Imperial College Union
Board of Trustees / 29 July 2026

Union Council Chair Update & End of Year Reflection

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Purpose: To report on the work of the Union Council Chair and Union Council

Decision: To note

1. Introduction

We have now concluded Council meetings for the 2025-26 academic year. From the 1st of August 2026, Yuanze Xia will take over as Council Chair. We have begun the handover process to ensure a smooth transition into the next academic year.

Thank you to everyone who has supported Council over the past three years, not least Aisha Qadi (Democracy & Representation Assistant), Zahra Butt (ICU Democracy and Campaigns Coordinator), Helena Schofield (Representation Manager), Clem Jones (Governance & Executive Manager) and Annie Willmot (Director of Membership Services).

2. Council 5 (26 May 2026)

In this meeting, Council ratified the reappointments of Lilia Evans and Sai Venkateshwaran to the Board of Trustees. It also noted the Board's response to questions about the reappointment process.

Council also approved changes to Bye-laws A, F and L. Alongside more minor updates, this included changes to the postgraduate representation structure.

Annie Willmot delivered updates on the Democracy Review as well as the Union's progress on improving digital systems and membership engagement, following issues with the transition to SUMS.

A policy was passed strengthening the Union's existing stance on the University's decarbonisation investment framework.

3. Council 6 (9 June 2026)

In the final Council meeting of the academic year Council received the Commercial Report and considered a paper led by Tom Newman on operational planning priorities. Council also passed a policy items on online and AI-based sexual abuse and considered a paper discussing the steps towards an ICU AI/LLM policy.

Council bestowed honorary lifetime membership on the outgoing Officer Trustees and Felix Editor. The Officer Trustees presented their end-of-year reports. Annie Willmot provided an update on the Deputy President (Finance & Services) role.

4. Reflections

Below I have included some of the points of progress as well as the challenges that arose during my time as Council Chair. I have focused on the points I believe are most pertinent to Board. There are, of course, other things I would approach differently, and I am sharing these with Yuanze as part of our handover.

Progress

Over the past three years, I've sought to improve students' engagement with Council by focusing on transparency, communication and accessibility. To support this, we trialled a number of initiatives including changes to the format of the Officer Trustee Report, increased promotion of Council meetings (including through Union social media), a Council stall to engage students in-person directly and an online attendance option for accessibility. Council now also incorporates more interactive sessions, both student-led and Senior Management Team (SMT)-led. This has helped create a more collaborative environment for the development of policy.

We developed the Suggestions platform for ICU, an online catch-all suggestion-box. We triage the submissions; where immediate change is possible, we direct the submission to the appropriate individual or team; where a more long-term approach is warranted, we aid the submitter in developing this into policy.

These aims have been aided by the democracy review, which saw reports from the Commercial team introduced as well as the strengthening of the sub-committees of Council, or Forums, among other changes.

It has been encouraging to see greater engagement from members of SMT and Board in attending Council meetings. Their presence has been valuable, particularly in enabling direct responses to papers and discussion points.

Lessons learned and challenges

Council

While some of the measures introduced over the past few years appear to have been effective, it has not always been easy to evaluate their impact systematically. There would be value in establishing more robust indicators in future, such as asking students whether they are aware of Union Council, tracking this awareness over time, and monitoring patterns of engagement across multiple years.

A significant challenge throughout my time as Council Chair has been the Union's digital systems. In a context where digital and online platforms are increasingly mediating how students engage with the Union and its governance, it's important that our systems are reliable, intuitive and responsive to change.

One example of where this has impacted student democracy has been the SUMS Suggestions feature. This idea, first proposed nearly three years ago, has still not yet been delivered in a fully functional form. More generally, Council webpages remain difficult to navigate and continue to sit on legacy parts of the website. This makes it harder for students to engage with Council and access relevant information. Over three years, we were repeatedly advised that progress on the Council webpages would need to wait until the transition to SUMS was complete, while other website

developments and comparable projects were taken forward. This highlights a possible need to review how digital priorities are balanced across the organisation, to ensure that all teams are empowered to raise requests and that processes are transparent and equitable.

Board

The Democracy Review has also provided important lessons. It highlighted the need to set clear expectations with external consultants at the outset of a project. In this case, one significant area of the review, the representation network, was not delivered and the evidence-base for the recommendations was significantly underdeveloped. My reflection is that work of this scale may benefit from being undertaken over a longer timeframe and broken into smaller, more manageable pieces. Rather than commissioning one large piece of work, it may be more effective either to engage different consultants for discrete strands or to begin with a smaller area of work, with the option to expand only if the initial phase is successful.

Students at Council have raised what in my opinion are well-founded concerns about SUMS being introduced to reduce the single-point-of-failure risk associated with e-Activities. If we continue to rely on e-Activities for certain functions, we still encounter this risk, which limits the extent to which this objective is achieved. In addition, the delays in implementing updates and changes within SUMS can create operational challenges and impact our members' confidence in the Union's ability to respond to student concerns.

Combined, this suggests that we need a clearer and more agile approach to digital development. This could be achieved by considering how the Union can make better use of student talent and AI, under appropriate staff leadership. I believe there is a strong case to be made for the Board to explore whether better documentation of e-Activities and incremental improvements to resolve known issues with e-Activities could resolve many of the issues we are currently facing by using the SUMS platform in an expedited fashion.