

2020 NSS Recommendations for the Union

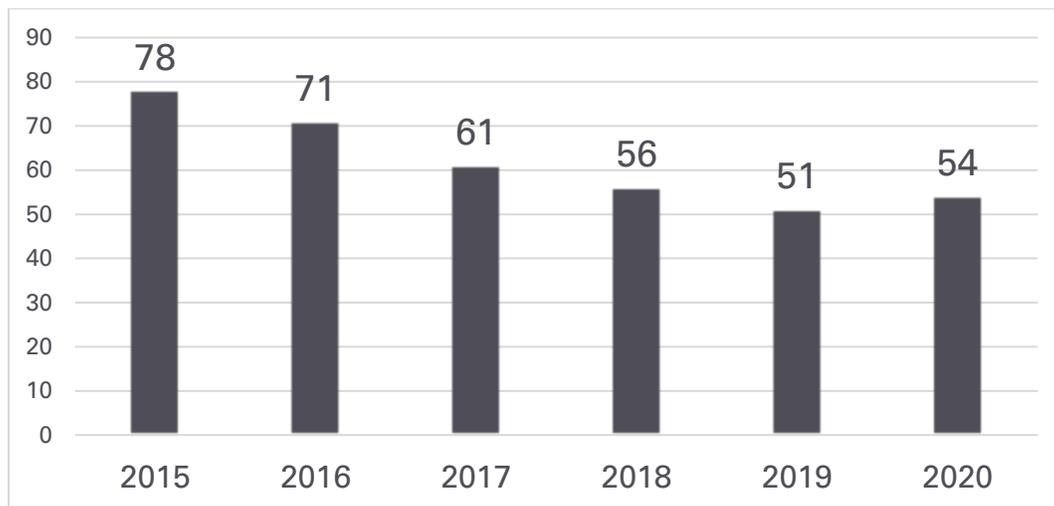
The National Student Survey is an annual survey of all final year undergraduate students at universities in the UK. The survey is designed to assess undergraduate students' opinions of the quality of their degree programmes. The students are asked 27 questions across 8 categories, including a specific question dedicated to the functioning of the Union, asking students to evaluate to what extent they agree with the following statement:

The students' union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic interests¹

The "Union's NSS score", i.e. the percentage of students who agree with the above statement, has been on the decline since 2015, with only a small improvement in 2020 - see figure below. While this is a trend observed around the sector, our 2020 score of 54% is still 2% below the national average, placing us in the 3rd quartile of all sector results.

In response to the National Student Survey (NSS), the Union annually produces a set of recommendations aiming to improve the student experience and satisfaction. In the past, the focus was on recommendations for the College and academic departments, with little to no self-reflection and specific recommendations for the Union itself.

Every year, independent of the NSS, the Union team sets a number of goals and objectives for the year ahead, aiming to improve both the student experience and the way the Union functions. This year we have collectively decided to connect these two exercises and come up with recommendations directly in response to the NSS, basing them on and reacting to the comments from the survey.



The percentage of final year Imperial students who answered "Definitely Agree" or "Mostly Agree" to the NSS question about the students' union in years 2015-2020.

¹ The question was changed from "I am satisfied with the students' union (association or guild) at my institution" in 2017

It is also clear that the Union is now in a period of turnaround, transformation and change. Over the next 12 months we have planned a strategic review of the entire organisation. This will:

- i. Agree a clear mission for the organisation, shared by students, staff and other stakeholders.
- ii. Deconstruct our mission into a set of core aims that clearly articulate how we plan to deliver impact for students.
- iii. Define our values in clear behavioural terms, to make sure they shape all our work and how we act.
- iv. Identify a set of internal enablers which support how we deliver our mission and aims, setting out clear development plans for each of them.
- v. Create a range of performance measures so we can track and progress, take action where needed, and celebrate success where we improve.

The review process is due to start in October and conclude in May 2021. We will be working closely with College staff to ensure our planning is aligned with the wider institution.

NSS Recommendations

While the NSS question asks about the Union representing effectively the academic interests of students, it is evident from the free text comments that students do not see the Union just as a representation body. They also point out problems with the way the Union is run, how clubs and societies are supported, problems with the Union venues and other issues not directly related to academic representation. It is evident that to improve the student satisfaction with the Union there need to be improvements and recommendations in all areas of our operations.

After reading through the NSS comments, specifically looking for any mentions of the Union, clubs and societies, representation, or our bars and events, we have identified a number of key problems. The team of officer trustees and senior staff has put together the following actions to tackle these. Based on these, we will develop an action plan for the Union, drawing also from other sources of student feedback, such as the Student Experience Survey.

1. Improve our engagement with the student body

A large proportion of the work the Union does is not communicated to the students effectively, and students are often not aware of the support the Union can provide to them. Our representative role does not feature enough in our communications, leaving the work done by senior reps unmentioned. It is difficult for students to judge how effective we are at representing their academic interests if they are not properly aware of what we are working on. The representatives in departments and at year level are closer to the students and often better at communicating, but those roles are generally not properly recognised by the students as being a part of the Union.

For the next academic year, we will aim to improve how we communicate with students. We will prioritise education and representation in our marketing, making sure that students are aware of what we are working on and how they are being represented by us. We will work better with the reps in departments, making them more involved in our decision making, and presenting the academic and wellbeing rep networks to students as the essential aspects of the Union they really are. Lastly, we will simplify the ways students can use to reach their reps at different levels,

including the sabbatical officers in the Union, making it easier for them to get help from their students' union when they need it.

2. Improve our volunteer training and support

Our volunteers are our greatest asset, and it is crucial that we provide them with the support they need to succeed. In the past, many of our key volunteers, including representatives or committee members of our clubs, societies and projects, had to go without proper training, relying purely on handovers from their predecessors. Training we were delivering to volunteers also often did not cover all aspects of their roles and was delivered too late.

We will review our support for academic and wellbeing reps, and other volunteers. As a part of this, we will work on improving the training we provide, making it more relevant, covering more areas, and ensuring all key volunteers are offered training. Based on feedback from previous years, we have already started a volunteer training review, with a revised Volunteer Training Week taking place in September 2020. For the next academic year, we will aim to offer a basic training for volunteers before the summer, ensuring they are prepared for their roles before they start. This is especially relevant to departmental and faculty reps who need to be ready to start in their roles in August, as well as clubs and societies preparing for the Welcome Week in October, and those who work on acquiring sponsorship over the summer. After a trial conducted this year, we will continue to train our reps more comprehensively, preparing them for various aspects of their role, such as team leading, negotiation or participating in meetings effectively, and offer all volunteers and ongoing training programme throughout the year.

We will also review the support our reps and other volunteers receive throughout the year. We want to ensure volunteers have points of contact in the Union, be it permanent staff members or some of the Officer Trustees. Only by supporting our volunteers properly from the start of their role and throughout the year we can ensure they are empowered to achieve their best and contribute to improving and enhancing the student experience.

3. Implement a customer relationship management solution

One of the most mentioned problems with the Union was our poor responsiveness when contacted by students. We often take days or weeks to respond to emails, sometimes failing to deal with the problem in time altogether. This causes frustration and can result in missed opportunities, such as lost sponsorship or cancelled events. Most importantly, this means we are not able to effectively support our Clubs and Societies in their great work.

Some of the Union staff members, including the officer trustees, receive a large number of emails that is difficult to deal with in a timely manner. Currently, there is no centralised system to deal with student queries and distribute them correctly to the people able to respond to them, tracking the responses and making sure that all queries are dealt with. Implementing a customer relationship management solution (e.g. Freshdesk) will help us prioritise, delegate and deal with queries we receive in a timely manner, making sure none are missed.

In the short term, we will set ourselves a goal of replying to all emails and student queries within 5 working days; this will form a part of the objective setting for staff members.

4. Review our processes for Clubs, Societies and Projects

We recognise that the current processes create a huge amount of work for our students and for our staff. This significantly limits the quality and amount of support that we can provide to our students. We want to deliver a high-quality support service that gives our students a better experience. This is especially true for club, society, and project (CSP) activities where there have been historic issues with under-performance and a complete lack of safety.

The Union has started a large project to map and improve all internal processes. This has started with risk assessments; by October 2020, student volunteers will have received risk assessment templates, tools, training, and guidance so that students can efficiently complete risk assessments for their activities. The start of Term 1 will also see the launch of a risk assessment authorization process with the same 2-week turnaround period as room bookings.

We have already started to automate the annual room booking system. The process this year gathered more data from student bookers, and intelligent dashboards have enabled us to allocate rooms more appropriately, more fairly, and faster than previous years. We are aiming to automate the same parts of our ad-hoc room booking. This automation will not only free up staff time, to greater support our students, but should significantly improve the student experience with the process.

The joint venture between the Union and Move Imperial to launch Imperial Athletes this year will give students a single point of contact (SPOC) for all things sport at Imperial. This SPOC will ensure student queries are answered in a timely fashion, as there will be clearer definition of responsibility between Move Imperial and the Union. Imperial Athletes will significantly reduce the administrative paperwork required from our student volunteers and also reduce the amount of money that gets recycled between Move, the Union, and our sports clubs. Imperial Athletes will also deliver cost savings to our students, in turn making participation in sport cheaper, and more accessible.

5. Work on improving our venues, spaces and events

One of the main reasons students come to the Union building is to access our venues and spaces. It has become clear in both the NSS, as well as the Student Experience Survey, that the standard of these spaces has dropped over a number of years due to our unpreparedness in dealing with them. This has caused multiple issues, with the most recent (and notable) being the shutting of our kitchen, which has highlighted the need for us to make significant changes to not only the physical spaces, but also our attitude towards them. We have made significant steps in resolving these issues - including a review of staff training - but we have more to do.

We are planning a review of our Health & Safety policies, which will include any policies that are missing, and ensuring we also introduce Preventive Maintenance Plans (PMPs) to ensure our venues are cost-effective, safe and have as little downtime as possible. We have already initiated conversations with the Estates team to ensure that we can bring our spaces back to the level we, and students, expect them to be.

Our culture towards our spaces is already starting to see movement in the correct direction, as we refocus our bar (FiveSixEight) back to what students really want. We have also, in the past, focused

too much on trying to run events planned by staff for students (with no student input), which has caused a lack of trust in our ability to run these events with students experience at the forefront of those decisions. This ethos has already started to shift, with the creation of a Summer Ball Committee – a committee with a membership full of students – to plan the Summer Ball, and whilst it was unfortunately unable to go ahead, it was more student focused and would have been a more enjoyable experience for our members. We want to continue this by using our CSPs, Liberation Networks, Rep Networks and Halls as the pushing force behind the planning of future events to ensure we continue to stay student-focused as we plan and create new events.