision-making:

- 67% preferred tools like polls and ballots.
- 82% wanted representatives to consult them before acting.

Interviews suggested that open forums before Council meetings could improve student engagement and foster collaborative policy development.

There is no programme of or approach to policy development with the Council or other bodies and it is not clear how officer workplans interact with the democracy on either a policy development or advocacy basis. This also links to the use of insight which does not drive or support the officers, councils, constituent unions or other bodies' work.

Engagement with Postgraduate and International Students:

Survey and interview data revealed lower engagement among postgraduates and international students. Only 38% of these groups reported feeling "somewhat represented" or better by ICU. This yields complicated cold spots of engagement, such as in the Business School, or via Constituent Unions who do not represent postgraduate students.

Governance Structures

ICU Council

Both surveys and interviews revealed mixed opinions on ICU Council's effectiveness. Only 18% of students strongly agreed that Council decisions reflect their priorities. Council agendas often fail to incorporate insights from Academic and Welfare Reps or liberation campaigns, reducing its relevance and connection to broader student concerns.

ICU Student Council SWOT

Strengths

- Representation of diverse voices: Student Council includes representatives from various faculties, Constituent Unions, and liberation groups, ensuring a broad spectrum of student perspectives.
- Democratic legitimacy: Council provides a formal structure for student input on policy and decision-making, reinforcing ICU's democratic foundations.
- Oversight of officers: Council has the potential to hold full-time and part-time officers accountable, ensuring alignment with student priorities.
- Connection to constituent unions: Constituent Union representatives provide a direct link between ICU governance and faculty-specific issues, enriching Council discussions.
- Correcting for complexity: The Council, as it is, provides a forum and a means of settling decisions that sit across a complex membership. It can, with some clarity, say 'yes' or 'no' to issues.

Weaknesses

- Disconnect from students: Survey and interview feedback indicate students perceive Council as bureaucratic and detached from their day-to-day experiences. Only 18% of students strongly agreed that Council decisions reflect their priorities.
- Underutilised Academic and Welfare Reps: Academic and Welfare Reps are not fully integrated into Council processes, limiting the system's ability to address grassroots concerns.
- Inconsistent engagement with officers: Council's ability to hold officers accountable is inconsistent, partly due to unclear reporting structures and limited training for councillors.
- Variable constituent union participation: While some Constituent Unions actively engage with Council, others operate independently, leading to fragmented representation.

Opportunities

- Policy Development Forums: Introducing pre-council forums could encourage broader student participation, align agendas with grassroots concerns, and improve policy-making processes.
- Strengthening accountability: Clearer mechanisms for officer reporting to Council could enhance oversight and ensure better alignment with Union-wide goals.
- Enhanced engagement with constituent unions: Formal agreements with constituent unions could clarify roles and responsibilities, improving collaboration and reducing duplication.
- Integration of Academic and Welfare Reps: Structured input from these representatives could ensure Council discussions are grounded in real student issues, enhancing its relevance.

Threats

- Perceived ineffectiveness: If council continues to be seen as disconnected and slow to act, it risks losing legitimacy and relevance among students.
- Constituent union autonomy: Strongly autonomous constituent unions, like the medical school, may bypass council, undermining ICU's ability to act cohesively.
- Low student awareness: Limited visibility of council's work reduces its impact and fails to engage the broader student body.
- Operational overlap: Duplication of efforts between council and other governance structures, such as constituent union boards or officer teams, could create inefficiencies.

Constituent Unions

Constituent Unions are an integral part of Imperial College Union's governance, providing focused representation for specific faculties and communities. They play a vital role in tailoring advocacy and engagement to local needs, but their relationship with ICU is marked by both strengths and challenges. CUs, particularly the Medical School, operate with significant autonomy. Interviews highlighted challenges in aligning these unions with ICU's strategic objectives while respecting their independence.

Additional points of note around constituent unions:

- Only the Medical School has a sabbatical officer, other CUs are voluntary.
- The CUs don't represent postgraduate students
- The Medical CU doesn't, in practice, represent non-medical degree students – for example Biomedical Science.

Constituent Unions SWOT

Strengths

- Tailored representation: CUs address specific faculty-level concerns, such as unique academic schedules or welfare needs, effectively engaging students locally. The medical school's dedicated sabbatical officer reflects the significance of this tailored approach.
- Autonomy and agility: CUs operate with flexibility, enabling them to respond quickly to local issues without being constrained by ICU-wide governance processes.
- Community building: Strong local engagement fosters a sense of belonging through events, campaigns, and leadership opportunities.
- Leadership development: CUs provide opportunities for students to engage in leadership roles, cultivating a pipeline of student representatives.

Weaknesses

- Fragmented relationship with ICU: Some CUs, particularly the medical school, operate semi-independently, which can weaken cohesion and reduce ICU's collective advocacy power.
- Resource disparities: Larger CUs often dominate resource allocation, while smaller CUs struggle to access sufficient funding and support. The Business School has no constituent union.
- Inconsistent integration in governance: Cu representatives' participation in ICU council and other structures is inconsistent, limiting their influence on union-wide decisions.
- Duplication of efforts: Overlapping initiatives between ICU and CUs, such as welfare campaigns or events, can create inefficiencies and confuse students.
- The Constituent Unions are undergraduate-focussed and do not represent postgraduates.
- Constituent Unions have no approach to their development, unlike in other collegiate systems, there is no programme or future-looking approach.

Opportunities

- Formalised collaboration: Clear agreements between ICU and CUs (e.g., MOUs) can define roles, clarify expectations, and improve alignment.
- Enhanced representation in ICU governance: Structured input from CUs in governance processes, such as pre-council forums, can ensure faculty-specific concerns inform union-wide strategies.
- Resource sharing: Centralised training, funding, and campaign support from ICU can help smaller CUs operate more effectively.
- Cross-campus campaigns: Joint campaigns involving ICU and multiple CUs can amplify advocacy efforts on shared priorities like housing or mental health.

Threats

- Excessive autonomy: Highly independent CUs risk diverging from ICU's broader strategic goals, reducing cohesion and advocacy impact.
- Resource competition: Inequities in funding and support may create tensions between ICU and larger CUs, such as the medical school.
- Perceived irrelevance of ICU in context: Students may view CUs and ICU as separate entities, diminishing awareness of their collective advocacy efforts.
- Overreliance on key CUs: ICU's reliance on highly engaged CUs, like the medical school, risks leaving smaller CUs underrepresented in governance.
- The focus on CU engagement in ICU governance overshadows the question of ICU's responsibilities towards CU development, which will ultimately only make relationships between ICU and CUs worse over time.

Operational Challenges

Siloing

Staff and elected representatives operate in silos, reducing collaboration and coherence in governance and advocacy. This is being acted on, but cultures of this kind of engagement take time and effort to correct for.

Staff turnover

More recent high staff turnover and limited resources have hindered ICU's ability to support governance and engagement effectively. Liberation officers, academic reps, and student councillors previously received insufficient operational support, reducing their effectiveness. The effect of this echoes forward into how support from ICU is seen and judged by the membership.

Other Issues Raised

Other issues have been brought forward which are not central to the reforms but are a part of the overall review. These will be delivered with the final report and recommendations, with Byelaw drafting taking place after recommendations have been approved or otherwise:

- Associate Membership in Societies: Concerns about non-student access to resources; a review of membership policies was suggested.
- Election Timing and Awareness: Extend campaign timelines and improve promotional efforts to increase student engagement.
- Simplification of Bylaws: Streamline governance documents for clarity and accessibility.

Summary recommendations

There are a number of recommendations which we believe respond to our findings through the survey, interviews and workshops. Principally though, there are three areas:

Get closer to the membership

We have found out that Imperial students like to make their own decisions, that they trust and have relationships with the groups and structures which are closes to them – for example in academic representation, in societies and then at constituent union levels, as opposed to the central Students' Union. That is not to say that they don't think there should be an ICU.

The history of Imperial creates a unique relationship between students and their faculties. The development and support of constituent unions becomes very important in this context. It suggests that ICU will better serve its members by working in the spaces which their members already inhabit, by making things easier for those members to do and helping them to express and act on their interests.

Community organising

A method we have brought into focus in our recommendations is a version of community organising. This is a method where an organiser is appointed to engage with communities and hold structured conversations to explore the personal interests, or issues, of that community, and to then build activity around those issues, by those communities through creating events, identifying points of change and building power and agency within those communities to deliver on their interests.

Typical examples of community organising include:

- Engaging and empowering people to increase the influence of underrepresented groups in policies.
- Bringing people together into an organisation to address shared problems and issues.
- Methods and practices that strengthen people's capacity to work together and exercise power.
- A process that identifies community needs, develops confidence, finds resources, and takes action to address those needs.

Although traditional community organising, the organiser can be anyone, for the purposes we have identified, we have recommended that organisers in ICU should be members of the community within which they are organising – i.e. a postgraduate organiser should be a postgraduate student; an LGBTQ+ organiser should come from the LGBTQ+ community. These would be appointed and paid positions.

Service governance

The different services at ICU need to find new ways to engage service users. The democratic route of linking deputy presidents to service areas results in overwork for elected students and an unfair and undeliverable focus on an individual. The Union should explore ways in which areas can be flexible to student input and views on service delivery.

Recommendations

1. Removal of the DPFS role

The role has become overwhelmingly operational rather than representative. The current DPFS and previous officers have noted that the role requires extensive engagement in financial oversight and service management, tasks better suited to appointed and qualified staff. Additionally, the role's responsibilities, including budget approvals and risk management, hinder the officer from engaging in student-focused strategic work.

Elected finance sabbaticals and treasurers have been removed from SU structures over 15 years ago. The summary reasoning for this is around budget size, scope, charity and other legal compliance issues. Election is the worst form of interview for a skill-based set of duties, and essentially removes a potential representative as opposed to adding accountability to finances, which should be done by the mix of individuals on the Board and via other routes around democratic mandate.

Survey data shows that students do not place significant value on the Officer Trustees' effectiveness, with only 41% stating they are "somewhat representative", and 18% believing they are "not at all" representative. Financial decision-making in the Union is already perceived as opaque, with 44% of staff neither agreeing nor disagreeing that they trust ICU's financial transparency. Given these concerns, removing the role allows for a more strategic allocation of responsibilities, possibly redistributing them between staff and student oversight committees to improve transparency of financial decision making.

Resource implications

Finance Audit and Risk Committee could have more student members to compensate for the removal of Finance from a sabbatical role.

Options:

- Do not replace role (not recommended)
- Replace with Deputy President Community Engagement and Belonging
- Replace with Deputy President Postgraduate Students

1b Replace with Deputy President Community Engagement and Belonging

The student survey showed that trust in ICU governance is low, with only 18% of students strongly agreeing that Council decisions reflect their priorities. The survey also showed that 18% of all students specified that “groupings of students by shared or common interests” was most useful. The idea of a role that had a focus on finding and bringing communities together both reinforces an institutional narrative and brings ICU closer to its members, building trust, reflecting student priorities, and meeting students where they are, as opposed to where the Union wants them to be. This role would work in tandem with other organising recommendations, particularly around postgraduates and LCNs, but also with respect of the secondary portfolios and student engagement recommendations.

This role would offer support by focussing on structured engagement with communities across Imperial, development of Constituent Unions, student and democratic leadership, whilst providing a sounding board within the services and events for those communities.

This role doesn't seek to create any new mandate around events and services – rather it takes what exists of this aspect of the DPFS role, and places it in the context of community connections and belonging. It would have a role description tightly allied to that of a Community Organiser, which is best summed up as: talk to communities of students, understand their community-based needs and interests, empower them to be active in securing their interests. It would link cleanly across wellbeing, academic, societies and CU-engagement areas.

Things to consider with this role:

- It will only really appeal to individuals who have an aptitude for community organising.
- It would logically make sense for this role to link with the various organising positions recommended, and there is potential for considering Networks oversight within this role as opposed to DPW.
- The role description would need to very exact and closely followed to mitigate against too much crossover with welfare or societies.
- It exposes the operational load of the current DPFS, as although the core of this role is appropriate, operationalising it is a challenge.
- There is not a culture of student engagement at Imperial. This role would potentially become isolated in the officer team, with the duties of student engagement being deferred completely to them. It would undermine efforts to make elements of community organising a core part of each elected officer's role.

Resource implications
There may be changes or impacts in how the officer interacts with services delivery, but this aspect of the role is predominantly based on the portion of the current DPFS that is service and activity-facing.

1c Replace with Deputy President Postgraduate Students

Postgraduate students feel underrepresented, with only 38% reporting feeling "somewhat represented or better by ICU". The Institution and the Union were consistent around their concerns about postgraduate engagement and representation. This role would put resource at a representative level for PG student experience. It would be able to focus on the CU engagement aspect, possibly share academic committee duties.

Some things to consider with postgraduate sabbatical:

- Experience of PG Officers in other Unions has tended to result in predominantly PGT students. The Union could offset this by ensuring either the PGR Student Organisers were closely linked to the PG Officer, or that the role had a specific focus which balanced their engagement with Taught and Research students.
- There is a risk that the role would end up being de-facto Postgraduate President and would possibly lead to siloing of work, and unmanageable workloads if not handled very carefully. Clear role descriptions and workplan support would address this.

2. Increase student oversight in finance

This links to the first recommendation. Some students mentioned that removing DPFS reduces transparency within finances. Engaging more students in finance oversight can maintain scrutiny.

Survey data shows that 31% of students indicated Officer Trustees to be representative to a 'very little' extent, and 18% indicated that Officer Trustees are 'not at all' representative. Expanding beyond the full-time officers, within financial scrutiny, could respond to this, which would involve increasing the number of student members of Finance, Audit and Risk Committee.

3. Replace Representation Chairs in PG Committee with appointed PG organisers

The Postgraduate Committee system is confusing and lacks engagement. The interviews highlighted that Taught Masters students in particular do not engage due to time constraints. With 18% of all students surveyed specifying that "groupings of students by shared or common interests" was most useful, separately from the 55% of students who said "shared and common interest through clubs and socs" we can draw a strong line towards a desire to enable students to act in groups.

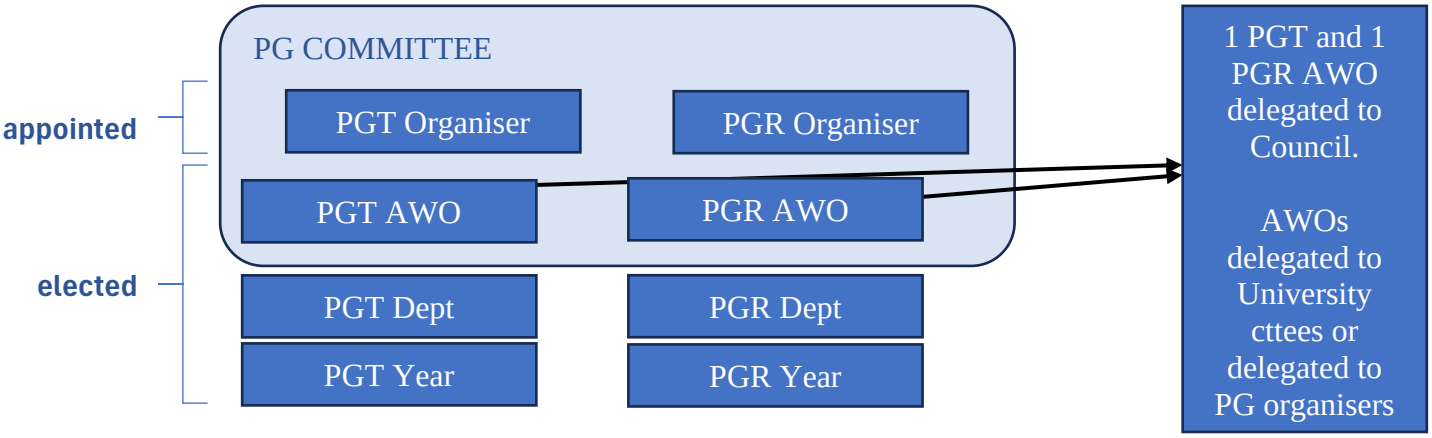
This suggests focusing on interventions that bring groups together. Postgraduates themselves mentioned in free text that postgraduate students would prefer to be treated in clusters, reflecting other responses around how close decision making and trust are in communities at Imperial.

The current postgraduate representation system is well-structured in theory but fails in practice due to inconsistent engagement and unclear responsibilities. Each strand (PGR and PGT) currently has an elected Representation Chair who sits on senior committees, Student Council and liaises with the Union and College. However, feedback suggests that students do not understand the responsibilities of these roles, leading to isolated and ineffective representation, particularly for international students.

There are frequently vacancies in these roles and overall engagement is poor, putting undue pressure on those that do take the role. In some faculties, there are no Academic and Welfare Officers (AWOs) at all, exacerbating the issue.

Replacing the current elected Representation Chairs with appointed and paid PG Community Coordinators (one for Taught and one for Research), who are postgraduates themselves, would provide continuity, structured engagement, and support to existing AWO as well as the development of these roles, particularly where vacancies exist. These individuals would specifically recruit, support and develop AWOs as two groups. The AWO groups can delegate from within their groups someone to speak on their behalf at Council meetings.

PG students, especially distance learners and those off-campus, need specific engagement strategies such as online consultation and networking events, which a dedicated staff member, appointed from the postgraduate student community would be better placed to deliver. This kind of approach has a lot in common with practice in the United States and is currently very successful in Durham Students' Union.



Resource implications
Creation of two paid part-time PG Community Coordinator roles.

4. Swap the election order for LCOs and Networks.

Currently, LCOs are elected in the spring elections, taking office in the summer, and then their respective networks are elected at the start of the academic year. This has a number of drawbacks:

- LCOs are isolated at the start of their term (which has impacts on planning for Welcome Week and Black History Month in particular)
- Each network is essentially dissolved in July, starting from scratch each year, with one individual.
- The cross-campus nature of LCO elections has some drawbacks around identifying with the campaign and also running for 'a title' which are exacerbated when switched this way around – they affect accountability as the LCO could potentially only need to build out of one community or one part of that community.
- It results in one LCO taking on all aspects of a network's existing and potential priorities, regardless their personal interests or manifesto.
- It furthers any tension with organisations operating within that network's area – for example a society or an existing campaign.

Current structure has officers first, leading to lack of network engagement and a lack of crucial continuity in the development of those networks. The recommendation is to form these networks first, and electing LCOs afterwards. The networks can build any summer activity with the Union (e.g. planning for Welcome Week). Forming networks first ensures broader participation. Survey results indicate that only 25% of students "somewhat agree" that they can hold elected representatives to account, and just 14% "strongly agree" This puts the networks at the centre of this form of representation, improving accountability and continuity.

5. Make LCOs delegates to Council

A further reform would be to move the Networks into a system of caucusing. Creating a caucus and delegate model would entail:

- Networks gather, then from amongst themselves nominate leaders of different activities and priorities as well as someone to represent the work of the group as the group's delegate to Student Council.

Such a caucus would therefore include members of various related societies and campaigns. It would enable individuals, with the consent of the caucus to appoint leaders or organisers of different aspects of

the Network's interest. Being the delegate to the Council would be a conduit. That individual would not be the sole representative, politically of a given network, they would be the liaison between the work and interests of a group of people and the wider Union.

It is unfortunately common that liberation activists are often overwhelmed by the accountabilities and expectations of representing an entire group's systemic oppression. The caucus model allows more individuals to share this load, the delegate model means that the caucus can delegate someone else to council if the current delegate needs to change. This requires a flexibility on behalf of Council in order to support the engagement of the networks.

Resource implications
Will require staff facilitation and digital tools to support network formation. Will add this work to spring election season or possibly later.

6. Appoint Liberation and Community Network Organisers

Liberation networks struggle with engagement due to the current structure. Beyond changing the order in which networks form, and representatives or delegates are chosen, these networks are increasingly unsustainable on a voluntary basis alone. Appropriately increasing staff resource would enable targeted development. Appointing student community organisers would provide consistency and support for networks.

There was a repeated message that ICU does not engage the breadth of international students well. International students are one of the existing networks, but this report wanted to note that along with postgraduate students, this group was the most noted gap in ICUs engagement. An organiser in this grouping would significantly strengthen this challenging role. Practice from the United States would suggest multiple organisers might be needed, but the UK has a stronger tradition of clubs and societies, so an organiser here could work with the activities team to leverage the best of the membership's engagement.

31% of students surveyed indicated that Officer Trustees were representative to a 'very little' extent, with a further 18% indicating that Officer Trustees are 'not at all' representative. They do not trust ICU's representation structures, and appointing dedicated organisers could improve the visibility and effectiveness of those networks and extend the basis of trust and confidence in the Union's democracy.

These organisers would identify into the community concerned:

- Black & Minority Ethnic Organiser
- LGBTQ+ Organiser
- Mental Health Organiser
- Disabilities Organiser
- Ethics & Environment Organiser
- Gender Equality Organiser
- Interfaith Organiser
- International Student Organiser
- Working Class Organiser

In addition, the Union should:

- Integrate liberation campaigns into ICU's strategic priorities with clear policy alignment and dedicated resources.
- Provide enhanced training and support for liberation representatives to strengthen their advocacy impact.
- Consider how liberation networks develop throughout the union including through constituent unions.

Resource implications
Nine New paid part-time student roles; additional training and staff oversight required.

7. Strengthen engagement with Constituent Unions

CUs are effective at local representation, but their role in ICU governance is unclear. Closer ties would improve student voice integration. Survey data shows that 49% of students indicated that CUs were "somewhat representative", 18% said they were "to a great extent". An engagement plan with CUs should be established.

There is a gap in particular in postgraduate representation and cohesion across the institution and with ICU. If the option to replace Representation Chairs on PG Committee with appointed student organisers is chosen, then they will play a large role in CU engagement and development. If not, ICU would still need to develop an engagement plan with particular regards for postgraduate students.

ICU should have a focus on the activity of CUs, how it supports them, how they interact and how they can grow localised representation. The following activities would support this development:

- Define formal agreements with Constituent Unions to clarify roles and responsibilities, ensuring alignment on strategic objectives.
- A union development approach to the Constituent Unions would further develop not only relationships, but the quality of experience and engagement at a CU level, as well as the quality of the CUs themselves.
- As a part of CU development, the engagement of postgraduate students and international students should be prioritised.
- CU approaches to supporting liberation activity should be supported, developed and collectivised, to support coherent networks of activity.
- There could be room to explore if the Medical CU sabbatical role could work with the other CUs should, say, 10% of the budget that funds them come from ICU or a combination of the other faculties.

Resource implications
Staff time for coordination and potential funding adjustments. Potential contribution to the Medical CU officer costs.

8. Academic and Wellbeing Rep Forums topic approach

Consider a topic-centred focus for these forums, planning the schedule across the year transparently, so that reps can engage based on their own interests and concerns. Consider working with Student Council to set at least part of the annual schedule for these forums.

This does not affect the structure of the current academic and wellbeing rep system, rather the basis and agenda around how they are brought together. There are differences in how each group of reps work, with

much more success on a small group or 1:1 basis with Academic reps, versus better forum participation from Wellbeing reps. With both groups, being specific about the topics (which are focussed on the reps' interests) will invite better engagement, rather than it being based on fixed business (the Union's interests).

Resource implications
Insight and policy support from ICU.

9. Student Council – pre-Council forums and Council Shape

Replace or consolidate existing governance structures with open forums before Council meetings to explore student concerns and develop agendas and align policy schedules with officer priorities and institutional issues. This could be as simple as hosting open sessions directly before the start of Council, but the objective is to create open, creative spaces to generate ideas and to move away from the fixed business approach of council.

There are two seemingly contradictory findings from the student survey:

Students are largely in favour of consensus-based decision-making

- 68% of students are in favour of negotiating mutual agreement using consensus
- 29% were in favour of brokering respectful disagreement using majority rule.

Whereas:

Students want to see the entire student body involved in more SU decisions

- 67% of students would most like to see polls/votes used to make decisions in the SU (only 27% chose debate/discussion, and just 6% chose elected representatives act on your behalf)
- The top 3 methods for SU decisions were: Campus-wide ballot (46%); Online forums (35%); Petitions (31%)

These opinions in the context of a lack of trust in representative decision-making:

Students aren't comfortable with handing reps a mandate to act on their behalf.

- 82% of students want to be consulted by reps before reps can speak on their behalf
- Only 18% of students indicate that reps can use their discretion when representing students

These proposed forums or open sessions would answer the appetite to have the option to be involved in consultation. As an option it is technically open to the entire student body – so long as such events are adequately specified (for example the topic or question at hand should be at the centre of these events – *we want to discuss fit-to-sit policy; we want to discuss ICUs position on rent negotiations*).

They should be underpinned by both insight and polling, in order to satisfy the desire for mass engagement.

They should seek consensus on views, but at the very least take a transparent approach to carrying the opinions of the open meetings into the summative decision-making of the Council, scaled appropriately to the model of council chosen.

"Mutual agreement is ideal but difficult to achieve. While majority rule usually ends up with popularity contest."

"Acknowledge 'don't care' as a valid opinion so that a loud minority don't have the only voice in decisions."

"I feel like there would be certain situations where a compromise is more appropriate than a majority but also other situations where it's the opposite."

Along with this, the Union should review the different consultative methods used recently. Does the SU favour certain types of consultation for certain types of issues, for example? It should develop a holistic approach where deeper and wider consultation is always on offer and used where appropriate or needed, which is scaled to both internal resources and aligned with membership engagement overall.

Reshape Council

- Either **consolidate council** into a smaller, more executive committee or forum (balanced with a substantial annual open meeting), policy positions would be more insight based, and more democratic events might be necessary to resolve contentious issues. The forums would support this and support the survey results around student appetite for engagement and preferences around representation.
- **Expand membership** to a larger General Meeting style model which only meets once per semester. This would be more policy setting and largely the status quo option. It would still require forums to develop its agenda; or
- **Use subgroups** to drive the policy, organising, campaigning work – these could meet monthly, whilst the larger council meets termly. Each sub-group would need to consider its student engagement approach in order to answer the challenge presented in the survey to engage more students before decisions are made.

Resource Implications
Insight to support forums and different types of council. Resource to create engaging student voice-based events in the forums.

10. Add secondary portfolios to full time officers

The full-time officer portfolios are highly focussed, sometimes at the risk of micro-managing operationally. This is a natural side-effect of electing directly to portfolio areas. Whilst trying to identify ways to reduce operational loads on officers, this space should be replaced with blanket duties and expectations around student engagement. Different groups of students will require different levels of attention depending on the year and the circumstances. A set of secondary portfolios should be agreed each year, based on a combination of student feedback, insight and manifestos. Largely the operation of these secondary portfolios will be in the shape of direct student engagement, but it's not possible to predict what precisely will be required.

Currently, as well as all roles having a duty around what is effectively community organising (within their portfolio community's issues) these secondary portfolios would be:

- postgraduate students*
- international students
- students of the Business School
- students studying at White City
- Biomedical students

*even with the proposed reforms around postgraduate representation, it would be appropriate that each area of representation have a plan or approach for postgraduate students.

However, it is not necessary that each full-time officer have a different secondary portfolio. The Union might decide that one single group of students become a shared priority for all officers, for example.

This recommendation particularly supports gaps in relationships with CUs, postgraduate students and international students, but is designed to introduce and annual flexibility to the sabbatical roles.

Along with this is the recommendation to stop referring to the full-time officers as Officer Trustees. The term Officer Trustee puts the emphasis on the wrong part of the role and is arguably the least representative aspect of an elected officer's role.

Resource Implications
This involves identifying and streamlining current operational activities that would not ideally be delivered by elected officers. Some of these activities may transfer to the staff team.

11. Changes to Insight and Advocacy approach

Create an annual or biannual Student Experience Report, consolidating feedback from Academic and Welfare Reps, liberation campaigns, and surveys.
Provide structured data access to Student Councillors and part-time officers to improve their advocacy effectiveness.

Addressing Siloing

- Establish cross-functional working groups to support collaboration between staff and elected representatives.
- Develop shared goals and communication strategies to align departments with ICU's strategic priorities.

Policy development Cycle/approach

- Coordination of open forums to help build the agendas of policy making bodies such as the council.
- Policy dev cycle – schedule of business based on a combination of officer priorities, emerging issues and opportunities, gathered insight across ICU and the CUs. Leave room for emerging issues, student forum insight and digital engagement.
- Try to balance the scorecard of ICU policy across different policy areas and audiences. Focus on 'believes' style policy statements, so that the Union and any other actors are able to tailor actions appropriately to resource and timing.
- Focus on mixed-method decision making. Consensus is preferred, but clear methods to conduct votes where necessary.
- If digital poling and issue collection is used, consider whether current governance arrangements have the democratic legitimacy to direct issues to the correct body or resolution (e.g. to trustee board, to a council, to a forum or just to complete the request). It may be necessary to create a form of joint policy committee with student representatives, union staff and a trustee able to decide where an issue or request goes, and to monitor the policy development cycle.

Resourcing implications
Support for insight team, cross-organisational working – staff development

12. Service engagement with students

As has been mentioned, within our interactions across the Union, elected mandates are highly linked to service and delivery, and culturally at ICU, this has run the risk of elected micro-management. It causes potentially the wrong kind of alignment between the democracy and the Union's service delivery.

A lot of these reforms are based on positioning the Union and its representatives in such a way as to be devolved or closer to the membership, making decisions that matter to members, where those members are. The obvious critique to this is that it looks like moving the democracy away from how the Union is run. There are two counters to this critique:

- the elected full-time officers are members of the Board of Trustees, which has ultimate authority and responsibility over the resourcing, scope, strategy and compliance of the organisation. A unique aspect of students' union definition of 'compliance' would be the compliance with its democracy.
- the democracy can raise questions about any aspect of the union through various channels, not least Student Council or mass participation activities such as referenda.

However, our critique works in both directions. Currently placing a single elected officer in a position to be the sole individual who represents student voice in the quality and operation of a given service area is not an adequate response to either service development or democratic control. The Union should have as a part of its student engagement plan, an approach to ensuring that each service area engages the membership in variations of listening exercises – for example, service user forums, open-house events, town halls.

Each service area should work with representatives to establish the appropriate form and frequency of student engagement on that area's delivery. This already happens with Clubs and Societies via the Management Boards, what are the solutions for reps, commercial services and advice, for example?

Resourcing implications

Time will have to be spent working out the form of engagement and setting time aside to engage students.

Appendix – Survey summary

Student Survey

Basic breakdown

457 respondents // 21% from WP route // Majority aged 18-24 (88%)
Pretty much equal male/female input; 4 respondents non-binary; 1 genderfluid
Ethnicity – a balanced cross section across all groups

By Faculty

49% Engineering / 28% Medicine / 17% Natural Sciences / 4% Business School

By Constituent Union

31% City & Guilds / 27% School of Medicine / 12% Royal College of Science / 9% School of Mines / 1% Silwood Park

Headlines

1. Students aren't comfortable with handing reps a mandate to act on their behalf.

   82% of students want to be consulted by reps before reps can speak on their behalf (otherwise known as 'enactive representation') (Q22)
   Only 18% of students indicate that reps can use their discretion when representing students (Q22)

2. Clubs and Societies are valued by students as a representative cluster/grouping; Postgraduates would benefit from being represented as a cluster

   55% of student respondents said that clubs/socs were the most useful cluster for representing students (Q24)

3. Students want to see the entire student body involved in more SU decisions

67% of students would most like to see polls/votes used to make decisions in the SU (only 27% chose debate/discussion, and just 6% chose elected representatives act on your behalf) (Q23)

The top 3 methods for SU decisions (Q25) were: Campus-wide ballot (46%); Online forums (35%); Petitions (31%) (Q25)

4. Students are largely in favour of consensus based decision-making *(note: this would appear to contradict headline 3)*

68% of students are in favour of negotiating mutual agreement using consensus (Q27)

29% were in favour of brokering respectful disagreement using majority rule

Relevant free text quotes:

"Mutual agreement is ideal but difficult to achieve. While majority rule usually ends up with popularity contest."

"Acknowledge 'don't care' as a valid opinion so that a loud minority don't have the only voice in decisions."

"I feel like there would be certain situations where a compromise is more appropriate than a majority but also other situations where it's the opposite."

5. <u>A significant proportion of students feel that they can hold elected representatives to account</u>

   25% 'somewhat agree' that this is the case (Q20); 14% 'strongly agree'; 25% 'neither agree nor disagree'

6. <u>Some roles/groupings more than others are felt to be truly representative of students – Academic and Wellbeing Reps and Constituent Unions are well regarded in terms of representative function, however Officer Trustees are not so much</u>

   44% of students indicated that Academic & Wellbeing Reps, represent them 'to a great extent' and 41% said that they felt 'somewhat' represented by these reps (Q21)
   49% of students indicated that Constituent Unions are 'somewhat' representative, and 18% that they are representative 'to a great extent' (Q21)
   In terms of Officer Trustees, 41% of students said they were 'somewhat' representative, with 31% indicating Officer Trustees to be representative to a 'very little' extent, and 18% indicating that Officer Trustees are 'not at all' representative


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