Imperial College Union
Trustee Board / 27 May 2026

External Membership Review & Alumni Engagement Strategy

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Purpose: To update the Board on the proposed External Membership Review, covering all forms of ICU membership held by individuals who are not currently registered Imperial College London students, and to set out, as part of this review, an opportunity to better understand ICU's Life Membership and its potential to form the foundation of a meaningful alumni offer. The Board is asked to note the risks identified, approve the proposed direction of the review, and consider the framing of alumni engagement as a distinct but related opportunity.

Decision(s): To **note, consider & approve**

1. Background and Context

The contextual background in this section draws in part on work undertaken by Clem Jones (Governance & Executive Manager) and is included with thanks.

1.1 Scope of this Review

For clarity, this review considers all forms of ICU membership held by individuals who are **not currently registered students** of Imperial College London, including Ordinary Associate Membership, Life Membership, and Honorary Life Membership.

At the 25 October 2023 Finance, Audit & Risk Committee meeting, it was noted that 'associate membership fees and benefits should be reviewed'. This action was incorporated into briefing for the 2024/25 Democracy Review (led by an external consultant). However, rather than undertaking a review, the final report made the recommendation (7.1) to 'Clarify the rights of associate members.'

A comprehensive review of membership categories is therefore still required. This review must clarify the rights of associate members, assess best practice across the sector, and carefully consider the appropriate rights and obligations for each membership category. In January 2026, students were informed via a democracy review update that a review would be the next step.

This paper outlines the work to date, the key risks identified, and the proposed next steps for the Board's consideration.

1.2 Current Membership Framework

ICU's Constitution places responsibility for defining the eligibility, rights and obligations of associate membership with the Board (Article E9). In December 2021, the Board approved an

Associate Membership Policy to formalise this. The policy sets out that there are three types of Associate Membership.

Membership Type	How Conferred	Who Qualifies
Ordinary Associate Membership	Application required; membership fee may apply. In limited cases may be conferred automatically by the Management Committee.	**Free of charge:** Students of Imperial College on Interruption of Studies; students admitted to Imperial College who have deferred commencement of studies; students of Imperial College intercalating at another HEI; Imperial College graduates within a four-month grace period after conclusion of studies. **Subject to a small administration charge (monthly or annual):** Staff employed by Imperial College London; students of the Royal College of Music, Royal College of Art, or the Medical School of Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. **Subject to a subscription fee (monthly or annual) set by Management Committee:** Students of any Further or Higher Education Establishment over the age of eighteen.
Life Membership	Application required; one-off membership fee set by Management Committee. A defined portion may be allocated to a Club, Society or Project of the applicant's choice.	Any previous Full Member of the Union who held Full Membership for at least one (1) year; or any previous Associate Member of the Union who held Associate Membership for at least two (2) years.
Honorary Life Membership	Bestowed free of charge by simple majority vote of Union Council; or automatically conferred upon recipients of certain Union Awards, including the Union Fellowship and President's Award.	Any individual, regardless of their membership status.

Rights/Entitlements

Under the current policy, all Associate and Life Members are conferred with the right to:

- **Join Clubs and Societies** (subject to payment of the group's membership fee) and participate in the group's activities. In sport, there may be limitations placed on Associate and Life Members competing on behalf of Imperial College
- **Access the Union's bars, spaces and events**

Associate and Life members may **not** participate in ICU's democratic processes, including standing or voting in Union elections (Article E8)

Information available to student groups
Beyond the formal policy, ICU provides guidance to clubs and societies on associate membership. The position as currently communicated to groups as follows:

- Associate Membership costs **£5.00/month**, purchased in person at the Helpdesk with proof of status
- RCA/RCM students pay a reduced **£5.00/year** annual fee
- Associate Members can join groups and participate in their activities
- External individuals acting **purely as instructors** do not need to be members; however, if they participate in general activities, they must become members
- People **outside the eligible categories** are explicitly excluded, as they are not covered by insurance and could take resources from students

1.3 Communication Gap
Information on associate membership is not easy to find on ICU's website. The policy exists within ICU's policy pages but is not prominently signposted and could be inaccessible to anyone who does not already know where to look. As a result, club and society committees may be making decisions without a complete understanding of the eligibility framework, fee structure, or the rights and limitations that apply to associate members. A clear aim of this review is to ensure that information on associate membership is easy to find, easy to understand, and readily available to any student - covering not only the rights of associate members but also the genuine benefits that associate membership can bring to clubs and societies when managed well.

1.4 Current Position
Disclaimer: The data presented in this paper represents the best currently available picture of associate membership, but it should be noted that comprehensive, readily accessible data in this area does not yet exist, so analysis is limited. The figures presented have required cross-referencing across multiple sources and should be treated with a degree of caution, as full accuracy cannot be guaranteed. In the longer term, improvements to data collection and recording processes will be needed to produce a more complete and reliable picture. The analysis in this paper reflects what can reasonably be drawn from the data currently available to us.

Membership Types by Year, 2020-2026

Figures reflect associate memberships active as of January 2026.

Academic Year	Student	Associate	Lifetime Associate
2020-21	30,584	111	6,033
2021-22	32,841	1,047	6,309
2022-23	33,354	2,084	6,585
2023-24	33,613	2,316	6,903
2024-25	33,878	2,399	7,185
2025-26 *(mid-year)*	33,245	713	7,302

Overall membership across all categories has grown steadily over the past five years. Student membership has risen consistently, reaching approximately 33,000–34,000 annually. Lifetime membership has grown every year without exception, from 6,033 in 2020-21 to 7,302 in 2025-26. It would be useful to further understand how many associate members have transitioned from associate to lifetime membership.

Current Year Snapshot, Associate Members by Institution (2025-2026)

Figures reflect associate memberships active as of January 2026.

Rank	Institution	Members	% of Total
1	FIE	235	32.6%
2	Boston University	177	24.6%
3	Royal College of Music	87	12.1%
4	AIFS	64	8.9%
5	Royal College of Art	60	8.3%
6	Imperial College Staff	30	4.2%
7	UCL	12	1.7%
8	Kings	5	0.7%
9	King's College London	4	0.6%
10	Royal Veterinary College	3	0.4%
10	University of West London	3	0.4%
—	All other institutions (×22)	22	3.1%
	Total	**720**	**100%**

The top 5 institutions account for 86.5% of all current associate members, and all top 4 non-staff partners are US study-abroad providers or specialist arts colleges, reflecting the bulk-purchase model that dominates this membership category.

2. Key Risk Areas Identified in Initial Review

The following risks have been identified as the most pressing for ICU at this stage, informed by a combination of sector insight – including reviews conducted by other unions and informal conversations with peers – as well as ICU's own experience to date. This is not intended to be an exhaustive assessment; further evidence gathering through the review process may identify additional areas of concern.

2.1 Charitable Purpose

As a registered charity, ICU's resources must be employed in the best interests of its beneficiaries, current Imperial students. A significant amount of staff time and resource is spent on associate members, and we need to ensure we justify why this is beneficial for current student members.

Key principles to embed in the review:

- Associate membership should never deprive a current student of an opportunity or resource
- Staff time spent on associate member issues must be proportionate and justifiable as benefiting students
- Any income from associate membership fees should be reinvested in student-facing activities
- The Trustee Board must be satisfied that the risk/benefit balance is appropriate

2.2 Safeguarding

Associate members do not go through the same identity, background, or criminal conviction checks as registered Imperial students. There is no equivalent cross-institutional information-sharing mechanism for non-students. This risk intersects with the conduct and discipline risk below, in that we are limited when safeguarding concerns are raised through a conduct and discipline process. There is also a risk that our safeguarding policies and procedures do not apply to external members and we may be limited in the support we can offer or signpost towards.

Associate members do not go through the same identity, background, or criminal conviction checks as registered Imperial students, and there is no equivalent cross-institutional information-sharing mechanism for non-Imperial members. This presents a meaningful safeguarding risk that warrants careful consideration.

Whilst our safeguarding duties extend to all members regardless of membership type, non-Imperial student members are not subject to the same university rules, regulations, and support infrastructure as registered Imperial students. This means that both the support available to them and our recourse if concerns arise are materially different.

This raises two important strategic questions:

- Do we want to be responsible for non-Imperial students' issues? Given our limited remit and capacity, there is a strong argument that this falls outside our core duty of care.
- Do we have the capacity to liaise cross-institutionally on non-Imperial student matters? In practice, this is extremely difficult and resource-intensive.

This risk intersects directly with the conduct and discipline risk, in that we are significantly limited in what action we can take when safeguarding concerns are raised through a conduct and discipline process involving a non-Imperial member. We may be constrained in the support we can offer, the signposting available to us, and our ability to investigate or act effectively.

2.3 Conduct & Discipline

Through bye-law H, associate members are subject to the Union's disciplinary process and a range of sanctions, including suspension from student groups or Union facilities, and ultimately revocation of membership. However, a significant gap exists at the most serious end of the disciplinary spectrum. For registered students, ICU can refer serious cases of misconduct to the University which has its own disciplinary jurisdiction and the power to impose far-reaching consequences including suspension or expulsion from the University. This route is not available for associate members, as the University has no jurisdiction over non-students. In the most serious cases, for example, allegations of assault or sexual misconduct, this means that the Union's options are materially more limited, and the consequences available are significantly less severe. This represents a known and significant risk that the review must address.

There is also the fundamental question of charitable purpose. The Union exists to serve Imperial students, and the use of staff time and charitable resource on conducting disciplinary investigations and processes involving non-Imperial members is at odds with that purpose. Every hour spent managing a conduct case involving an associate member is resource that is not being directed towards the Union's core beneficiaries.

Therefore, consideration should be given to whether the threshold for executive action against associate members should be materially lower than that applied to registered students, for example, through enhanced executive powers to suspend or remove a non-Imperial member without the need for a full disciplinary process. This would better reflect both the difference in our relationship with, and obligations to associate members, and the practical limitations on our ability to investigate and act in such cases.

2.4 Insurance

ICU's insurance arrangements are designed for students. If a non-student is injured or causes harm during a student group activity, there is a risk that the group and the Union could be exposed to liability. This requires further investigation as part of the review, including whether insurance does cover non-student members, whether this comes at a premium, and whether that resource could be better deployed for current students.

2.5 Student leadership

Associate members – particularly long-standing ones – can, in some circumstances, over time

come to exert a level of influence over a student group that undermines it being student-led. ICU has received anecdotal reports of this happening, but we likely do not understand the full picture. Some students have felt uncomfortable raising concerns formally, fearing the consequences for their group or for their relationship with the associate member in question. The fact that students feel unable to speak up is as concerning as the underlying issue itself, and the review should consider how to create an environment in which students feel genuinely empowered to raise concerns without fear of repercussion.

3. Sector Best Practice: What Other Unions Have Done

3.1 UCL Students' Union

In **2024–25**, UCL Students' Union carried out a formal review of its visiting and associate membership. The stated aims were to:

- Evaluate the programme's overall value to the Students' Union and the student community
- Address potential health and safety, insurance and safeguarding related concerns and
- Consider the programme's alignment with the Union's charitable objectives – in particular that in no circumstances does a visiting and associate member take away an opportunity from a UCL student.

The review consisted of five workstreams:

- **Legal advice:** guidance on the appropriate procedures for investigating complaints and disciplinary matters involving visiting/associate members.
- **Sector research:** review of comparable Students' Unions with similar external membership programmes to understand the broader market offering.
- **Staff feedback:** feedback from departments such as Sport & Physical Activity and Arts to gather insights on the programme and current operational processes.
- **Student survey:** feedback from clubs and societies with the highest proportion of visiting/associate members.
- **Consultation at Activities Zone:** presentation of draft proposals to student representatives to gather feedback.

Based on the review, UCL implemented two key changes:

- **Sports Clubs:** Due to updated insurance requirements, visiting/associate members must now purchase **personal accident insurance** before joining some sports clubs, submitted via an online waiver form and approved by Union staff.
- **Arts Societies:** Some arts societies were identified as **high-risk** and cannot accept visiting/associate members by default. Individuals wishing to join must submit a waiver form including a **supporting statement from the club president or treasurer**, which is then reviewed and approved or rejected by Union staff.

Also worth noting that UCLSU, separately to the changes following their review, give clubs and

societies the option to opt-out of visiting/associate membership if they do not have capacity to take on additional members

3.2 Bristol SU

Bristol SU conducted an **independent external review** (via AtkinsonHR) and ultimately decided to **cease all associate memberships** from August 2025, replacing it with a formal **Registered Coach/Instructor** scheme for non-students in a purely instructional capacity.

Key reasons cited:

- Safeguarding gaps
- Conduct management limitations
- Charitable purpose alignment
- Insurance exposure

A further note on Bristol SU's experience: Bristol SU brought a motion to update its Bye-Laws to Union Council and it was rejected by students. The Trustee Board took the step to override this decision on risk management grounds. For ICU, this is a useful reminder of how important early and authentic student consultation is but also that assessing ultimate legal responsibility to manage risk as a Trustee Board, even where doing so is uncomfortable or unpopular, is crucial.

3.3 Other Students' Unions

Further sector benchmarking will be carried out as part of this review. Initial informal conversations with sector colleagues have not yet surfaced a students' union with a clearly articulated strategy for associate membership and many unions appear not to offer associate membership at all. However, this has not yet been formally quantified. Developing a clearer picture of the sector landscape will be a key early task of the review.

4. Life Membership, Alumni Engagement & the Opportunity to Develop an Alumni Offer

This section was prepared by Nico Henry (Imperial College Union President) and is included with thanks.

4.1 Why This is Part of the Review

As part of the broader External Membership Review, it has become clear that Life Membership requires separate and specific consideration. Life Members are a distinct group within ICU's external membership, many of whom are alumni of Imperial College London. Life Members represent a significant, largely untapped opportunity but **it is important to note that they are not all alumni so this must form part of the review process.**

ICU currently holds 7,268 life members, but has no contact details for 6,816 of them. Alumni engagement today is limited primarily to Club Associates (CAs) and a small number of society-specific groups. The opportunity is significant, and the case for acting now is strong.

Critically, however, before ICU can develop any meaningful alumni offer, we need to understand who our Life Members actually are and separate out the Life Membership category from Ordinary Associate Membership so that we can think clearly about what each group needs, what they can offer, and how any engagement model would work in practice.

4.2 What Alumni Currently Receive from Imperial

What alumni currently receive from Imperial Advancement includes:

- A library access card
- Yearly pins
- Access to 76 regional groups worldwide
- Imperial Plexus — online alumni network with 30,000+ members, jobs board, and mentoring
- Alumni Mentoring Scheme and Ask an Alum (in development)
- Course discounts: 25% on Executive Education, 10% off CPD, 20% MBA loyalty bursary

4.3 ICU's Strategic Position on Alumni

ICU's role is not to run a parallel alumni programme, it is to collaborate with Imperial Advancement, increase awareness of their work, and embed alumni engagement into the student experience from the very start of a student's time at Imperial. The earlier the alumni identity is built, the stronger and more lasting the connection.

> *Nico met with the Advancement team and the relationship is positive. They are in the process of implementing an 'Ask an Alum' programme and are keen to work collaboratively with ICU. They would like to be part of this strategy going forward.*

ICU's role is threefold:

- Raise awareness of and promote what Imperial Advancement already offers
- Start the alumni journey earlier — embedding a sense of belonging and community from year one
- Build society-based alumni connections that complement Imperial's broader network

4.4 What an Alumni Offer Could Look Like

Drawing on lessons from leading universities and students' unions, an ICU alumni offer — built on a reformed Life Membership — could include:

- **Society-based alumni Shared Interest Groups** — formalising the natural alumni communities that already exist around ICU's clubs and societies (e.g. mountaineering, drama, robotics), with a clear principle that alumni involvement must benefit current members
- **A Young Alumni Opportunity Fund** — explored jointly with Advancement, providing micro-grants to recent graduates to create and host their own events, driving organic peer-led engagement

- **A two-way alumni feedback mechanism** — a light annual structure through society alumni reps or a small advisory panel, giving alumni a meaningful reason to stay engaged and giving ICU insight into what alumni actually want
- **Promotion of Imperial Advancement's offer** — better signposting of Plexus, Ask an Alum, mentoring, and regional groups to current students and recent graduates

4.5 Ensuring It Benefits Student Members

Any alumni offer developed by ICU must be grounded in the same charitable purpose principles that apply to the broader External Membership Review:

- Alumni engagement must **never displace or reduce** opportunities for current student members
- Any alumni involvement in clubs and societies must be **student-led and student-governed**
- The offer should be designed to **add value to the student experience** — through mentoring, skills, networks, and resources — not simply to serve alumni interests
- ICU should work with Advancement to ensure that **data recovery and contact** with Life Members is handled appropriately and in line with data protection obligations
- Student consultation should be embedded throughout the development of any alumni offer

4.6 Key Challenges to Address

- No direct alumni contribution to the student experience currently
- Significant barriers to participation
- No clarity on what most alumni actually want (beyond Club Associates)
- Competition for alumni time from other institutions and charities
- Alumni are not aware of what Imperial offers them — awareness and promotion is a gap ICU can help close
- **6,816 out of 7,268 life members have no contact details on record** — this data gap must be addressed urgently as a prerequisite for any alumni engagement strategy

5. Proposed Review Strategy

Phase 1: Fully Understand the Current ICU Context — Evidence Gathering (Month 1)

- Information/governance audit: Map all current references to associate membership across bye-laws and student-facing information
- Data collection: How many associate members does ICU currently have? Which clubs and societies have the most? What activities do they participate in? How many Life Members are alumni vs. other categories?
- Insurance review: Ensure we have a clear picture of what is and isn't covered for associate members
- Safeguarding audit: Review what checks (if any) associate members currently undergo

Phase 2: Benchmarking & Options Development (Month 1)

- Review at least 5–7 comparable unions (UCL, Bristol, KCL, Manchester, Edinburgh etc.) and any associated policies, review outcomes, and lessons learned
- Develop 2–3 clear options for the future model, for example:
    - Option A: Retain external membership with enhanced safeguards (insurance requirements, tiered risk categories, opt-out for clubs)
    - Option B: Replace external membership with a formal Coach/Instructor Registration scheme only
    - Option C: Restrict associate membership to RCA/RCM students and ICU/College staff only, removing the broader FE/HE student category
- As a separate strand, develop options for a reformed Life Membership / alumni offer, with clear criteria for how it would benefit current student members

Phase 3: Student Consultation (Months 2–3)

- Online survey to all clubs and society members (and associate members)
- Focus groups with clubs and societies that have the highest proportion of associate members (e.g. sports clubs, drama or music societies)
- Activities Forum / Student Council presentation of draft proposals for feedback
- Ensure consultation is transparent about the risks and trade-offs, not just presenting a predetermined conclusion

Suggested consultation questions include:

1. Does your club/society currently have associate members? If so, how many?
2. What value do associate members bring to your group?
3. Have you experienced any issues with associate members (conduct, insurance, capacity)?
4. Would you support a requirement for associate members to hold personal accident insurance?
5. Should your club be able to opt out of accepting associate members?
6. Do you feel your group is genuinely student-led, or do associate members have significant influence?

Phase 4: Policy Development & Byelaw Changes (Months 4–5)

- Draft updated governance (e.g. Byelaw A) on associate membership
- Develop a new Associate Member Policy covering: eligibility criteria, application and vetting process, insurance requirements, code of conduct and disciplinary procedures specific to non-students, safeguarding obligations, and club opt-out mechanism
- Develop a separate Life Membership / Alumni Engagement Framework setting out what the offer looks like, how it benefits students, and how it will be governed
- Present to Trustee Board for approval
- Submit changes through the appropriate democratic process

Phase 5: Implementation & Communication (Month 6)

- Communicate changes clearly to all affected groups and current associate members
- Update clubs and societies' training materials
- Train clubs and society committees on any new requirements
- Set a review date (e.g. 12 months post-implementation)

6. Alignment with Charitable Purpose

ICU must ensure its activities serve its charitable purposes:

- *"The Union's objects are the advancement of education of **students at Imperial College London** for the public benefit by: promoting the interests and welfare of **students at Imperial College London** during their course of study and representing, supporting and advising students; being the recognised representative channel between students and Imperial College London and any other external bodies; and providing social, cultural, sporting and recreational activities and forums for discussions and debate for the personal development of **its students**."*

Both the External Membership Review and any alumni offer developed must be tested against these principles at every stage. The Trustee Board must be satisfied that the risk/benefit balance is appropriate, and that ICU's resources - staff time, financial, and operational - are being deployed primarily in the interests of current student members.

7. Next Steps

The Board is asked to **note** this paper and **approve** the proposed review strategy.

Specific next steps include:

- **Immediate:** Begin information/governance audit and data collection on current associate and life membership
- **Month 1:** Complete insurance and safeguarding audit; begin sector benchmarking
- **Month 1–2:** Develop options for the future associate membership model and a separate Life Membership/alumni framework
- **Months 2–3:** Student consultation
- **Month 4–5:** Policy development and byelaw drafting
- **Month 6:** Implementation and communication
- **Ongoing:** Continue Advancement partnership discussions — including exploring a Young Alumni Opportunity Fund as a joint initiative and agreeing a co-promotion plan for the Ask an Alum launch
- **Ongoing:** Work with Advancement on data recovery for Life Members, with particular focus on capturing recent graduates before they drift