Imperial College Union
Democracy Review
Counterculture and ICU Staff

Introduction

A democratic, student-led union is fundamental to ensuring every student has a transformational experience at university. It equips the Union to deliver truly student-centric services, while helping students build a stronger sense of belonging, develop self-determination, and feel genuine agency over their university journey. In its strategic plan, Imperial College Union (ICU) articulated its commitment to democracy as a foundational principle, its alignment to the goal of 'effective advocacy and influence,' and the importance of ensuring ICU members to drive the decisions made at Union and University level.

Many of the ICU democratic structures were developed over time – some dating back to the formation of the University, others were reviewed and amended over the Covid-19 pandemic – and many adjusted in between. However, it has, until now, been unclear how well students at Imperial understand or can access their union's democracy. Moreover, whether the University deems them credible or effective at influencing their decision making to make positive impacts for the student body at varying academic and non-academic levels is also in question.

This report is timely; there has not been a recent, holistic analysis of the Union's democratic processes, structures and offices in their entirety. Furthermore, as Imperial seeks to expand its provision across multiple campuses and diversify its student body, clear and accessible decision-making and robust evidence collection to influence choices across the university has never been more important.

Following a competitive tender process, ICU commissioned Counterculture to provide an independent perspective and wholesale analysis of the current systems and make recommendations based on their findings. In scope of this review were the following themes and areas:

- Sabbatical Officer positions/roles/portfolios
- Liberation and Community Officer (LCO) and network (LCN) structure
- Student-led campaigns
- Democratic/student policy-making bodies e.g., Union Council
- Constituent Union (CU) structure.

Context

Why a democracy review?

In 2023, ICU launched its strategic plan, which articulated a central mission to '…positively transform the lives of every student at Imperial' and a goal of 'effective advocacy and influence'[1]. Underpinning any effective advocacy is the need to deliver a 'strong, accessible democracy' which enables genuine student led change and impact for members.

Like many students' unions of longstanding institutions, the democratic structures at ICU have developed over time – aspects of this were first established in 1907 when Imperial formed into a as a singular university from independent colleges. As Imperial has expanded, so has the need for further additions – which has created some complexity, and, as a result, a lack of accessibility and transparency for both students and the University.

The last time a Democratic Structures review took place was in the academic year 2021-2022, undertaken by the Union President, resulting in several recommended changes. In scope for this review were: membership of, accessibility of and subcommittees of Union; democratic scrutiny of Sabbatical Officers; Constituent Union (CU) Governance; and student representation across Imperial's numerous campuses. Although this review was helpful in streamlining some processes, it was not able to be as holistic or wide-reaching as an independent review could be.

This review represents a large, broad, and wholesale review of the entire representational functions and democratic engagement mechanisms of the Union. It aims to place the Union on a strong footing to support a growing student body across multiple campuses, placing an understanding of the depth and breadth of community issues at its core – responding to the challenges faced by a diverse, high-achieving, and high-expectation setting student population.

A brief overview of Imperial's student demographic data

To contextualise the responses, it is useful to have an understanding of how Imperial is populated. A brief overview of Imperial's student data can be found below:

- 53% of students are Undergraduates (UG), 28% are Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students, and 19% are Postgraduate Research (PGR) students.
- 57% of students identify as men, and 43% identify as women
- 55% of students are Asian, 29% of students are White, 5% of students are of Mixed Heritage, 3% of students are Black, 7% are of other/unknown heritage
- 52% of students are International, and 48% of students are home students[2]

Data collection and analysis approach

Between September and December 2024, a comprehensive data collection process was undertaken by Counterculture, ensuring diverse perspectives informed the review. The following methods were applied:

Surveys:

- Student survey: 422 responses gathered – exploring representation, decision-making, engagement barriers, and perceptions of ICU's influence and visibility.

A breakdown of survey demographics is given below:

- 21% identified as coming from a widening participation background (8% did not answer).
- 88% aged 18-24 (8% did not answer).
- 74% undergraduate (UG), 13% Postgraduate Taught (PGT), 13% Postgraduate Research (PGR) (8% did not answer).

[1] ICU strategic plan, 2023-28

[2] Registry data 2024-25

- 47% men, 50% women, 3% other/prefer not to say (8% did not answer).
- 37% Asian students, 34% White students, 7% Mixed heritage students, 4% Black students, 3% Arab (Middle Eastern/North African) students, 15% other/prefer not to say (8% did not answer).
- 1% were not the gender identified at birth (8% did not answer).
- 12% of students identified as having a disability (8% did not answer).
- 2% have caring responsibilities (8% did not answer).
- 49% Engineering, 28% Medicine, 17% Natural Sciences, 4% Business School (8% did not answer).
- 31% City & Guilds, 27% School of Medicine, 12% Royal College of Science, 9% School of Mines, 1% Silwood Park, 20% not sure/did not believe they were a member (8% did not answer).
- 72% said they were a member of a club, society, or project (CSP), 37% said they were a committee member of a CSP, 31% said they regularly used the venues, attended events and/or used Union shop, 25% said they were a representative, 9% said they were a CU committee member, 7% said they were a student staff member, 2% said they were an Management Group (MG) Chair, 2% were an LCO (30% did not answer).

- Imperial staff survey: 61 responses gathered – qualitative and quantitative feedback from University staff (predominantly situated in departments and central services) about ICU's professionalism, effectiveness, and engagement in institutional processes.

A breakdown of the Imperial staff survey demographics is given below:

- 27% education office staff (faculty/department), 16% academic staff, 15% Teaching fellows or principal teaching fellows, 7% registry staff, 5% information or library services staff, 4% student support staff, 2% alumni relations staff, 2% comms staff, 22% other/unspecified.
- 44% Medical School staff, 24% Natural Sciences staff, 16% Engineering staff, 4% Business School staff, 13% Unattached to an academic department.

Interviews:
Over 90 one-to-one interviews were conducted with Officer Trustees, Academic and Wellbeing Representatives, Liberation and Community Officers, Constituent Union leaders, ICU staff, and senior Imperial academic and professional services staff (including but not limited to the Registrar, Vice Provost Education and Student Experience, Director of Student Services, Academic Registrar, Vice-Provosts EDI, Deans and Vice Deans (Education), and Faculty Senior Tutors).

Workshops:

- Eight workshops held with key stakeholder groups:
    - Three student focus groups on under-represented groups and engagement barriers.
    - Three workshops with Union Council members exploring governance, insight, and policy (Feedback from the last workshop was communicated via a Padlet, pen, and paper which is referenced in the report).
    - One all-staff workshop involving ICU permanent staff
    - One workshop with the ICU board of trustees.

Observational Engagement:

- Attendance at ICU's autumn election promotional stall, where students shared informal views on democratic opportunities and barriers.

Desk-based Research:

- Review of ICU's strategy, website, governance documentation, byelaws, internal structures, and historical data.
- Comparative analysis of student representation models from similar student unions.

Analysis Approach:
Survey data, interviews, and workshop transcripts were triangulated to identify broad themes, contradictions, and areas of opportunity. The process was grounded in appreciative enquiry, recognising and building upon ICU's strengths as a platform for student voice.

To support actionable change, data was also analysed through a SWOT framework (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats), alongside consideration of external influencing factors (such as University structures and sector trends):

Strengths	**Weaknesses**
- Longstanding structures (e.g. CSPB, CUs) with strong cultural roots and capacity for student leadership. - Trusted partnerships with University leadership and presence on University committees. - Committed student leaders and staff working to build inclusive engagement. - Clear appetite from students for co-creation and participatory models	- Low visibility and participation in existing governance structures (e.g. Union Council). - Lack of understanding or support for PGs and some unclear officer remits. - Fragmented systems for feedback, limited use of data, and weak community organising infrastructure. - Inconsistent support and accountability for Liberation and Community Officers (LCOs) and their networks (LCNs).
Opportunities	**Threats**
- Implement a simpler, more inclusive and evidence-led governance model. - Empower networks, CUs, and reps with greater autonomy and structured support. - Align sabbatical structure with strategic needs and increase PG support. - Build clarity and trust through transparent budgeting, reporting, and elections.	- Cultural resistance to change, especially in long-established structures. - Risk of burnout or disengagement if roles are not properly supported. - Operational capacity to deliver structural reforms across the Union. - Maintaining momentum and student engagement through transition.

Key findings
The following findings were established and aim to be resolved by this review.

- A lack of transparency in Union decision making: ICU must be transparent and clear about the services they deliver and decrease their reliance on a single elected officer or a small number of heard voices.
- A lack of trust in ICU's credibility from both students and University in influencing change: an over-reliance on a high engagement from a small minority of students, rather than broad representation of the wider student body, means that only 14% of students strongly

agree that ICU advocate effectively on their behalf[3], and the University is not always convinced that ICU's inputs are genuinely representative.

- Unclear full-time officer (FTO) remits: the current remits of the FTOs do not reflect the needs of the 2025 Imperial population, nor the current capacity or purpose of ICU.

- Low PG engagement: PG students feel disengaged from the current structures, and there is no full-time Union support for these students, which limits the overall ability of ICU to understand and advocate effectively for c.48% of members.

- High bureaucracy and low impact of Union Council: Union Council is perceived as disconnected from the current student body and focussed on procedural or operational matters rather than on forward-looking or cohesive policy development.

- Inconsistent support for CUs, driven by a lack of formalised relationships with ICU: CUs are detached from ICU, activity is often duplicated, and their collective advocacy power is weakened, alongside their trust in ICU as an umbrella body.

- Low engagement from under-represented groups, and limited visibility, accountability and support for LCOs: the LCOs and LCNs operate in isolation to other representative structures, and it can be challenging to articulate their roles. As a result, students from under-represented backgrounds do not engage with the networks, and this can lead to a lack of visibility of the needs of this student body.

- Complex structures and processes creating inaccessible governance: overly prescriptive byelaws, frequent elections and confusion around the rights of different types of union membership leads to inaccessibility for all students.

The review is structured into seven key themes, explaining the findings and a series of recommendations – with a clear description of how this will be operationalised, and its impact. These themes are:

1. Organisational transparency
2. Officer structure
3. Community organising
4. Council and committee reform
5. Constituent Unions
6. Liberation and Community approach
7. Governance

The recommendations in this report do not operate in a vacuum. They should be considered in relation to each other, reinforcing the theory, principles, and process which underpin the report.

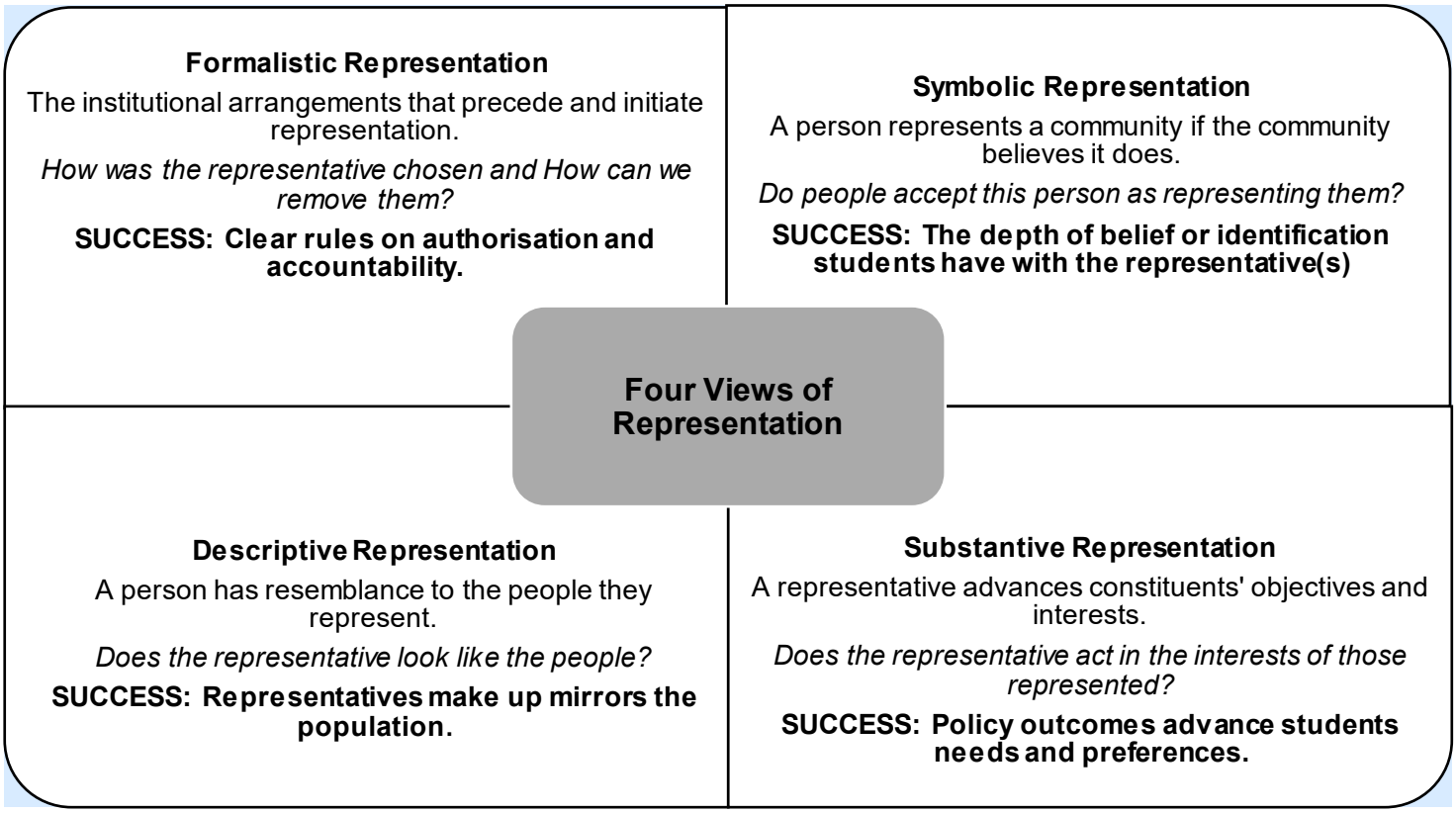
[3] Student Experience Survey (2025)

Underpinning theory, principles, and approach

Theory

Underpinning the democracy review, a central theory of representation has been established. This is not only to ensure that solutions to the problems found through the research are met, but that a new structure, changes, and recommendations are anchored into a credible theory. This is especially important, given that only 26% of Imperial staff surveyed by Counterculture agreed that ICU can tell them something they don't already know about their department or their work.

In her seminal work, *The Concept of Representation*, Pitkin identifies four views of representation: formalistic, descriptive, symbolic, and substantive.[4] This model supports ICU to ground its structures in a clear theory and ensure the Union is successful at delivering representation.



Principles

As well as a clear theory for delivering representation, it is also important to articulate a set of values and principles for how ICU create and operate democratic structures. As well as aligning with the Union's strategic values, it is important that these principles deliver against the overarching intentions of this review. As such, the following principles for democracy have been defined below:

- Integrity: The Union's democratic structures must serve as a genuine and transparent channel for student voice, reflecting students' views and enabling real change.
- Inclusivity: All students, from all backgrounds and levels of study, must be able to access, understand, and influence the democratic processes at ICU.

[4] Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation (1967)*

- Innovation**:** ICU should not replicate tradition for tradition's sake. Democratic structures should be forward-looking, adaptive, and imaginative in responding to students' changing needs.

- Simplicity and efficiency: The structure should be easy to navigate, limit duplication, and make good use of time and resources for both students and staff.

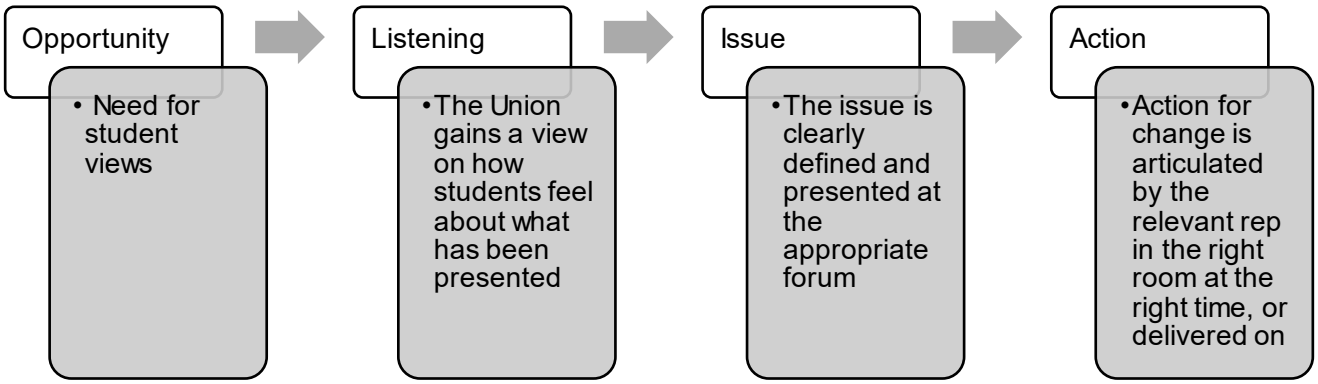
- Impact and accountability**:** Participation must lead to real outcomes. Students should see their input reflected in decision-making, and officers and representatives must be held to account.

Approach

To deliver against an underpinning theory and clear principles of an effective ICU democracy, there needs to be a process for influencing change on behalf of students. There are two ways in which this can be successful:

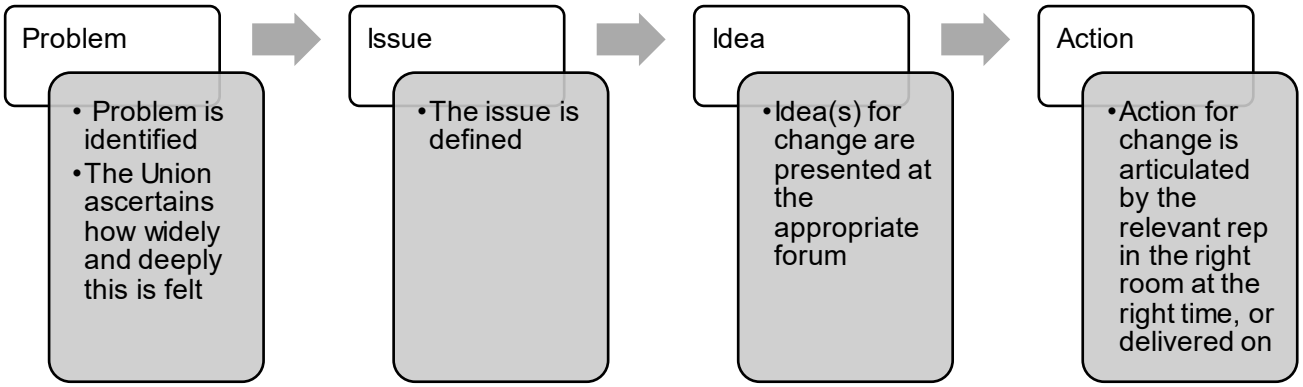
Top down/opportunity led:

The University or another decision-making body presents an idea, plan, concern or risk to the Union which requires consultation.



Bottom-up/data-driven:

A student or a collection of students are experiencing a problem which requires the University (or a sub-section) to change their practices or policy for an improved student experience.



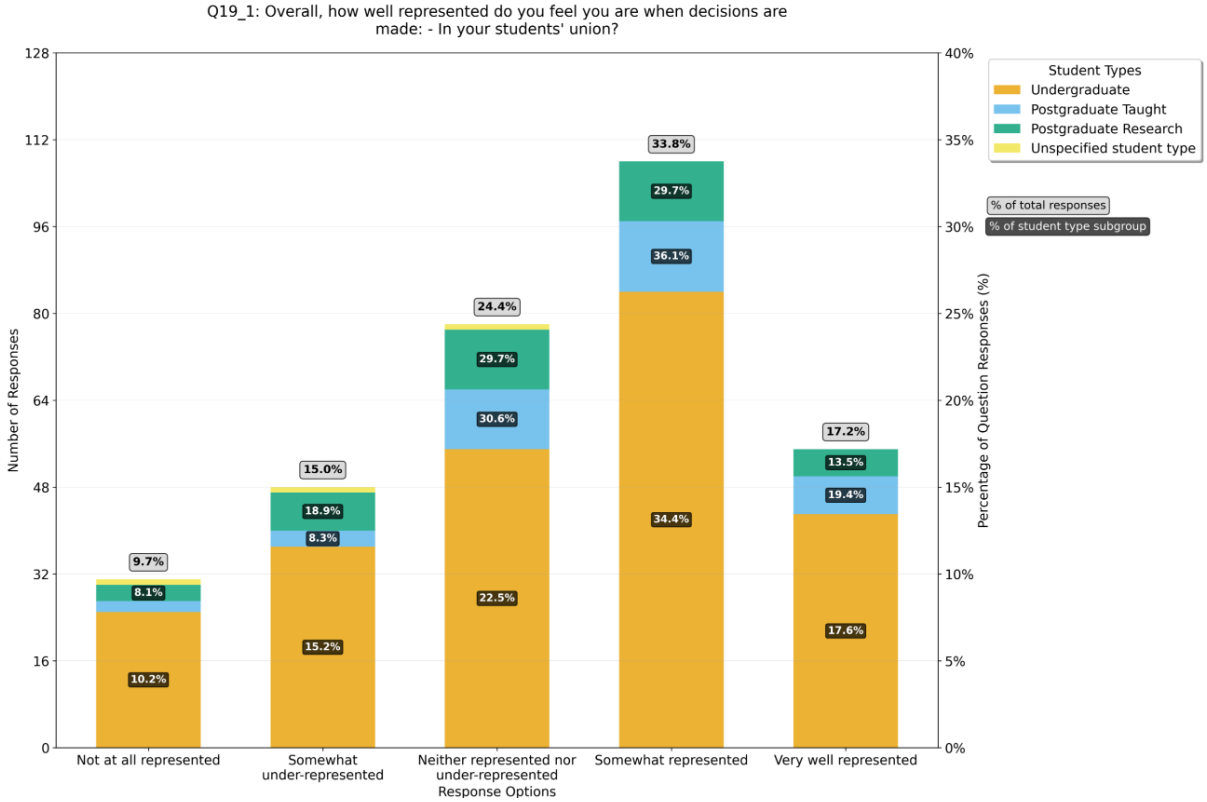
ICU democratic structures sit at the heart of these processes, to ensure that the problem/opportunity is truly understood, that the issues are well defined, and effective action is articulated to the relevant body (usually the University) as a result. If it requires the Union to make a change, that change is delivered. Each of the suggested recommendations will link back to the theory, the principles and the process to demonstrate how these intersect.

Theme one: Organisational transparency

Findings

ICU's mission is to be 'a high-performing students' union run by and for students, with exceptional services and people, which positively transforms the lives of all Imperial students.' Ensuring a multiplicity of students influence the services ICU offer is fundamental to achieving this mission.

However, to do this effectively, ICU must first be transparent about the services they deliver, and the decisions they make. Counterculture's student survey data suggests that Imperial students currently feel only slightly more represented by their students' union than their University (51% to 49%, respectively) in decision making – despite this central mission in ICU's strategy and operations.



This suggests that students could and should feel more represented in the Union's decision-making, and that they should be clearer in how this is arrived at.

Student interviews with Counterculture demonstrated that it was evident students did not understand how ICU prioritises resources, and, in turn, how this benefits the wider student body. The Union has not communicated a student-facing impact report since 2019, and there is no central approach or clear intent for gathering feedback on services which impact the wider student body.

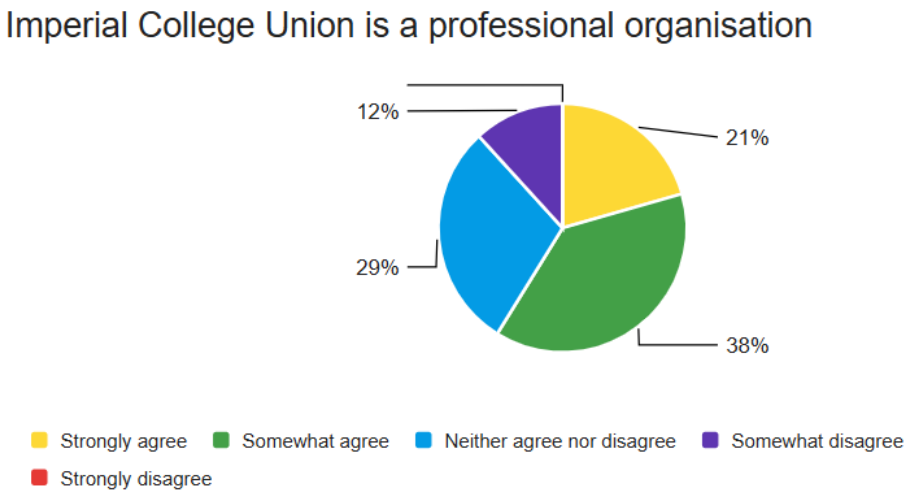
As one student remarked, "*There's very little feedback – I'm never really sure if the Union did anything with what we told them.*"

Second, there is a lack of clarity on where or how decisions are made to the wider student body, which can create distrust or disinterest in the work which ICU does on behalf of students. For example, important decisions on Union financial matters, such as the approval of budgets, management accounts, and major commercial decisions (e.g., Summer Ball, major impacts to venues etc.) – although held rightly by the Union's trustee board with delegated authority to the

Finance Audit, and Risk Committee (FAR)[5] – is not presented anywhere that is clear or digestible to the membership. This can cause concern that the Union is not prioritising spend or resource on issues affecting students. Feedback from Union Council suggested that *"Transparency is really important, especially considering how the Board and FAR work, as well as publishing updates to Council",* and, as a result, this is embedded into the recommendations.

Perhaps more pressingly, there is no evidence that ICU clearly communicates its impact on the student experience well to the wider student body. There is no signposting to this effect on its website beyond sporadic officer blog posts. An effective democratic structure should enable ICU to communicate how it has advocated on behalf of students at a range of levels – from course or community – to the wider student body.

Data from the Counterculture staff survey suggests 59% Imperial staff consider the Union to be a professional organisation.



The interviews with staff members suggest this is a clear improvement to how ICU was perceived in previous years. However, one staff member summarised a disconnect between ICU's purpose and how it currently operates by stating: "*They should be setting the exam papers, not telling us how to answer them*" – suggesting that the Union's representatives are too focused on responding to existing agendas (set by the University or operational work), rather than adopting substantive representation. Demonstrating how ICU delivers impact for students publicly not only would imbue the student body with confidence but also reinforce ICU as a credible organisation to the University and other stakeholders.

Recommendations

The review has identified five recommendations to resolve these concerns:

	Recommendation	Operational delivery	Impact	Relationship to theory	Relationship to principles	Relationship to process
1	Hold Annual General Meetings (AGMs).	Meetings are held a minimum of once per year, advertised at the beginning of the first	Students can understand, respond to,	Formalistic representation	Integrity Impact and accountability	Opportunity led Data-driven

[5] The purpose of the FAR is to monitor and challenge where necessary the financial statements of the Union, (including annual and other reports), interim management accounts, review significant financial reporting issues and judgments. The committee passes on their findings and recommendations to the ICU Trustee Board for ratification. The committee may have 3-5 trustee members, of which one must be external and one student.

		term to give students notice to attend. They are facilitated by the Governance and Compliance Manager, Representation Team, and the Union's senior management team (SMT), and chaired by ICU President. Any Imperial student can join, hear about ICU work and finances, and ask questions or feed in ideas to hold the ICU accountable.	and influence ICU priorities and financial activity.			
2	Release finance reports and minutes of FAR in a digestible, front-facing format, and a written termly commercial update will be provided to Council.	SMT will produce an annual financial report, which is published on ICU website, presenting digestible financial information for any student to read and understand. FAR minutes will also be published on ICU website in a student-friendly way and effectively publicised within a month of the meeting occurring. A representative of the Commercial team will also present written commercial updates at Union Council.	Increases ICU's ability to be financially transparent.	Formalistic representation	Integrity Impact and accountability	Opportunity led
3	Deliver student experience and impact reports.	ICU staff will annually publish student experience reports, summarising student data, feedback and insight received, and the impact this has had on the student experience. This will be delivered in an accessible, visually engaging way on the ICU website and through social media updates. Similarly, ICU will publish an annual impact report, articulating how its	Strengthens the legitimacy of ICU policy function and shows the impact of Union services to both students and the University.	Formalistic representation	Integrity Impact and accountability	Opportunity led

		services have supported the student body. Union Council will also publish regular, student-facing comms.				
4	Create opportunities for student feedback and input.	Every student-facing team at ICU will embed a face-to-face opportunity for direct student input and feedback (e.g., events, drop-ins etc.) into their operating plans and communicate any changes made. Reforms to Union Council will enable any student to bring ideas and insight.	Strengthens student input and engagement.	Formalistic representation	Integrity Simplicity and efficiency Impact and accountability	Data led
5	Hold effectiveness reviews of Council/democratic structures.	Following the changes made by this review, by June 2026 an ICU working group of student leaders and staff will evaluate and review the impact of democracy review changes. Once it has convened and reviewed how well the recommendations have worked towards the aims of the review, the ICU staff team will deliver any operational changes, and structural changes will be voted on by Union Council. After the first year of implementation, ICU will review its democratic effectiveness in this way every three years.	Ensures flexible structures fit for changing needs of students.	Formalistic representation	Integrity Inclusivity Impact and accountability	Opportunity led

Theme two: Officer structure reform

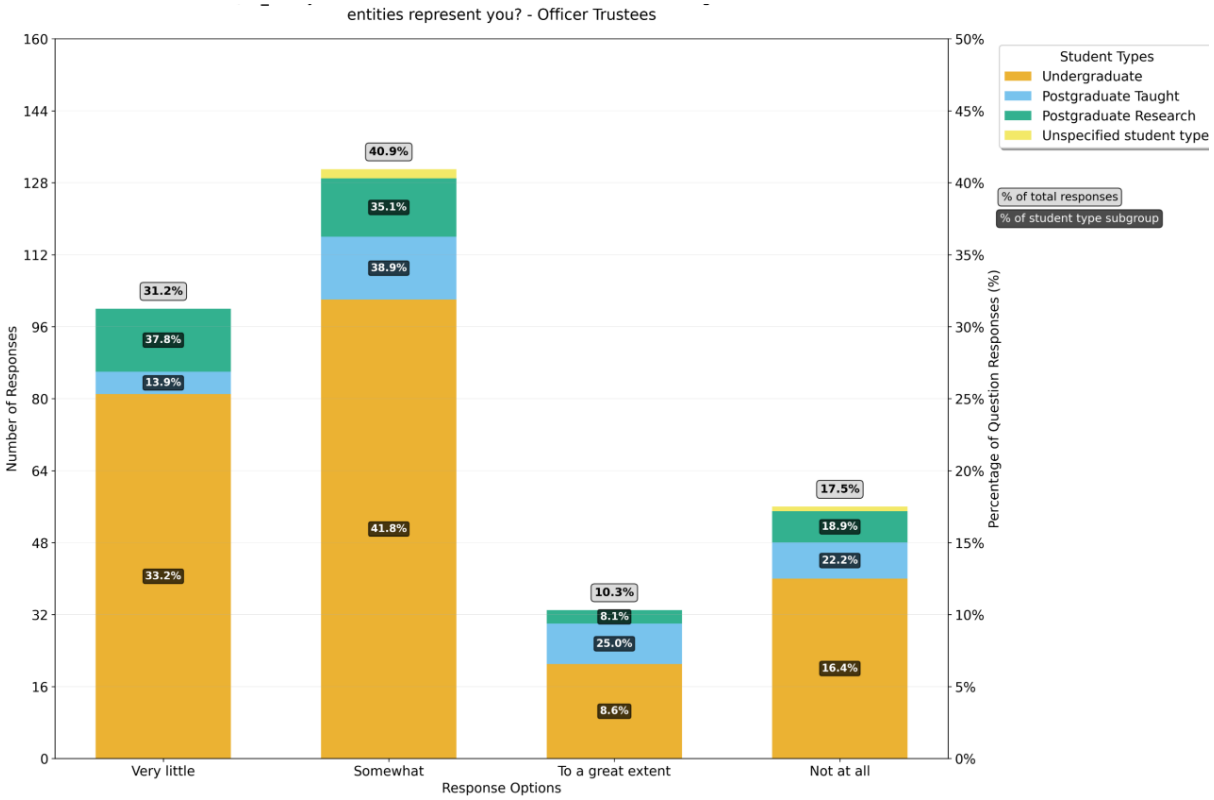
Findings

ICU currently elects five full-time, paid, Officer Trustees (OTs) to lead the political direction of the Union through executing and developing policy to further the aims and objectives of ICU, deliver its strategic plan, as well as ensuring that all members of the Union are equally represented.[6] These five officers also act as trustees of the Union, as well as chief representatives. The current Officer Trustee roles are:

- President: the ultimate representative of the Union
- Deputy President (Clubs and Societies): responsible for clubs and society recognition, support and representation
- Deputy President (Education): responsible for reporting on student views of academic affairs
- Deputy President (Finance and Services): responsible for reporting on student views on health and safety, financial procedures impacting students, union events and sustainability
- Deputy President (Welfare): reporting student opinion on liberation and welfare issues and representing the welfare needs of all students.

A full breakdown of their roles can be found in Bye Law F of the Union's governing articles. There is also a full-time Medical School president funded by the Faculty of Medicine.

Counterculture student survey data revealed limited confidence in the ability of the Officer Trustees (OTs) to represent them. Only 40.9% of surveyed students felt OTs were both "somewhat representative", and "to a great extent", while 48.8% believed they represented students "very little" or "not at all".



[6] Imperial College Union, *Byelaw F - Officers of the Union* (2023)

Interviews also noted that OTs have, historically, prioritised operational over strategic tasks, limiting their visibility and effectiveness as advocates. This concern has been compounded by officer role titles and descriptions not matching their current portfolios of work, and the evolution of staff roles within the wider Union (e.g., a larger membership services and commercial directorate). Stakeholders highlighted the need for this clearer role delineation to ensure OTs can maintain a strategic and representative focus.

One sabbatical officer remarked, "*The line between staff and sabbatical responsibilities was always blurry – you'd be sorting operational things instead of leading campaigns or influencing policy. That's not what students elected us for*."

"There's no clarity about what's within their remit anymore, and I think that's why students don't know what they're doing." – ICU staff member

Therefore, a priority for this review is to implement recommendations around officer transparency, and to ensure their remits are relevant and clear to the student body so they can feel these roles are representative of their needs.

A clear example of this is the Deputy President (Finance and Services) (DPFS), where the role no longer has a clear, relevant remit within ICU and requires consideration within a new structure. Many of the responsibilities of the DPFS articulated in the role description have changed or transferred to staff members. A detailed analysis of the role description is delivered here:

Role description[7]	**Current provision/Analysis**
Take on Presidential duties as appropriate	Responsibility of all OTs
Be responsible for reporting students' interests on health and safety to the College and external bodies, suggesting areas for development, in conjunction with the relevant Union committees and staff	Since this role was created, ICU has: - Recruited a Facilities, Health and Safety Manager - Introduced a Health and Safety Committee with student and University staff representation.
Be jointly responsible with DPCS for the training, support and recognition of CSP volunteers, in conjunction with the relevant Union committees and staff	This was considered an operational task, and is delivered by the Activities team, with support from the DPCS.
Be jointly responsible with DPCS for overseeing support on financial matters to Clubs, Societies & Projects	Much of this work is operational, previously took up the majority of the DPFS and DPCS workload. To alleviate this, ICU repurposed this work to the Activities and Finance teams. A specific Activities Coordinator (Finance) has been recruited to administer and support CSPs with financial queries. The DPA would still retain strategic oversight over financial and funding decisions (e.g., annual budgeting) but no longer has responsibility for processing.
Be responsible for reporting students' interests on financial procedures that impact students, suggesting areas for development, in conjunction with the Finance & Risk sub-committee of the Board of Trustees, where the Deputy President (Finance & Services) will be a member	This does not currently happen and could be delivered more effectively with recommendations identified through theme one.

[7] Imperial College Union, *Byelaw F - Officers of the Union* (2023)

Be responsible for ensuring students' interests are accounted for in the delivery of the Union services provided at all campuses, including but not limited to conferencing, retail and licensed trade services	ICU recognises the strategic importance of having students' interests accounted for in events and services. However, the role does not have access to clear data other than the Student Experience Survey data which the ICU staff team can use and is not empowered by a structure which enables them to get the right information from students. The Union no longer delivers a conferencing service, and the provision of services is managed by a larger commercial team.
Be responsible for the sponsorship of the Union	ICU commercial and CSP sponsorship is guided by the ICU ethical framework (voted on by Union Council and approved by the trustee board) and either administrated by the Partnerships Manager or the Activities Coordinator (Finance) and Activities Manager. The DPA would remain responsible for holding strategic and political decisions regarding funding.
Be responsible for ensuring students' interests are considered in the training, support and recognition of all student staff, in conjunction with the relevant Union committees and staff	Training is delivered by the ICU Venues team, and feedback from the students is given directly to permanent staff. A recent all staff survey demonstrated that ICU casual staff satisfaction is higher than it has been historically.[8]
Be responsible for ensuring students' interests are the key driving factor behind Union events, in conjunction with the relevant Union committees, volunteers and staff	The DPFS does deliver this, and it is important a function of the officer team holds this to meet ICU's strategic objective of fun and inclusive communities. However, it is not currently a large proportion of their work and could perhaps sit with a different role within ICU. Teams which deliver events should also hold regular feedback sessions directly with students to understand how this is going.
Be responsible for reporting students' interests on matters of sustainability – environmental, financial, and social – to both the College and the Union, suggesting areas for development, in conjunction with the relevant Union committees, volunteers and staff	This is also important to hold in relation to ICU's strategic enabler around environmental sustainability. However, this should sit across portfolios and key, student-led, strategic work on this issue has been led by the President as the issue has gained more importance in recent years.

Although there are necessary aspects to the role, it is evident that much of the role is currently not viable in the current way in which ICU operates. One crucial way in which the DPFS role should contribute to delivering ICU's central mission of operating 'by and for students' is through ensuring students can influence commercial services and events. Although it is not clear that a full-time officer is required for this, further feedback from the student body has suggested a transparent mechanism should be established between students and the commercial team to provide feedback and ask questions. When reviewing Russell Group students' unions methods for delivering democracy, it was found that Exeter Guild has established advisory panels or feedback forums to shape initiatives and facilitate feedback. It is suggested that a similar mechanism is established to deliver this for ICU. To ensure the right voices are represented at

[8] ICU staff survey (2025)

the forum, it is suggested that the following groups of students are actively invited (although it should be advertised widely to all students):

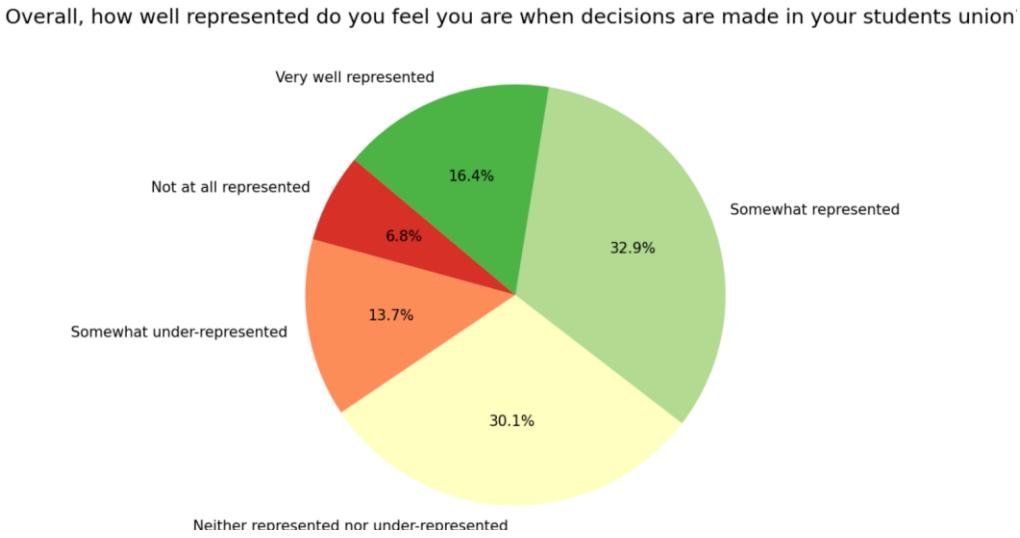
- Deputy President (Activities)
- President
- Management group chairs
- CU Presidents
- Students with regular bookings with the venue

Upon liaising with the commercial team, a regular, termly forum occurring in the middle of the term would be most useful to ensure that student feedback directly impacts the operational planning cycles. Students would have space to explain how policies have affected the running of their events, feedback on future policies or initiatives, but also can give wider feedback on larger, strategic issues such as welcome activity, event planning, shop merchandise, and/or venues stock.

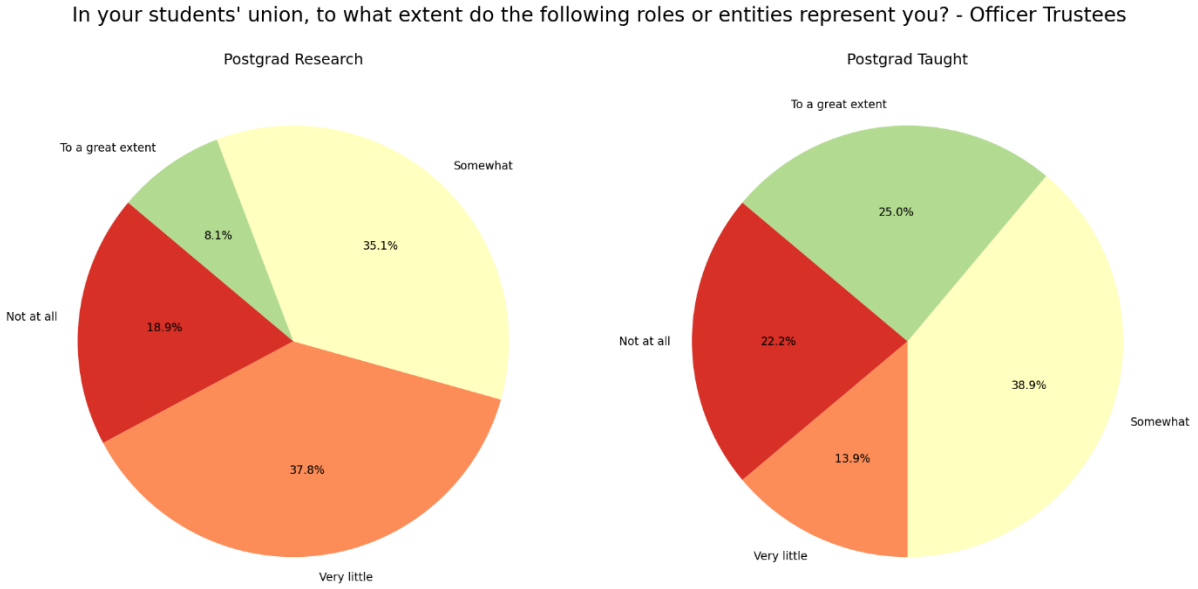
Another strategic need is driving work around Union and University sustainability. It is imperative that this is embedded into every officer portfolio rather than one officer – as this issue permeates every aspect of Imperial life. However, given the President is the lead officer for the Union, it is pertinent that the primary remit for this sit within this role.

The Union also aims to deliver upon is the goal around the delivery of fun and inclusive communities through the officer structure.[9] Although clubs and societies and their representation is a critical component of this, student-led events, reward and recognition, and volunteering also foster community and a sense of belonging. The Deputy President (Clubs and Societies) (DPCS) role could be broadened to include representation on these issues and therefore renamed to Deputy President (Activities) (DPA).

In contrast, a clear gap in ICU's current advocacy approach is how it represents postgraduate students. PG students currently make up roughly 48% of the student population, but there is no full-time support or holistic understanding of their diverse needs and issues. PG students were under-represented in the survey data, with only 26% of respondents articulating that they studied at that level. Those who did respond said that, while they broadly align with the numbers of overall respondents who feel very well or somewhat represented by their students' union, fewer students felt that the Officer Trustees represented them.



[9] ICU strategic plan, 2023-28



PG students are also under-represented in Union elections. Turnout data for PGT and PGR students is significantly lower than UG[10].

LE Election year	UG Turnout	PGT	PGR	Total PG
2023	47.4%	11.5%	11.7%	11.6%
2024	48.9%	8.9%	13%	10.8%
2025	54.7%	13.7%	9.1%	11.7%

Counterculture interviews of University staff articulated some of the concerns surrounding PG representation at ICU. One staff member explained, *"Many postgraduate researchers see their departments as their primary support network. ICU needs to better demonstrate its relevance to their academic and professional development."* Another interviewee remarked, *"ICU's events and policies seem more suited to undergraduates, which limits postgraduate interest."* This suggests a need for more tailored ICU outreach efforts, particularly for research-focused students who may not engage with traditional ICU activities or governance processes.

Options considered for an alternative Officer role

Option	Pros	Cons	Recommendation
Retaining the DPFS in its current role	▪ Officer structure to retain some formalised student representation on student-led events, commercial teams, and sustainability.	▪ Many operational aspects of the role are delivered by the ICU staff team. ▪ Aspects of representation would be better achieved through a combination of the recommendations regarding transparency and groups having direct communication	Not recommended

[10] ICU Leadership Elections turnout data 2023-25

		and/or representation with the Commercial team.	
Reform the DPFS into the DP Engagement and Community	▪ Could deliver aspects of the DPFS role on student engagement in the context of community engagement and belonging. ▪ Could act as a community organiser role within the officer team.	▪ This role has an unclear full-time job description and remit, running the risk of delivering a series of miscellaneous duties rather than having clear, substantive impact for students or the University. ▪ Does not serve the needs of the PG community who require specific representation and community building. ▪ This role would likely have significant overlap with the work of the President, DPW and the DPA. ▪ The role has the potential to 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. ▪ It may only appeal to individuals who have an existing aptitude for community organising.	Not recommended
Replace the DPFS with a DPPG	▪ Could deliver 'Student-led' representation for a cohort of	▪ It may be challenging to engage PGR students in the	Recommended but not currently viable

	currently under-represented students ▪ Would have the lived experiences of PG issues ▪ Can focus on specific PG issues ▪ Could be viewed by the University as the main student voice for postgraduate students, which staff feel is not currently understood or represented by ICU.	position due to institutional fatigue and funding complications (taking a year out would need to be approved by a PhD funder who may not agree to this). ▪ The above point could result in representation of PGTs only, but a remaining gap in PGR support. ▪ Lack of ICU staff capacity to support additional officer of specific remit which could lead to inefficiency.	

While the PG officer was considered by the review to be the recommended option, the challenges around capacity and support for the role would not be resolved. Consequently, a more pertinent alternative to these options for the next academic year would be to recruit a full-time representation coordinator on a fixed-term basis to build the PG community and equip ICU with a holistic understanding of the challenges PGs face. Furthermore, written feedback from Union Council on the Padlet suggested this staff role could *also support logistical issues that tackle PG engagement.* It would be preferable to do this before deciding and holding elections for any full-time or part-time role.

OT Accountability

All representatives – particularly the OTs – run on political manifestos, and these shape the way the union influences Imperial and the wider community. ICU has created some governance around officer objectives to ensure they are plugged into the wider overall annual operating plans of the Union, as well as communicated to stakeholders upon arrival. However, much more could be done to communicate the political objectives of the OTs to the membership.

This lack of communication can weaken transparency and accountability, making it harder for students to connect officer work with their original mandates. Currently, most political direction from manifestos is only tracked through brief officer reports to Council or internal goal-setting mechanisms, with limited visibility for the wider membership. *"We don't know what they're doing week to week. It all just disappears after elections."* - Student Council member. Another student council participant commented, "*We got updates at Council, but they were always a bit vague – we couldn't really tell what had been achieved*."

Contributing to the issue of accountability is that the Officer team's work is regularly diverted away from their manifesto objectives because of opportunities or issues presented by the University or the student body. An example of this is rent negotiation settings, where officers had to set aside their projects to focus their attentions on influencing these discussions. Creating opportunities for OTs to explain a diversion in priorities clearly and transparently to the student body would support others to understand how they are continuing to deliver a transformational experience for students, even if they are not directly the objectives they had set out to deliver during the election.

To understand how other Unions deliver on this, there was an analysis of how this is delivered at other Russell Group (RG)SUs. Liverpool Guild and LSESU have established accountability panels for their officers. However, this was tried during a previous democratic structure review and was proven to be unsuccessful and inefficient.

Additionally, the President 'line manages' the Deputy Presidents (and in doing so holds other OTs accountable in the workplace). Past and present officer teams reported that this either leads to a lack of effective support or clear divides which can impact their ability to function successfully as a team.

Recommendations

The review has identified eight recommendations:

	Recommendation	Operational delivery	Impact	Relationship to theory	Relationship to principles	Relationship to process
1	Change full time officer line management to Managing Director (MD).	Sabbatical officers (including the ICSMSU President) as staff to be line managed by the Managing Director (NB; the MD would have no jurisdiction over workload, how Officers represent student views or act as trustees. Rather, this would only be for HR matters – including Time Off In Lieu (TOIL), annual leave, wellbeing concerns, staff conduct matters).	Clear accountability for officer development, support and HR processes.	Formalistic representation	Integrity Simplicity and efficiency Impact and accountability	N/A
2	Rename DPCS to Deputy President (Activities).	The role would maintain responsibility for club and society oversight and development, but in addition to this would include more holistic community development for students (including student-led events, volunteering, reward and recognition, and skills development) with	Enables positive and inclusive co-curricular culture, aligning with student and organisational needs.	Substantive representation	Inclusivity Innovation Simplicity and efficiency Impact and accountability	N/A

		support from the ICU staff team. They would also promote inclusivity through activity.				
3	Do not elect a fifth Officer Trustee for AY 25-26.	ICU will be led by four Officer Trustees for the upcoming academic year. Council and Board may choose to add a fifth officer through the effectiveness reviews or at separate meetings.	Charity resource can be reallocated to support under-represented students to embed within ICU (see below). This also improves effectiveness of the remaining Officer team through enhanced staff support.	Substantive representation	Integrity Simplicity and efficiency	Data driven
4	Recruit a Postgraduate Coordinator (full-time staff role on a fixed-term basis).	This role would support PG specific policy and campaigns and empower PG reps to enact policy and campaigns on a fixed term basis. They would liaise with ECRI and Trade Unions (e.g., UCU). The role would focus in on understanding PG specific issues, and support PG representatives across institution.	This would deliver a more equitable capacity to support c.48% student population. Postgraduate students are supported, understood, and advocated for.	Descriptive representation Substantive representation	Inclusivity Impact and accountability	Data driven
5	Consider further the need for a fifth officer portfolio, and what this might look like.	Union Council and Board can choose to revisit this option through regular reviews, with timings proactively considered around the leadership elections. ICU will evaluate the effectiveness	The opportunity remains for a senior 'political' voice for PGs, but ensures ICU support for postgraduate representation is consolidated prior to this	Descriptive representation Substantive representation	Integrity Inclusivity Impact and accountability	Data driven

		of other recommendations related to postgraduate representation to inform this decision.	and/or a full-time voice to champion student-led events if the feedback meeting does not provide a suitable mechanism for shaping issues.			
6	Set up a termly student forum for student-led events and commercial activity.	ICU will establish a termly student forum for commercial services receives feedback on initiatives and shape ideas for events/commercial activity.	This enables students to provide direct feedback and shape commercial policies, strategic planning, and activity.	Substantive representation	Integrity Impact and accountability	Opportunity led Data driven
7	Reform Officer accountability mechanisms.	Officers will still be held to account at Council, and the Council Chair will convene a working group over the summer to establish best practice for this, as well as an implementation plan. Each officer will align to the proposed committees (theme three) - receiving feedback, and co-developing policy. Manifestos or reports would be published on the website with compulsory monthly term-time updates – reviewed regularly with ICU staff, with input from students.	Students and reps will feel Officers are more accessible and visible. Accountability at council is formalised and focused on student priorities and manifesto promises.	Formalistic representation Substantive representation	Impact and accountability	N/A

Theme three: Community organising

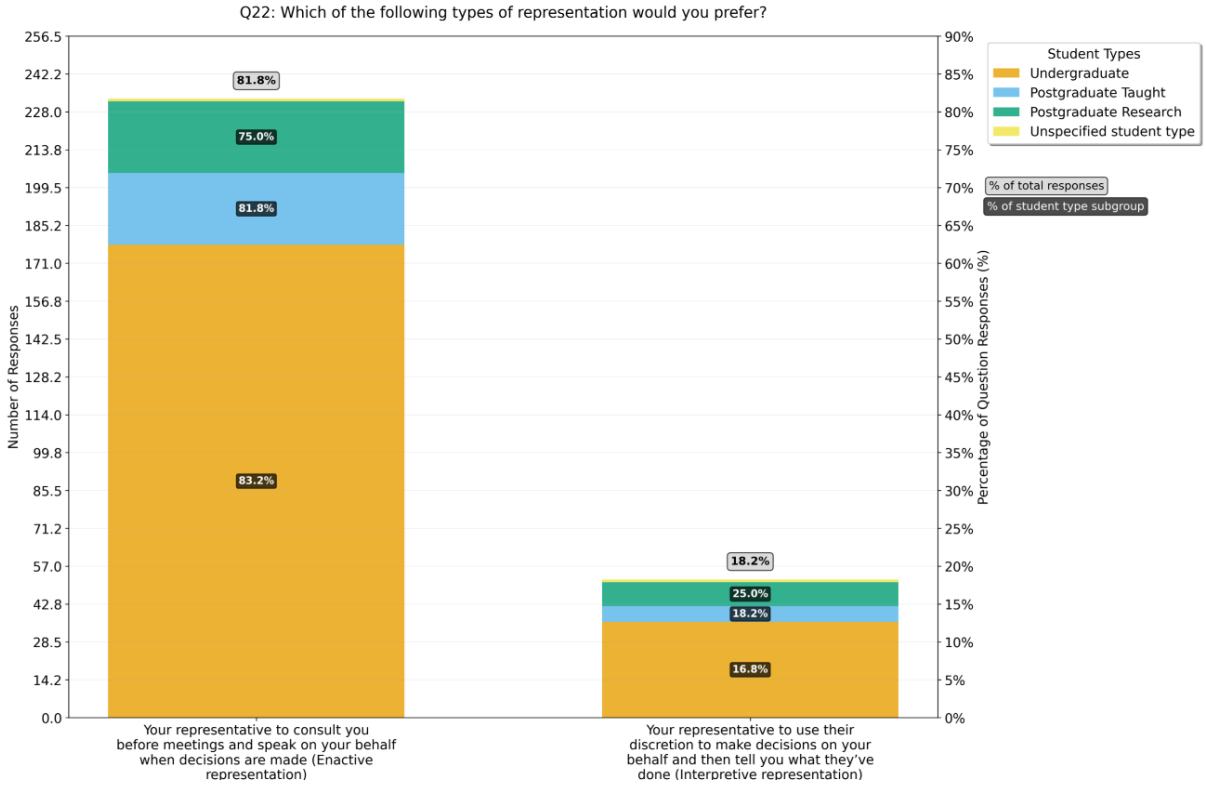
Findings

Citizens UK define community organising as 'bringing people together so that they can build the power to win change. This means building community-led solutions to big and small problems, that work for everyone'.[11] Based on the applied principles, the ambition to model substantive representation, and deliver data-driven policy development, the application of a community organising model is fundamental to the effectiveness of ICU democracy.

Student communities are not currently supported consistently. Volunteer officers – particularly LCOs and identity-based representatives – reported difficulty maintaining regular engagement with their communities owing to workload and a lack of consistent operational support or infrastructure.

Because ICU has lacked a structure for organising around emerging issues or interest-based themes, students who share experiences or concerns often have no clear way to come together and drive change unless there is already a formal officer role. This can lead to a focus on a small number of students at the top of the democratic hierarchy, and an over-reliance on 'opportunity led' change rather than 'data driven,' grassroots led influencing.

82% of students who responded to the Counterculture survey reported that they would prefer to be consulted by reps before reps can speak on their behalf, with only 18% of students who responded to the survey indicating that reps can use their discretion when representing students:



[11] Citizens UK, *What is community organising* (2025)

First, it is important to acknowledge bias in the survey results – those who have an interest in representation at ICU are likely to answer the survey. However, this sample suggests that students would benefit from reps who are well versed in garnering views from their academic or non-academic communities.

Equally, a key concern from interviewed University staff is the limitations of the feedback ICU offer to Imperial at every level. Senior Imperial staff have asked for ICU to be able to feed in aspects of the student experience which they do not already know – they expect ICU to provide original insights into student needs rather than simply reiterating data or insight they have previously collected. A faculty administrator said, *"We need ICU to be a bridge between students and the institution, not just an echo chamber."* Representatives do not draw from a broad evidence base – instead demonstrating adeptness at articulating their individual experiences rather than research, data, or insight.

Recommendations

The review has identified two recommendations:

	Recommendation	Operational delivery	Impact	Relationship to theory	Relationship to principles	Relationship to process
1	Introduce a funding pot for volunteers to use to deliver community organising initiatives and events. *	The fund can be applied for to support students to bring together others from an under-represented community to bring about a change (e.g., Trans+ rights). It would be administered by the Representation team, with student representation from the DPW and the DPA.	Under-represented student communities are supported by lifting logistical and operational barriers.	Symbolic representation Descriptive representation Substantive representation	Integrity Inclusivity Innovation Impact and accountability	Data driven
2	Deliver community organising training for all relevant student reps and volunteers.	All reps are trained in community organising to help build effective substantive representation. This will be integrated into the existing training programmes for representatives and tailored depending on the level of rep need and function.	Reps are more effective at advancing student objectives and interests.	Symbolic representation Descriptive representation Substantive representation	Integrity Inclusivity Innovation	Data driven

*NB; This is contingent upon agreement on the following recommendations in theme two:

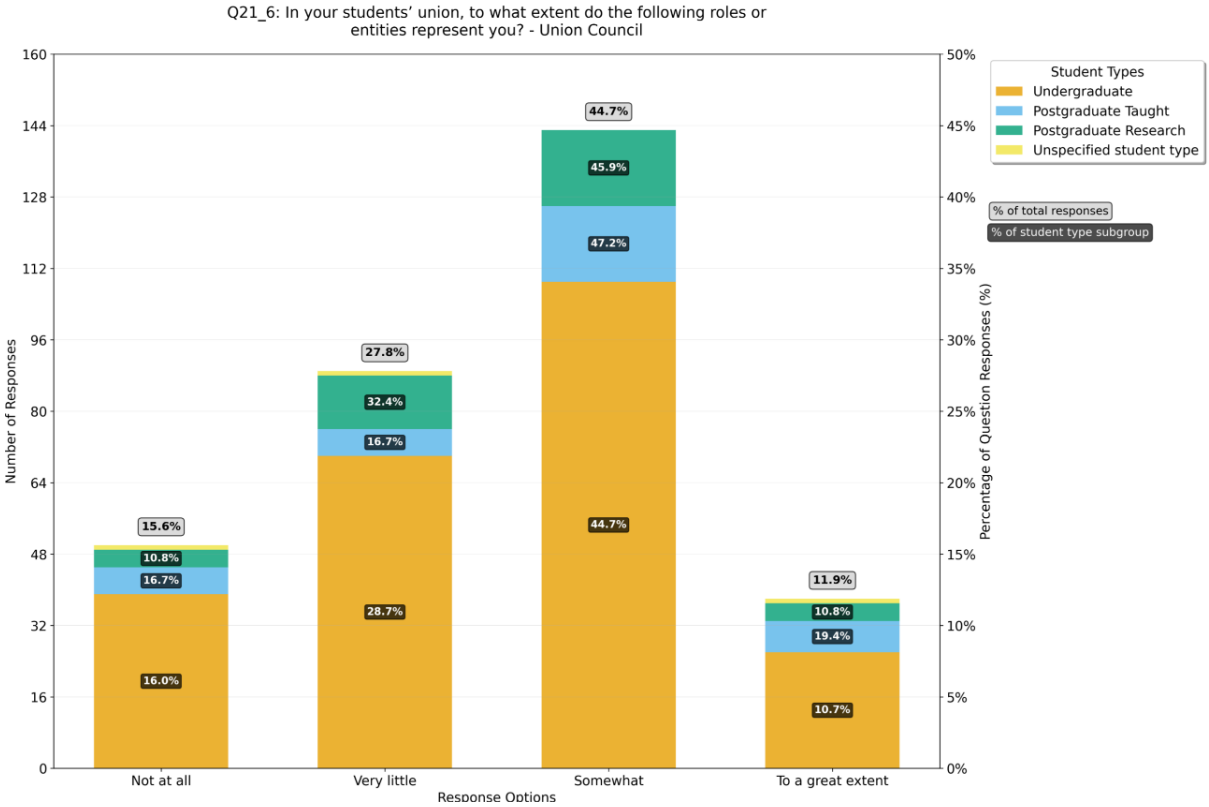
- The removal of the DPFS
- The introduction of a Postgraduate Coordinator

Theme four: Council and committee reform

Findings

Council is made up of up to 60 members, consisting of the Chair, the OTs, the Liberation and Community Officers, the President, Education and Welfare representatives from each Constituent Union, the Postgraduate Taught and Research Chairs, the Academic and Welfare Officers from each faculty, the Management Group Chairs, and 16 elected members. The meeting occurs monthly during term time, and any student is welcome (although Council is reminded) to bring motions which are voted on to bring about a policy change in the Union. The benefits of this model mean a large range of voices from different communities are, in theory, contributing to policy development, and provides further democratic legitimacy to ICU's political direction. It also has a role in scrutinising the OTs.

However, there are issues with the current structure. There is some disconnect from the current student body – 12% of surveyed students strongly agreed that Council decisions reflect their priorities.



Although there have been more policy-focused discussions in recent meetings, Council often spends time examining procedural or operational matters (e.g., small changes to byelaws). One participant described Council as "*very inward-looking – it doesn't really speak about the student experience, only the Union*." Others felt "*the discussion always comes back to procedure*," even when the topic was meant to be policy focused. Evidence suggests few voices are heard at Council meetings – with a small number of regular members contributing to the discussion. There is a risk that Council is perceived as being too slow to respond to the needs of the student body, which further undermines confidence in ICU to be truly representative of their interests.

"I sat through three hours and didn't say a word. Then never came back." – Student Councillor
"*It's all about form, not function."* – Council Chair

A recent Council meeting to discuss the initial findings from the Democracy Review evidenced that there is benefit to Council members having the opportunity to consider, shape, and develop policy in small groups – which ensures every perspective shapes the outcome.

Options considered for an alternative Union Council model

To understand possible alternatives to the current model, a desktop analysis of Russell Group students' union democratic models was undertaken. Russell Group SUs were considered owing to the size, nature of University governance structures, and parallels in the kinds of issues students face. The analysis is given below:

Model of decision making	Union Examples	Opportunities	Challenges	Recommended?
Union Council	Bristol Cambridge Durham Edinburgh Imperial Newcastle Nottingham QUB Southampton York	This model is established and well understood by ICU members. A cross-section of reps ensures diversity of thought and opinion on policy.	This model lacks innovation – it is no different to current model so would experience similar challenges to those currently outlined in the findings. It also lacks accessibility/is not considered inclusive (even if open to all students).	No
All student meetings/all student votes	Birmingham Warwick	This model was considered to be inclusive as it engages the whole student body in the decision-making process. The students who responded to the Counterculture survey suggested they wanted more opportunities to vote directly on policy.	A lack of engagement in these votes could impact the legitimacy of student democracy. ICU may struggle to reach quoracy, as demonstrated in previous referenda endeavours. This method does not solve the issue of students inputting into policy development.	No
Jury-style student assemblies (students picked at random to make policy).	Leeds Liverpool LSE	Students would be selected randomly, to enable any student to have a final say on decision-making and avoids an echo-chamber.	No appetite for this style of decision making at Imperial (CounterCulture survey data suggests only 27% of students who answered would feel comfortable with a student jury). Given the lack of student support for this idea, and Imperial-specific workload issues, there are concerns around ensuring students turn up and would need incentivising.	No

			This method does not solve the issue of students inputting into policy development.	
Themed policy-making forums/committees + overarching decision-making body	Cardiff KCL *Leeds (jury-style decision making body)** Sheffield** UCL *Leeds theme their forums around Union change, University Change, Local Change. ** Sheffield theme them annually around different topics.	Students have clear, accessible routes to engage with democracy via their interest/area they want to see change. Smaller forums enable better deliberative policymaking, with better capacity for discussion and workshop-style inputs. An overarching body (i.e., Union Council) is able to provide scrutiny and final oversight to avoid students with similar mindsets voting in the same way.	This structure is potentially more bureaucratic and would need to be configured well to ensure Council have a clear body of business to make coherent and timely decisions.	Yes

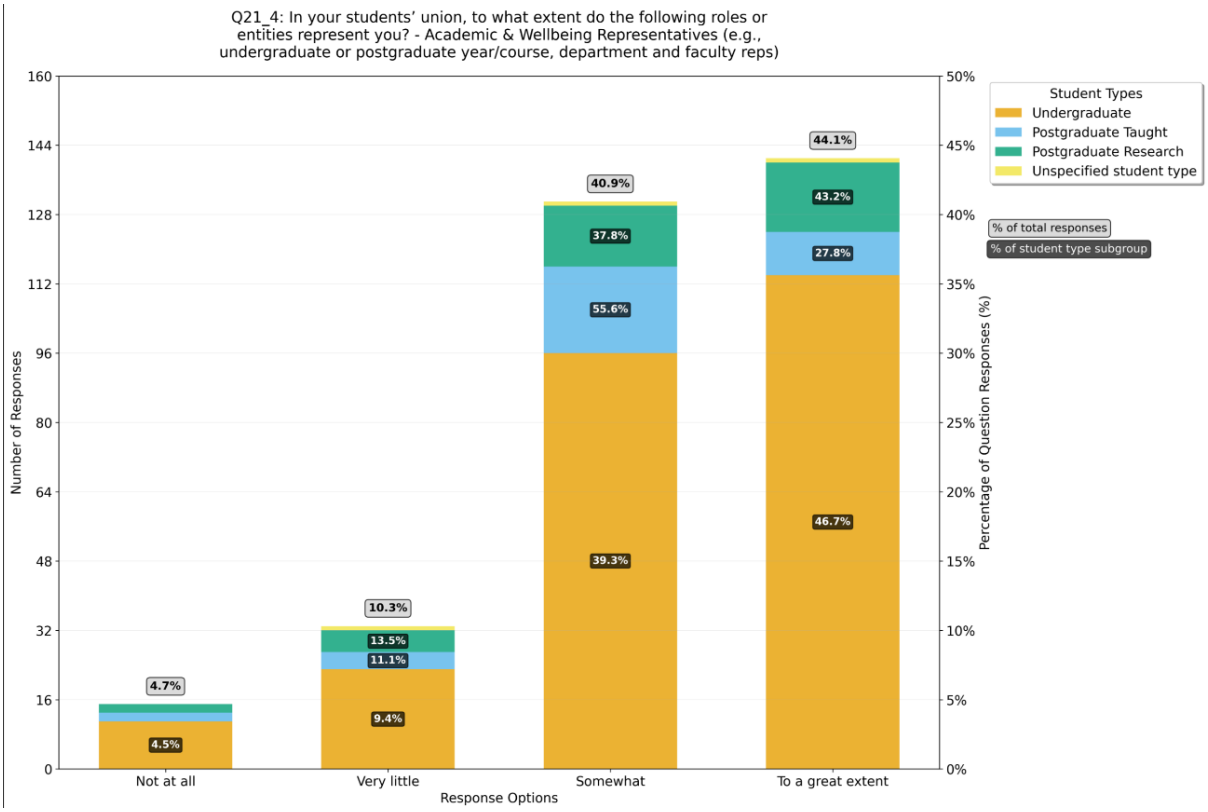
Accountability

As well as Officer Trustee accountability, addressed in theme two, there is wider concern about representative accountability. There is limited opportunity for students to hold reps, particularly those who are elected by campus-wide ballot, to account for their work. It is suggested that Council not only considers how it holds officers to account for their work, but all reps – within the theory, principles and process outlined in this report.

Taught/Research Academic Rep Forums and Community and Welfare Forum

The academic (TARF/RARF) and welfare representative (CWF) forums occur termly and have varied attendance. The success of the format of these meetings was found to be mixed. For example, there was more impact in a small group or 1:1 basis with academic reps, versus better forum participation from Wellbeing reps.

To ensure these forums are contributing to policy setting, ICU should look to frame these around rep concerns or ideas to improve student engagement and wider representation. This is particularly important as Counterculture's student survey data highlighted strong trust in academic representatives, with 44% of students reporting that these roles represent them to a great extent.



"They're the only people I've ever seen actually bring my feedback to someone who listened." – Undergraduate Engineering student

Furthermore, there are opportunities to link these forums more closely to the Union council agenda. While forums provide a structured space for reflection, reps reported that the value of these sessions often depended on how well they were facilitated and whether actions were followed up. Where academic reps were offered focused, faculty-specific time in smaller formats, engagement increased. In contrast, wellbeing reps appeared more motivated by peer connection and shared learning.

In Council responses and interviews, several reps noted that forums felt disconnected from Union influence unless there was a clear pathway into decision-making. Integrating outcomes from these forums into Council papers, or enabling reps to submit motions, could enhance their status and create a tangible link between representative roles and Union policy.
Reps also expressed a desire for more clarity about the forum purpose – whether advisory, deliberative, or decision-making – and greater continuity of discussion across terms. Attendance could be supported by stronger integration into rep training, standing meeting schedules, and role expectations.

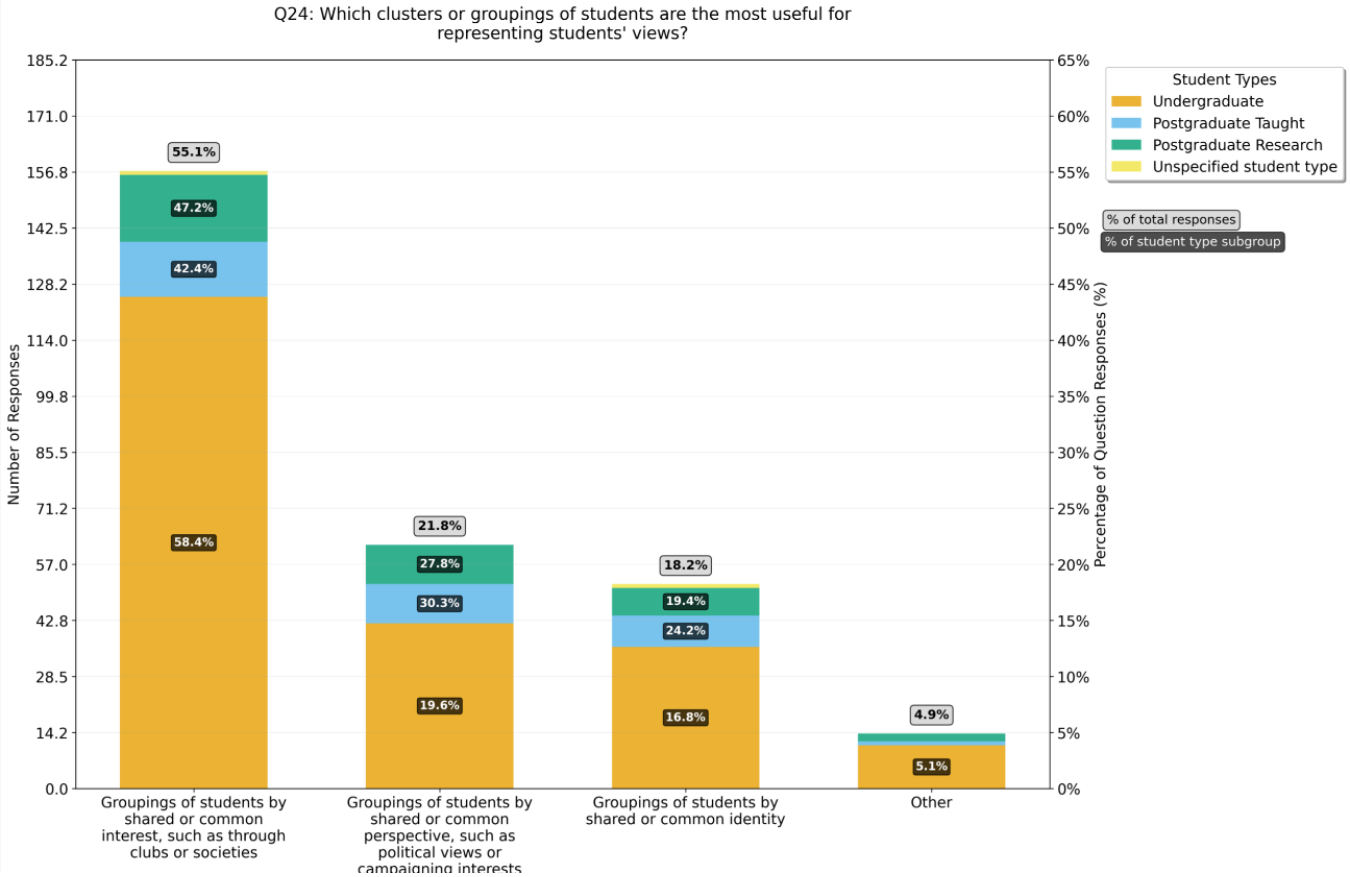
Club and Societies Project Board (CSPB)
CSPB holds policy-setting powers and oversees the development of student-led activities. Even in the current structure, it is considered a successful representational and developmental space for clubs and societies—rather than a gatekeeper for processes. Management Group Chairs and CU leaders are engaged in decisions about club operations, funding, and development.
However, if the remit of the DPCS changes, this could be expanded to wider input into other student activities.

Policy development
The formation and passing of policy currently sits with the Union Council and some committees (e.g., CSPB). Council members are asked for papers ahead of meetings which follow a specific

structure. For students unfamiliar with Council processes, they are reliant on the Chair to support them through structuring and shaping the paper, so it is well placed to be voted on by Council.

Some students, through the interviews, expressed interest in engaging with policy if the processes were easier to access or understand, such as through themed policy calls, deliberative forums, or open agenda-setting. To deliver genuine 'bottom up' substantive representation, any student should be able to come to the Union with an issue, rather than a fully formed document, and workshop this into a policy with interested and data-informed individuals. Therefore, it is proposed that a committee structure is created to facilitate that space, and Council can scrutinise the proposed policy once it has been workshopped.

To structure the committees, it is helpful to theme them. The suggested themes have been informed both by the Counterculture student survey data, which shows that 55% of surveyed students consider the most useful grouping of students to represent views to be by shared or common interest, as well as current groupings of reps.



To support this structure to be effective, the RGSU analysis bore two other initiatives detailed below.

Other innovations	Union Example	Opportunities	Challenges
Online form to submit ideas or issues to the wider student body (e.g., an SUggestion form).	LSE Manchester Newcastle UCL	This creates an easily accessible platform for any student to submit an idea. It makes policy ideas easy to signpost to the correct committee/relevant staff	Requires administration and clear communication with the student(s) who

		team. Collating ideas enables ICU to see trends/patterns which could feed into wider advocacy and influencing strategies.	submitted a proposal.
Democracy working group which supports the signposting of student-submitted ideas, and the creation of an idea into a motion.	Liverpool LSE	Creating a working group is less burdensome for Council chair and the student to have to do this.	More staff input and resource

Recommendations

The review presents four recommendations:

	Recommendation	Operational delivery	Impact	Relationship to theory	Relationship to principles	Relationship to process
1	Replace existing committees and fora with four committees: ▪ Activities committee (replaces CSPB) ▪ Academic committee ▪ Constituent Union Presidents committee ▪ Liberation and Wellbeing committee.	Relevant Officer Trustees will chair the committees. The whole Council will meet a minimum of once per term, and chairing this overarching committee remains the responsibility of Council Chair as 'Speaker of the house'. The committees precede the Council meetings, where any student can contribute with an idea or a problem. A report on the business of the committee (including officer work) will be scrutinised at	This provides clearer purpose and visibility. It embeds student input through forum approach. It promotes productive, collaborative discussion, while maintaining timely influence and trusted existing structures.	Formalistic representation Symbolic representation Descriptive representation Substantive representation	Integrity Inclusivity Innovation Simplicity and efficiency Impact and accountability	Opportunity led Data driven

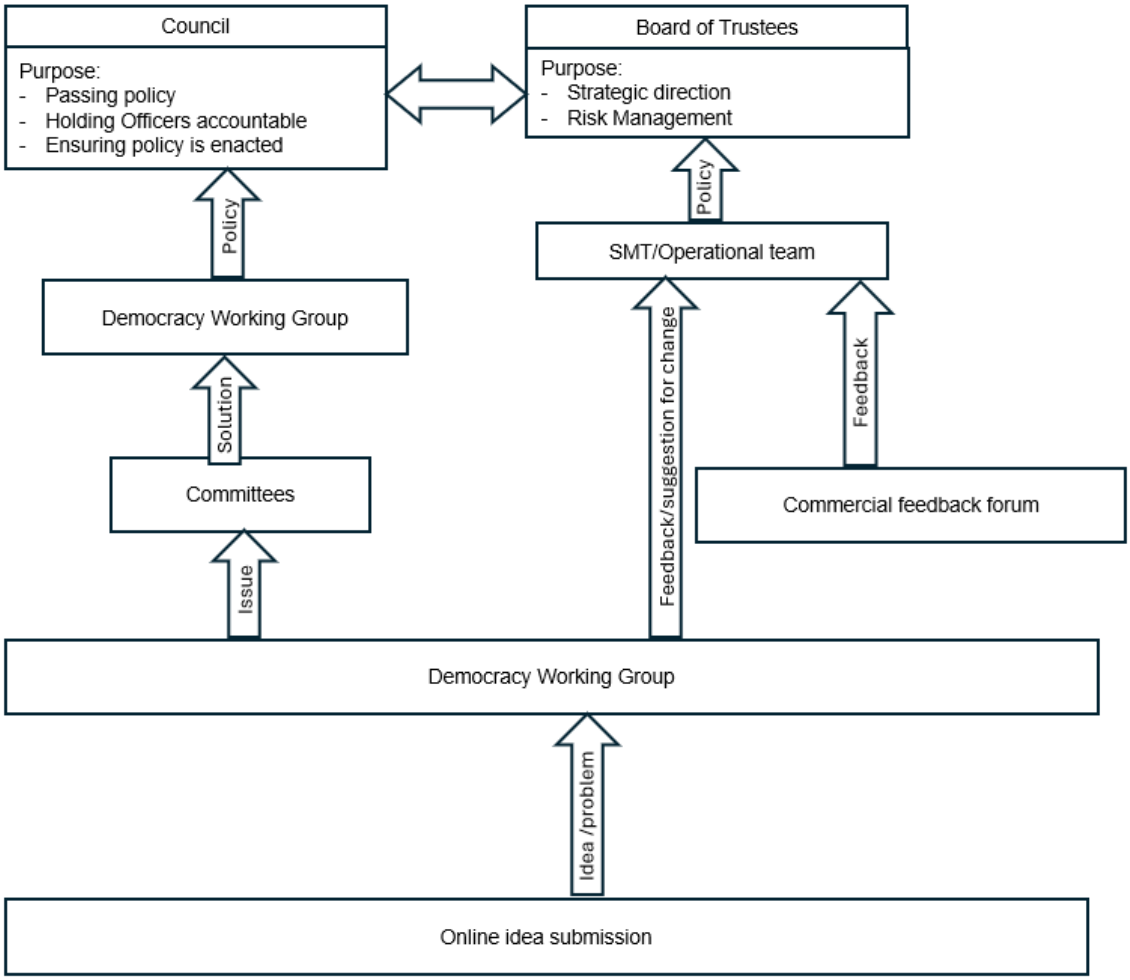
		Council meetings. Committees will be less formal than current Council structure – any student can come with an issue or idea rather than a paper. Each committee will receive a budget to provide refreshments for student reps who attend the committees. A working group will be established over the Summer, convened by the Council Chair, to create a timetable of committees and the structure to ensure it develops viable policy. Similarly, it will focus on how to demonstrate Officer and representative accountability to the wider student body				
2	Create an online form for students to submit ideas to ICU.	ICU will create an online form for students to submit ideas to the Union. Ideas will either be given directly to relevant teams, or, if a policy suggestion,	This provides a clear and accessible opportunity for students to submit an idea to the Union without needing to have a fully-	Substantive representation	Inclusivity Innovation Simplicity and efficiency Impact and accountability	Data Driven

		directed to a relevant committee to workshop. This will then be turned into a policy and voted on either by the committee or by Council.	formed policy.			
3	Establish a Democracy working group.	A neutral democracy committee will be established to ensure that ideas are signposted to the right place, and that the idea becomes a formal motion.	This takes part of the burden off both the student proposer and the Council Chair, whilst ensuring Council and the Committees have a structured motion to vote on.	Substantive representation	Innovation Simplicity and efficiency	N/A
4	Develop a communication plan for Council and its sub-committees.	ICU will develop a communication plan for Council, reviewed by the Council Chair, and its committees to ensure students understand, and can access, decision making. The plan will consider how it communicates the contents of the meeting, the decisions made, and the impact of this work, as well as representative accountability. The plan will come to Union	Students understand and can access ICU decision making structures.	Formalistic representation Substantive representation	Inclusivity Innovation Impact and Accountability	Data Driven

		Council for final approval.				

Committee structure and remit

The committees will act as policy development forums – acting as the intersection between the 'opportunity led' and 'data driven' methods of influence – and seeking to satisfy student desire for direct input into democracy and make decision by consensus. Remits of these committees will be specialised and clear to ensure that those who hold relevant positions or have particular interest in a policy area will be able to influence discussions. They will be chaired by the relevant Deputy President and/or president. The suggested structure is demonstrated below:



Any student can and will be actively encouraged to attend these committees, but a formal membership is necessary to ensure the voices of a multiplicity of students is incorporated. Membership of these committees would need to be established through the summer working group, as well as a procedure for removing representatives who do not participate, but a draft membership and example topic lists are articulated below:

Academic committee*	**Activities committee**	**CU presidents committee**	**Liberation and Wellbeing committee**
Example topics: - Faculty/departmental issues	**Example topics:** - Activities process feedback	**Example topics:** - University-wide concerns	**Example topics:** - Wellbeing services

- Learning resources, space and facilities (e.g., IT, library space, study space) - Assessment and feedback - NSS/PRES/PTES survey results - Graduation - Research conditions	- Club and society budgeting - Activities funding - Activities-led events - Volunteering - Club and society reward and recognition	- Commercial activity - Sustainability	- Mental and physical health - Liberation issues - Social justice and student rights - Housing and accommodation
Chaired by: DPE	Chaired by: DPA	Chaired by: President	Chaired by: DPW
Voting Members: - Department reps - Academic CU reps - PG CU reps*	Voting Members: - Management group committee members - CU Presidents and activities representatives	Voting Members: - CU committee presidents	Voting Members: - Liberation and community network members - Wellbeing department reps - Wellbeing CU reps
Invited Members (to observe and participate): - Academic year reps - Academic society presidents	Invited Members (to observe and participate): - Union club and society presidents	Invited Members (to observe and participate): - CU committee members	Invited Members (to observe and participate: - Wellbeing year reps - Relevant society Presidents
All Union members receive an open invitation (advertised on What's On Pages)	All Union members receive an open invitation (advertised on What's On Pages)	All Union members receive an open invitation (advertised on What's On Pages)	All Union members receive an open invitation (advertised on What's On Pages)

* The final name of these (committee/forum/policy zone) will be consulted on with the wider student body to ensure the name is accessible to all students.
** This is contingent upon the creation of PG CU reps.
This structure was reinforced by feedback from Union Council, where committees of council were received positively. Feedback included: *'I think subcommittees would be a good idea, like CSPB but for other areas'* and *'Among the three options, we thought consolidate council or using subgroups would be good ideas*.'

Council remit

Council will continue to construct agenda and pass items of business. However, instead of focussing on procedural items or operational concerns, they will adopt the following approach:

- Set priorities for the committee to discuss during the year
- Scrutinise and pass policy formed at committee level
- Scrutinise committee reports and officer output

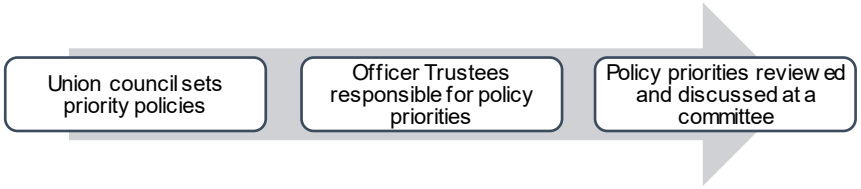
An elected Council Chair will chair the Council. Functionally, this role will continue to be an impartial 'speaker of the house' and be independent in all proceedings.[12] The intention behind this new model of council representation is to engender both a data driven and opportunity led approach to advocacy and influence.

[12] Imperial College Union, *Byelaw F - Officers of the Union* (2023)

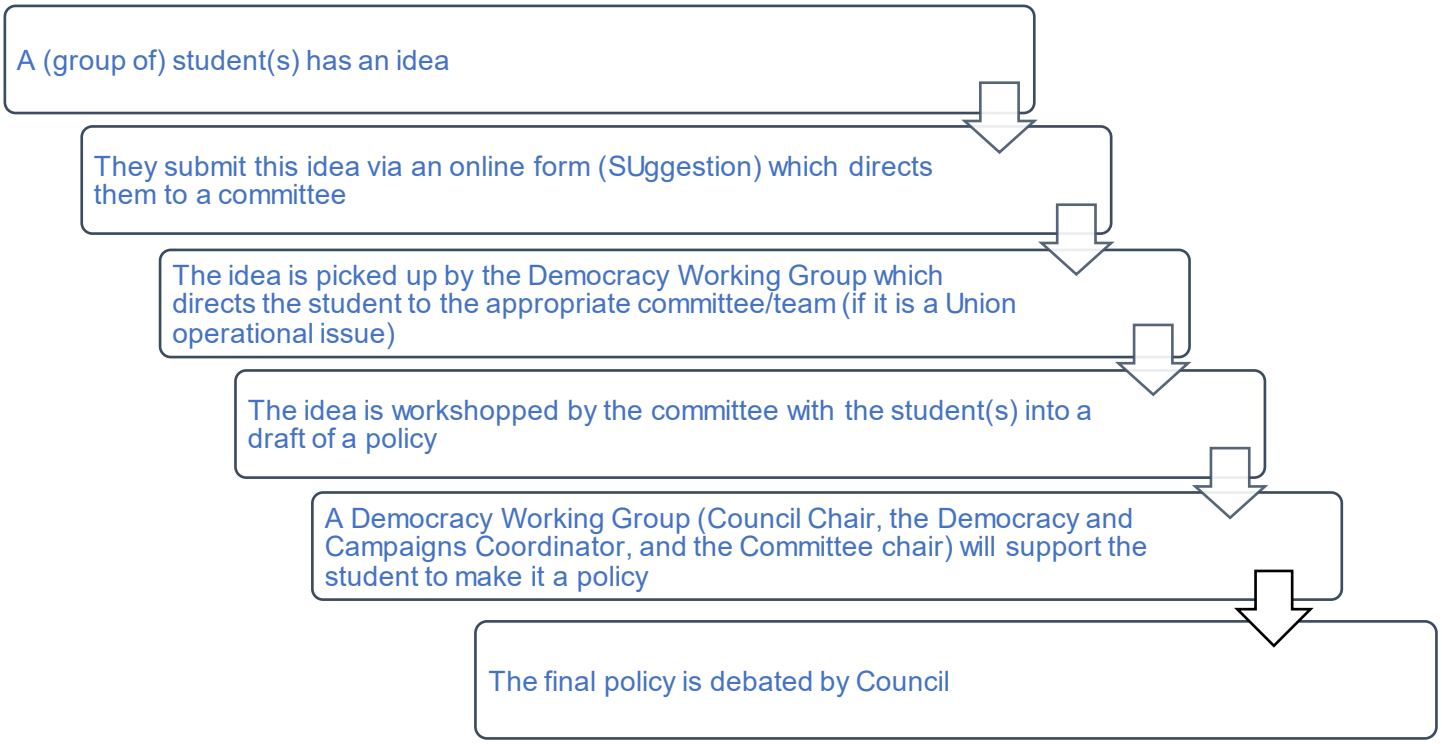
Data driven:



Opportunity led:



Policy development journey

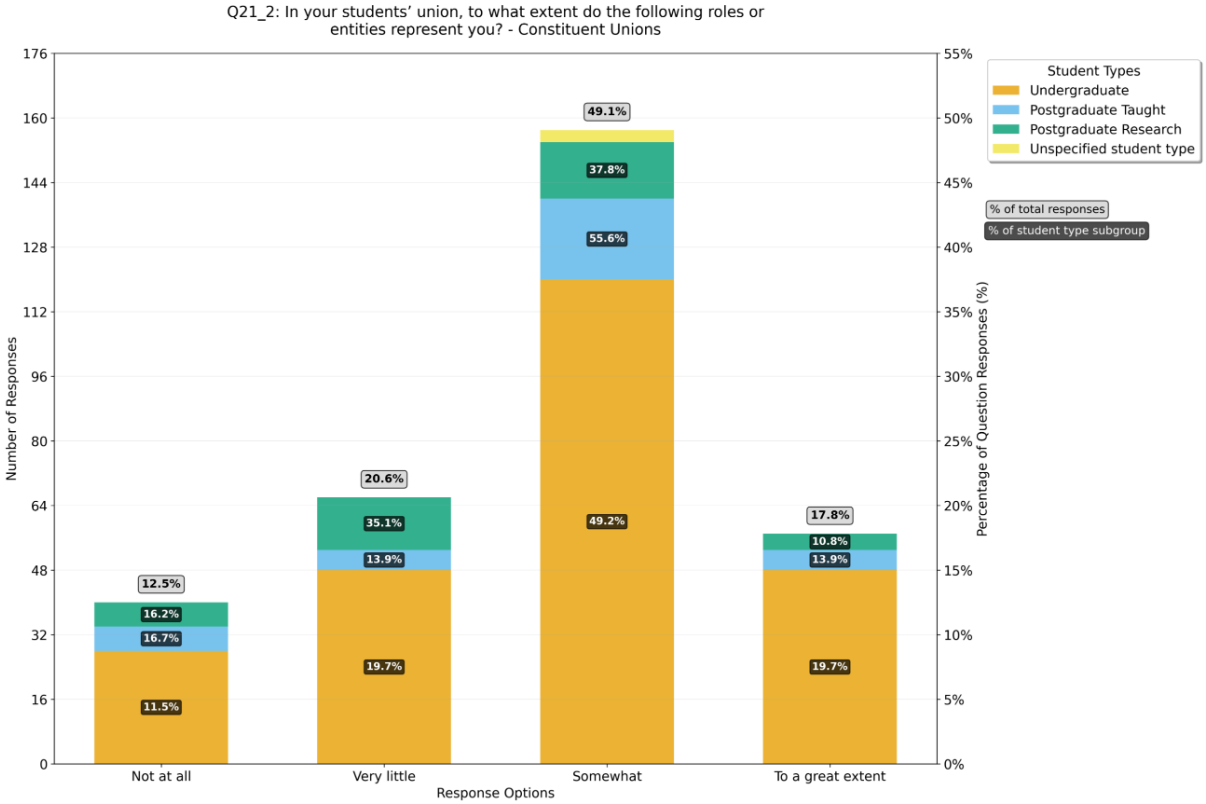


Theme five: Constituent Unions

Findings

The five CUs (City and Guilds College Union, Imperial College School of Medicine Students' Union, Royal College of Science Union Royal School of Mines Union, and Silwood Park Union) are an integral part of ICU's governance, providing focused representation for specific faculties and communities. They were developed as a response to Imperial merging several existing STEM colleges together to create the over-arching College. In 2025, they still play a vital role in tailoring advocacy and engagement to local needs, but their relationship with ICU is marked by both strengths and challenges.

Counterculture's student survey results show that 49% of students view CUs as "somewhat representative" and 18% say they represent them "to a great extent" – a better rating than Officer Trustees.



First, the Business School – the most recent faculty to be established by Imperial in 2003 and introduced undergraduate courses in 2023 – does not operate under the same structure as the other three faculties. This is largely as the Imperial Business School (ICBS) has developed its own representative function (Dean's Student Advisory Council) which does not correlate with ICU structures owing to its lack of elected roles. This creates challenges for ICU in representing the needs and interests of Business School students because parallel representative roles are frequently unfilled. A democratic structure should include thinking around how to co-develop a model with the Business School faculty that has parity with the commonly used CU model across other faculties, so they may benefit from that representation.

Unlike the other CU presidents, the Medical School funds a full-time, sabbatical officer role as president which operates with significant autonomy – both physically (the role is based outside the students' union offices) and operationally (their work is centred around the medical students and their experience).

"They get stuff done – that's the difference. We actually see the outcomes." – Medical student
And: *"It's odd that they're outside everything but also more effective."* – University staff stakeholder

This role is completely funded outside of the block grant but enjoy aspects of the support ICU give to deliver their work and focus their development. They are not a member of the trustee board. Notably, undergraduate medical students frequently rank their experience with their students' union highest above all other departments in the National Student Survey (NSS). Although other faculties may not be able to fund a full-time president, there is clear benefit in ICU ensuring other CU presidents are given high-quality support to deliver on their objectives and build community within their faculty.

PG students make up around c.48% of Imperial's student population. As aforementioned in this report, postgraduate students are not holistically represented by ICU democratic structures. Currently, the Union elects a Postgraduate Research and Taught Chair, as well as four faculty-based Academic and Welfare Officers. These roles are often uncontested or left unfilled, and the structure sits outside of the CUs. This is because the CUs are technically undergraduate (UG)-facing and do not formally represent PGs within their faculty. However, in practice, some engage with PGs informally or through events and shared initiatives. This creates inconsistency, with some CUs building productive postgraduate links and others having minimal interaction. Several CU officers noted they "*weren't sure what postgrads wanted from us*," and *"PGs don't really see themselves in our CU model. That's a problem."* while PG students said they "*didn't even know the CU was meant for them."* When asked "To which Imperial constituent union do you belong?", 33.3% and 63.6% of PGR and PGT students, respectively, said "I'm not sure". RCSU has recently introduced a postgraduate officer onto their committee, but the impact of this change has not yet been fully understood. Feedback from Union Council (on the Padlet) suggested that a way to solve this concern could be to include a PG rep on every CU to ensure PG students would feel the benefits of this representation as well as feeling part of their wider faculty community.

These issues speak to overarching problems around disparity, inconsistent integration with the wider ICU model, and a lack of clear direction or support. Although their distinct and historical cultures do create a sense of community pride and belonging, their collective advocacy power is weakened, alongside their relationship and trust in ICU as an umbrella body.

"We don't know where we stand with ICU. Sometimes it's collaboration, sometimes it's conflict." – CU Leader

ICU should take a greater role in uplifting student leaders, facilitating their development based on their needs and data, and enhancing their community-building activity. This may be achieved through formalised collaboration, shared terms and relationships built between likeminded roles, resource sharing and/or joint campaigns. Council feedback called for clearer expectations between ICU and CUs, especially around where collaboration should happen versus where autonomy is valued.

<u>Recommendations</u>
The review proposes four recommendations:

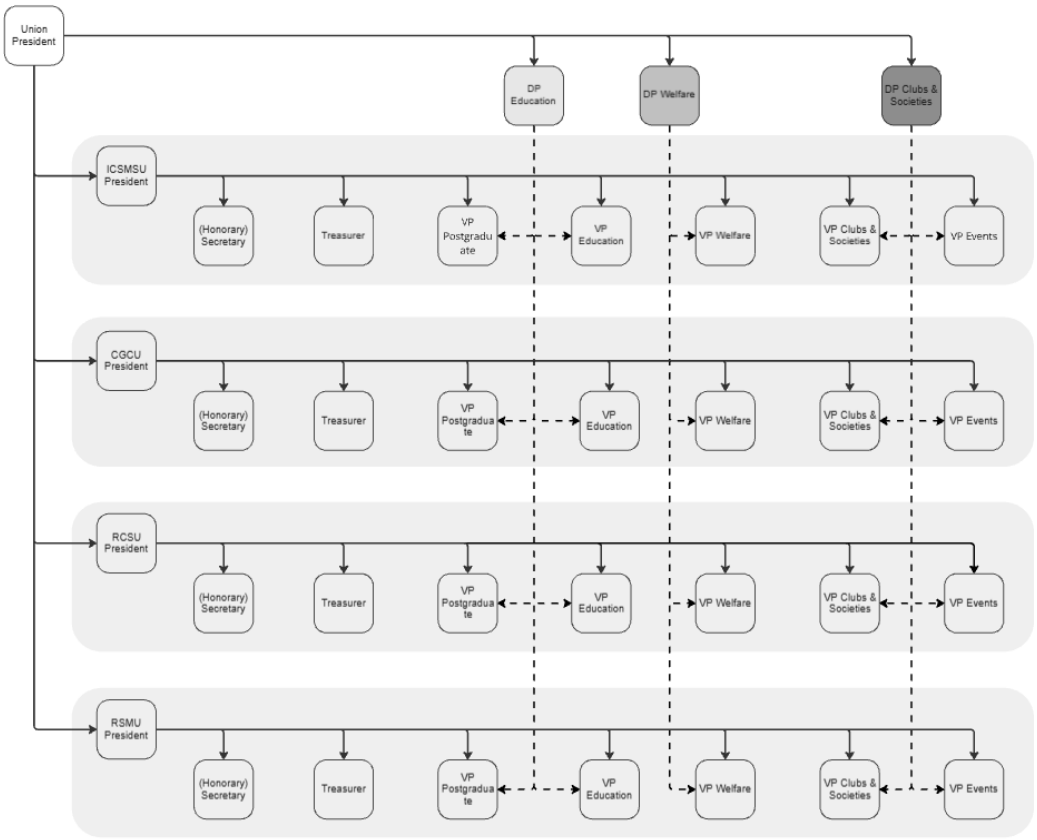
	Recommendation	**Operational delivery**	**Impact**	**Relationship to theory**	**Relationship to principles**	**Relationship to process**
1	Co-develop partnership agreements between ICU and CUs.	Partnership agreements will set out joint and individual	This will lead to enhanced activity on both sides, as well as assuring	Formalistic representation Symbolic representation	Integrity Simplicity and efficiency	Opportunity led Data driven

		priorities and objectives to create a shared understanding. They will outline expected activities and support available from ICU, tailored to the needs of the CU. They will also include commitments to inclusive representation and community development.	efforts to gain wider scale representation. Fundamentally, it also ensures ICU can better support CU activity.	Descriptive representation Substantive representation	Impact and accountability	
2	Create and implement a CU officer development programme.	ICU will provide tailored development and support for CU officers on governance, leadership, planning, peer-support, and coaching They will also receive specific support on how to respond to, or represent, PG issues in their faculties.	CUs will be trained by ICU, leading to impactful activity and development opportunities for student leaders as well as a consistent approach for students at faculty level.	Substantive representation	Integrity Inclusivity Impact and accountability	Data driven
3	Ensure CUs actively represent and cater for PG students.	The approach to representing PGs is outlined in partnership	PGs have equitable representation and communities to UGs, and their	Descriptive representation Substantive representation	Inclusivity Simplicity and efficiency	

		agreements. Each CU will have an elected postgraduate officer/VP PGs on their committee (name dependent on CU).* These roles will deliver PG specific activity, with support of ICU, and in collaboration with ECRI. This replaces the current PG Rep Committee structure (AWOs/Rep Chairs).	representation structures are assimilated into existing ICU ones.		Impact and accountability	
4	Introduce ICU-led faculty level representation and community-building between ICU and the Business School.	This new structure would need to be co-developed with the ICBS but would seek to ensure there is a parallel structure to the DSAC for both UG and PG students.	This provides an equitable experience for ICBS students and ensures UG ICBS representation is truly assimilated into ICU structures.	Descriptive representation Substantive representation	Inclusivity Simplicity and Efficiency Impact and Accountability	Data driven

* Particular consultation on this issue has been extended to the Faculty of Medicine (including staff), given the current remit of the ICSMSU and how it is funded. There is recognition that there may need to be some flexibility, and ICU will work with ICSMSU and its faculty to ensure it reaches a mutually beneficial solution.

Postgraduate representation embedded into CUs



The above diagram represents an example of how this may be operationalised. Feedback from CUs during a recent CSPB suggested that the CUs were broadly happy with embedding PG representation into the CU structure but advocated for flexibility around the naming of these roles in line with their distinct culture and tradition. The review recommends that this is articulated as part of the partnership agreement, so that there is parity but distinction.

Theme six: Liberation and Community approach

Findings

Currently, ICU elects nine LCOs in the Leadership Election Cycle, including:

- Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Officer
- Disabilities Officer
- Ethics and Environment Officer
- Interfaith Officer
- International Officer
- Gender Equality Officer
- Mental Health Officer
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer + (LGBTQ+) Officer
- Working Class Officer

Underneath each role is a network of other volunteers, who support the work of the LCO to deliver campaigns, events, and advocacy for their wider communities. These roles are elected in the Autumn series of elections.

Engagement from under-represented groups in ICU's democratic and representative structures is low and inconsistent. LCOs are expected to carry out significant representational and advocacy work, often with little structural or peer support. The extent to which these officers can engage in policy development, consultation, or influencing varies widely across roles and academic years. Many volunteers have taken on their work in isolation, with limited access to continuity, institutional memory, or cross-role collaboration. Officers operate comfortably in the space of event delivery, because other aspects to their role require an active community to engage with.

"Sometimes it feels like they're doing everything alone – they don't have a team." – ICU staff member

"I felt like a figurehead, not someone who was expected to do anything." – Former LCO.

There are also broader concerns about the sustainability of relying on voluntary officers from marginalised groups to lead change without capacity or a supportive infrastructure. These challenges intersect with issues of emotional labour, burnout, and gaps in role clarity and accountability.

The role is also challenging to articulate to the wider electorate. This is in part because of the varying expectations and barriers to communicating their effectiveness when in post. Another key reason for this is the elections for the network and the officer role are separated, so it is unclear that there is a mandate, or a support system, embedded into the ICU structures. Equally, the network roles are also challenging to fill owing to a lack of clarity with how they intersect with the officer. A consequence of this (reported by the officers themselves) is the difficulty in recruiting successors or building lasting community engagement – which means work is at risk of restarting every year. By reframing this so the network is elected first, there is a cohort to deliver community building activity rather than just a single officer.

A key factor to the success of these initiatives is the operationalisation of theme three. Excellent community organising training which networks will be required to attend so they can genuinely understand the multiplicity of student viewpoints which their community hold, will empower them and others to make changes on their behalf.

Recommendations

The review proposes three recommendations:

	Recommendation	Operational delivery	Impact	Relationship to theory	Relationship to principles	Relationship to process
1	Elect the LCNs before the officer.	The whole LCN will be elected by campus-wide ballot as part of the Leadership Elections. Instead of proscribed positions, these will be open and reflect the needs of the network. Elected network then chooses an LCO delegate via an AGM, who acts as a spokesperson for the network, and is the representative to meetings. Networks can host open meetings, shape their own structures, and develop shared priorities.	This places less emphasis and responsibility on one individual, and creates a sustainable group of student volunteers, and encourages continuity.	Formalistic representation Symbolic representation Descriptive representation Substantive representation	Inclusivity Innovation Impact and accountability	Data driven
2	Enable substitution of representation.	When the LCO delegate is unavailable to attend Union and University meetings, other network members can attend in place.	This increases flexibility and accessibility and ensures that the entire network is active and visible.	Descriptive representation Symbolic representation	Inclusivity Impact and accountability	Data driven
3	Clarify the eligibility and accountability of the networks.	The delegated LCO spokesperson sits as a formal member of the Liberation and Wellbeing Committee Networks (with	This provides a formalised layer of accountability for the networks.	Formalistic representation Symbolic representation Descriptive representation	Integrity Impact and accountability	Data driven

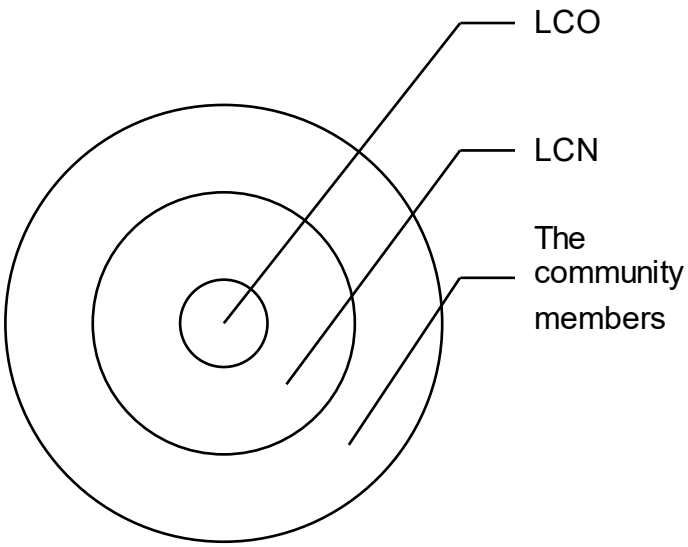
		the LCO as spokesperson) provide a report termly to the Liberation and Wellbeing committee.				

Approach to liberation – a 'community first' model

The approach to liberation and community representation will change to a 'community first' model. This places communities in the best position to define their leadership, discuss the issues most pertinent to them and suggest action, as well as to build an inclusive community with support from ICU. They are empowered to do this through excellent community organising training articulated in theme three.

In practice, this will mean each community will elect its network committee each year during the Leadership Election cycle. The network will elect their lead representative – the LCO.

This model of community building is represented below:



Responsibilities of the Networks and the Designated Officer

Although the review recommends that network roles remain nondescript to enable flexibility and autonomy of the networks, they should seek to act in the following ways:

- Organise students with similar identities, experiences or interests to articulate issues they face as a community
- Seek to influence the Union, the University and beyond on their community's behalf
- Organise campaigns, projects, and activity to bring together the community and to bring awareness of the issues that they face.

The role of the LCO is to:

- Represent the community at formal Union or University meetings
- Convene the report written by the network and act as the spokesperson on the Liberation and Wellbeing committee.

Theme seven: Governance

Findings

As established at the very beginning of this review, ICU governance and democratic structures have developed over a period of time – some aspects dating back to the early 1900s when the University was established. As the University has evolved, the governing articles have been built upon but not fundamentally changed.

Following a review of the governing documents, Counterculture found that some governance processes – particularly around elections, complaints, and byelaws – are overly complex and not consistently understood or applied. Stakeholders noted that attempts to update the Major and Minor Elections Byelaws were challenged on the grounds of removing accountability, despite intentions to modernise and clarify.

Similarly, some election processes seen as outdated. While 25% of students voted in the 2025 leadership elections, this drops significantly for Autumn and Summer.

	Autumn election turnout	Summer election turnout	Leadership election turnout
2022	17%	5%	36%
2023	15%	3%	23%
2024	16%	2%	22%
2025	N/A	N/A	25%

Three election cycles create additional confusion for student leaders and returning officers, and cause election fatigue amongst the wider student body. Only 17% of students surveyed in Imperials Student Experience Survey strongly agree that elections are accessible and inclusive.[13]

This complexity contributes to frustration among those engaging with ICU's democratic systems, creates barriers to participation, and risks undermining confidence in institutional processes. It also absorbs disproportionate staff and officer time to interpret, explain, or workaround procedural gaps.

There is also limited clarity over which students are full members of ICU and what rights are afforded to associate members. This includes students on placements, intercalating medical students, visiting researchers, and alumni participating in Clubs, Societies and Projects. There is uncertainty around whether associate members are eligible to vote or stand in elections, access certain services, or take part in democratic processes. This inconsistency creates confusion and may undermine the fairness and transparency of ICU's democratic and governance structures. When comparing to sector peers and other membership organisations, most UK institutions would not allow associate members to vote and would only be in officer positions for specific associate roles (e.g., alumni reps).

Recommendations

The review proposes three recommendations to these problems:

	Recommendation	Operational delivery	Impact	Relationship to theory	Relationship to principles	Relationship to process
1	Clarify the rights of associate members.	The Membership Services Director should	This ensures alignment with sector, and creates a	Formalistic representation	Integrity	N/A

[13] Imperial, *Student Experience Survey* (2025)

		conduct a full review of its membership categories – leaning on sector practice. Following this, it should define the democratic rights and entitlements of associate members, and all categories and rights to be clearly communicated.	shared understanding amongst staff, students, and associate members.			
2	Modernise the Union byelaws.	The Representation and Governance teams should redraft byelaws in line with democracy review outcomes, ensuring they are plain language and updated in a manner which befits a 2025 and future cohort.	Ensures any changes made are enshrined in the governing documents and provides clarity for students and staff to follow.	Formalistic representation	Integrity Simplicity and efficiency	N/A
3	Simplify the election processes and cease the operation Summer Elections (for leadership positions only).	Remove the Summer Elections cycle for leadership positions, but this will remain in place for CSP positions. If a major position remains unelected, then a by-election can be held. Other unfilled positions can be elected in the Autumn elections cycle. In tandem, ICU	This will improve election accessibility and engagement.	Formalistic representation	Simplicity and efficiency	N/A

		will review all election materials and messaging to ensure succinct, accessible, and clear language.				

Appendix One – Summary of decisions and implementation leads

Thematic Area	#	Recommendation	Implementation lead(s)	By when
1 Organisational Transparency	1.1	Hold Annual General Meetings (AGMs).	ICU SMT Governance and Compliance Manager ICU Representation Team Union President	October 2025
	1.2	Release finance reports and minutes of FAR in a digestible, front-facing format, and a written termly commercial update will be provided to Council.	ICU SMT Governance and Compliance Manager ICU Chair of Finance, Audit and Risk	October 2025
	1.3	Deliver student experience and impact reports.	Representation Team	October 2025
	1.4	Create opportunities for student feedback and input.	ICU Operational Managers	October 2025
	1.5	Hold effectiveness reviews of Council/democratic structures.	ICU working group of student leaders and staff	June 2026
2 Officer Structure	2.1	Change full time officer line management to Managing Director (MD).	MD	July 2025
	2.2	Rename DPCS to Deputy President (Activities).	ICU SMT	July 2025
	2.3	Do not elect a fifth Officer Trustee for AY 25-26.	Returning Officer	N/A
	2.4	Recruit a Postgraduate Coordinator (full-time staff role on a fixed-term basis).	ICU Trustee board (decision makers) Representation Manager (recruiter and manager)	November 2025
	2.5	Consider further the need for a fifth officer portfolio, and what this might look like.	Union Council	January 2026
	2.6	Set up a termly student forum for student-led events within ICU and commercial activity.	Director of Commercial Services	October 2025
	2.7	Reform Officer accountability mechanisms.	Council Chair Representation Manager	October 2025
3 Community Organising	3.1	Introduce a funding pot for volunteers to use to deliver community organising initiatives and events. *	ICU Trustee board (approval) ICU Representation Team (administrators)	August 2025
	3.2	Deliver community organising training for all relevant student reps and volunteers.	ICU Representation Team ICU Activities Team	July 2026
4 Union Council	4.1	Replace existing committees and fora with 4 committees of Council for deliberative matters and policy discussion spaces, with Council meeting at least termly.	Council Chair Representation Team	October 2025

	4.2	Create an online form for students to submit ideas to ICU.	Systems Team Democracy and Campaigns Coordinator	October 2025
	4.3	Establish a Democracy Working group	Council Chair Democracy and Campaigns Coordinator	July 2025
	4.4	Develop a communication plan for Council and its sub-committees.	Council Chair Representation Manager	October 2025
5 Constituent Unions	5.1	Co-develop partnership agreements between ICU and CUs.	Director of Membership Services Representation Manager CU Presidents	December 2025
	5.2	Create and implement a CU officer development programme.	Representation Manager Activities Managers	October 2025
	5.3	Ensure CUs actively represent and cater for PG students.	Representation Manager	July 2026
	5.4	Introduce ICU-led faculty level representation and community-building between ICU and the Business School.	Representation Manager	July 2026
6 Liberation & Community	6.1	Elect the LCNs before the officer.	Returning Officer Chair of Governance and Membership Representation Manager	February 2026
	6.2	Enable substitution of representation.	Union Council (agree) Democracy and Campaigns Coordinator (inform)	July 2026
	6.3	Clarify the eligibility and accountability of the networks.	Democracy and Campaigns Coordinator (inform)	July 2026
7 Governance	7.1	ICU reviews the rights of associate members	Director of Membership Services	October 2025
	7.2	ICU modernises its Bye Laws in line with democracy review outcomes	Council Chair Governance and Membership Committee Director of Membership Services Governance and Compliance Manager Representation Manager	October 2025
	7.3	Simplify the election processes and cease the operation Summer Elections (for leadership positions only).	Governance and Membership Committee Returning Officer	June 2026