1. Introduction

Imperial College Union (ICU) represents the students of Imperial College London (the College), with the specific purpose of advocating for and enhancing the student experience at Imperial through the provision of innovation services, representation and activities.

In the 21-22 academic year, it was reported that there were 22,749 students at Imperial College, with 56.5% of them studying at undergraduate level (11,722 students). Of these:

- 40% of students identify as female and 60% identify as male.
- 31% of students are White, with Chinese (20%) and Indian (11%) students representing the second and third largest ethnic groups respectively.
- 64% are Home students, and 36% are Overseas students.

46% study in the Faculty of Engineering (FoE), 31% study in the Faculty of Natural Sciences (FoNS), and 23% study in the Faculty of Medicine (FoM). The Business School does not currently offer any undergraduate degrees; however, it does teach modules to undergraduates via the College's I-Explore programme and some degrees incorporate a management stream where students take modules in the Business School as part of their degree.

2. Approach to evidence-gathering and preparing this submission

This report was written by the Deputy President (DPE) and the Policy and Research Officer at ICU. The former is an elected representative of the student body, and the latter is a permanent staff member at ICU responsible for research and policy engagement.

Several other members at the Union have made inputs into the document, including the Union President, Deputy President (Welfare) (DPW), Director of Membership Services, and the Managing Director. Evidence was provided by the Academic Representation and Impact Coordinator, Student Activities Manager, Advice Administration and Outreach Coordinator, and Senior Web Developer.

A decision was taken to not cover all elements of the TEF metrics within this submission. Instead, ICU has prioritised recurring areas of feedback that have emerged from interactions with students. The submission also highlights aspects of learning and teaching which ICU believes are central to the Imperial student experience.

Evidence

A significant proportion of ICU's insights have been drawn from existing national and Imperial-focussed surveys and qualitative research with students.

Quantitative data includes:

- Imperial College TEF indicators.
- National Student Survey (NSS) data (data collected between 2019-2022).
- Imperial Student Experience Survey (data collected between 2019-2022).
- Module Evaluation Questionnaire (MEQ) (data collected between 2021-2022).
- Student Online Lecturer Evaluation (SOLE surveys) (data collected between 2018-2022).

- Representation Network Survey (data collected in 2022).
- Advice Service data (data collected between 2022-2023 on AdvicePro).
- Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Graduate Outcomes data 19/20 (data collected in 2022).
- A survey of Club. Society, and Project (CSP) members on CSP culture and inclusivity, of which 677 participated (data collected in 2022).
- A survey of student views on the College Counselling Service (data collected in 2022 from 58 current or previous service users).
- ICU elections data extracted from EVoting (data collected between 2018-2022).

ICU gathered qualitative data through a range of different means, including:

- Taught Academic Representation Forum (TARF), a termly forum for undergraduate and taught postgraduate department and faculty representatives to feedback queries and concerns impacting the academic experience of students on taught courses.
- Community and Welfare Forum (CWF): a termly forum for undergraduate and postgraduate department and faculty wellbeing representatives and Liberation and Community Officers (LCOs) to feedback queries and concerns on issues pertaining to student welfare.
- A specific consultation with student representatives from the Physics Department conducted as part of a review into the Physics Department.
- Interviews with the ICU Mental Health Officer, Disabilities Officer, and the Working Class Officer (part-time liberation officers), and their respective networks.

- Individual conversations with several student services across the College, including Library Services, International Student Support, the Careers Service, Centre for Academic English, and the StudentShapers team for perspectives on workload, assessment, and feedback.

- Interviews and discussions with education leaders in the three relevant faculties (FoE, FoNS, FoM) at Imperial College to investigate their awareness of the issues that students face with assessment, feedback, and workload. This gave insights into any measures that are underway to address the challenges. ICU has considered the status of those measures while making our submission.
- Research findings of the College's Centre for Higher Education Research and Scholarship (CHERS) on learning, teaching and the student experience at Imperial.

These qualitative engagements have been through formal focus groups and interviews specifically for the TEF (as mentioned above) and other research through student experience related projects by elected Union representatives. For example, where ICU comments upon belonging and community among various student groups at Imperial, evidence may have been drawn from focus groups or surveys conducted earlier in the context of a project examining CSP culture or a specific departmental review (Physics). For pre-existing surveys or views gathered through focus groups, the information was collected either directly by the DPE or DPW for specific projects, through undergraduate academic and wellbeing representatives, or through LCOs who regularly interact with students from their community and have specific insights on issues impacting those members.

ICU-College Collaboration on the TEF

The College and ICU have worked collaboratively on preparing our individual submissions, meeting weekly to share information and insights. ICU received any requested data and information from the College in a timely manner. This was necessary where the College collects relevant data, and the Union does not. However, aside from direct deductions made from the data provided by the College, ICU has collected its own evidence and perspectives directly from students and staff to ensure the

independence of this submission to the OfS. This submission has been shared with the College at the final stage of preparation. ICU have not considered any substantive changes to our statements or perspectives based on opinions shared by the College, and they did not unduly influence the content of this submission.

3. Student Experience

Student Voice

The College ranks 57th in the NSS for student voice, with 84% of final-year undergraduate students in 2022 indicating they had opportunities to feedback issues pertaining to their course. This score reflects the plethora of opportunities given to students to participate in College-level committees to represent the feedback of their peers.

ICU operates two undergraduate representation networks: the Academic Representation Network and the Wellbeing Representation Network.

These networks aim to improve the academic and wellbeing experience at Imperial by facilitating opportunities for students and departments to work together with ICU to address student feedback.

Within the network, there are four different levels of representation:
- Deputy President (Education) and Deputy President (Welfare): these representatives are elected by campus-wide ballot to undertake a paid, full-time sabbatical year from their studies at Imperial and represent students on matters pertaining to the academic and wellbeing experiences of students at the College. These positions work directly with the College to lobby and develop policy through various College committees, with the Deputy President (Education) being a member of Senate, Education and Student Experience Committee, Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee, and Programmes Committee. They also work with students directly through their individual research and campaigns on pressing issues impacting students at Imperial and meet with the most senior members of College staff regularly outside of the governance structure to convey the views of students.
- Faculty Reps: these are the highest-level voluntary role within the representation network. They represent all students in their faculty to senior staff and the Union by collating and raising feedback from Department Reps (dep reps) in their faculty, as well as leading and supporting dep reps to develop the representative community. Each faculty has at least one academic rep and one wellbeing rep, and they sit on faculty-level committees.
- Dep Reps: oversee the Year Reps and represent all students in their department. They collate and, if necessary, evidence feedback from Year Reps, and raise it with departmental staff. There are usually two Department Reps per department: one academic, and one welfare
- Year Reps: they are the largest group in the representation network and represent all students in their year group. They collect feedback from their cohort, address it with staff at programme level, and pass it onto their Department Rep, especially if it is feedback that cannot be resolved at the programme level.

ICU elects nine LCOs: the Black & Minority Ethnic Officer, LGBTQ+ Officer, Disabilities Officer, Mental Health Officer, Gender Equality Officer, Ethics & Environmental Officer, Interfaith Officer, International Officer, and Working Class Officer. These are volunteer roles which represent students

who identify with, ally with, or are interested in those groups or ideas. Some LCOs are invited to represent the views of their community at College-level committees. The LCOs are elected by campus-wide ballot.

Reps are responsible for collecting student views on issues, raising feedback, and developing solutions with their departments/faculties as well as the Union. ICU provides them with training at the start of their elected terms, as well as ongoing support and interaction throughout the year. This is to ensure that feedback can be collected efficiently and accurately, enabling student voice to have a direct and impactful influence on student representation.

Students elect their representatives in two main elections: Autumn for academic year rep positions and Spring for full-time or senior volunteers (including Faculty and Dep Reps and LCOs). There are three further minor elections for unfilled positions, Horizons courses, and medical school positions where academic terms do not align with other faculties. Elections are held online, and current Imperial students are eligible to vote. Turnout for the Spring Elections for undergraduate students between 2018-2022 was 49.7%, and 33.9% for the Autumn Elections. ICU works closely with academic departments to promote the elections to their students, actively encouraging students to vote without influencing its outcome.

In a survey of the ICU representation network
                                86% of respondents agreed that the College have made positive changes as a result of their work. 76% of reps felt that their work was achieving a positive impact on the student experience.

Assessment and feedback
Assessment and feedback has been one of the College's lowest performing areas in the NSS for several years, with Imperial ranking 147 out of 160 HEI providers in 2022. However, there are individual departments at Imperial that perform well on this metric. For example, Chemical Engineering has 74.2% student satisfaction and Earth Science and Engineering has 75.7% satisfaction for 2022. The devolved nature of the College's governance structure means that each department and faculty retains a high level of autonomy and control. This autonomy allows for more innovative teaching practices. However, it can mean that student experience varies in each department. The College's Learning and Teaching Strategy recognises that there have been longstanding issues with assessment and feedback, including problems regarding overassessment, methods and styles of assessment, and quality and timeliness of feedback.

Volume of assessment: The College recently completed a largescale Curriculum Review for each of its taught programmes. One of the objectives of this curriculum review was to harmonise assessments against learning outcomes and reduce the volume of assessments. Following discussions with both student representatives and staff, it has emerged that in many cases an unintended consequence of this exercise has been an increase in the overall number of assessments and a resultant increase in workloads for staff and students. This is owing to the introduction of more low-stakes assessment throughout the year, meaning students spend more time completing assessments and staff spend more time marking assessments overall. Student feedback raised in TARF and NSS comments have repeatedly indicated that some pieces of coursework are often not weighted proportionally to the amount of time which is required to complete them and that deadlines are frequently scheduled close together.

Feedback: In the College's SOLE data, feedback is consistently the lowest score, with only 73% of students agreeing that they had received helpful feedback on their work so far compared to 81% of students who are satisfied with the module quality overall. Students suggest that feedback provided on assessment can be inconsistent, with the timeliness, frequency and quality of feedback dependent on the marker for that piece of assessment. Feedback also varies depending on a student's department, as evidenced by the large variation in student satisfaction in the NSS between departments on assessment and feedback. Consultation with student reps and analysis of NSS comments shows that many students feel that marking criteria are not always followed consistently or transparently. This lack of clarity can result in differing expectations between markers such that students can receive contradictory feedback on double-marked coursework. Some external examiners have reported similar concerns, stating that it is not always clear to them how marks have been assigned and that there have been cases of inconsistent marking practices.

Timeliness and quality of feedback: The College has adopted a policy of providing feedback on summative assessments within 10 working days, with the recognition that quality of feedback should not be compromised to meet this deadline. Where there is predicted to be a deviation from this timeline, it is recommended that departments publicise expected timescales for the return of feedback. However, this policy is not always followed by departments. Students have reported cases where they have waited for months without any communication from their lecturer as to the due date for feedback. Student representatives have raised concerns that delays of this nature cause stress and other wellbeing issues. Furthermore, many students have coursework returned with little to no comments or feedback provided by markers. For example,   some students reported receiving only one or two sentences of feedback for a 4000-word dissertation.

The College has introduced projects to improve student experience of assessment and feedback. Some of these programmes are College-wide, and some at individual departments. The StudentShapers programme was introduced as part of the Learning and Teaching Strategy and involves students partnering with staff across projects to produce resources collaboratively on matters like teaching curricula or good feedback. The Department of Life Sciences has for several years used the "Traffic Light" process, where coursework deadlines and feedback return dates are publicised in a database at the start of each term, assessments are colour-coded based on the timeliness of feedback, with the database publicly visible to staff and students. This process allows the department to easily identify delays in feedback and maintain oversight on systemic issues such as scheduling of deadlines.

The Department of Materials has introduced a mark query check system which students can use if they consider feedback to be insufficient or marking to be inconsistent or incomplete. The Department has seen the number of submitted queries drop each year as quality of feedback improves and students gain confidence in the system. Some departments also allow students to review certain assessments with their personal tutors.

The Department of Computing has started developing its own in-house EdTech software which students are able to develop and contribute to. One of these is Answerbook, an online platform that allows students to sit exams remotely. This was used extensively over the pandemic as exams were conducted as Timed Remote Assessments. The EdTech team worked rapidly to deliver on student feedback and make improvements to the software to increase its reliability. The EdTech team also runs projects and internships for students to work on their software. Other tools that have been

developed include Scientia, a custom Virtual Learning Environment, Peer Assessment, a tool allowing peer-to-peer feedback, and eMarking, where markers can collaborate and students can access feedback in one place.

In 2021, the College funded a significant expansion of the ICU Advice Service to include an Advice Manager, two caseworkers and an Advice Administration and Outreach Coordinator. The service supports students primarily with academic issues and complaints, as well as halls of residence and signposting for other College services or external partnership organisations for legal services and food bank networks.

Academic Support – belonging and community

Imperial College has ranked 3rd in Europe and 10th in the World in the Times Higher Education World Rankings 2023. Being a world-class institution pursuing excellence in STEMMB (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, Medicine, Business) education, it attracts the best and most talented students from across the world. On enrolling at the institution, students join an environment that encourages innovation and leadership. However, the academic rigour and pressure to achieve high marks can create disparate experiences among diverse student groups. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how students from different backgrounds experience belonging and community at the College.

The College's CHERS 2019 research conducted through the 'Belonging, Engagement, and Community' (BEC) Project has found that students at Imperial experience belonging through shared values and interests, a sense of feeling at home, and feeling valued by others. Additionally, the Project found that CSPs play an important role in students' sense of community at Imperial. The College awards £425,000 in funding to CSPs through the ICU block grant. This enables students to participate in academic, departmental, social, sports, cultural, faith-based and outdoors related activities and learning, and 75% of undergraduate students at Imperial are members of at least one CSP. 86% of respondents to the CSP survey agreed that participating in a student group supported their overall student experience at Imperial and 85% of participants agreed that membership of a CSP has had a positive impact on their life.

CHERS' 'Supporting the Identity Development of Underrepresented Students' (SIDUS) project also conducted studies among Imperial students between 2020-2022 and identified some key areas of focus for underrepresented groups:

- The transition from school to university can be challenging for students from underrepresented groups as there is a lack of visible role models or other students in their cohort from their background.
- Some students who are part of multiple underrepresented groups seem to feel less of a sense of belonging, leading to negative impacts on their experience and achievements.
- The devolved nature of Imperial's organisation means that it can be challenging to share 'good practice' in supporting underrepresented students across departments without coordination.

This section introduces opinions of diverse student groups on the general learning environment and its ability to contribute towards a sense of belonging and community for all students. There are wide departmental variations between student experiences at Imperial and this is evidenced through the NSS 2022 results.

Through the Union's own student engagement efforts during 2022-2023, it was found that certain aspects of academic policies or environment disproportionately disadvantage students from particular backgrounds or those with specific challenges, such as students with mental health issues or working-class students. It can be inferred that these students encounter an overall sense of poorer academic experience which could negatively impact their sense of community and belonging.

The availability and sufficiency of academic support from personal tutors, academic feedback, and the lack of consistency around the application process for mitigating circumstances were raised as relevant issues causing increased levels of stress and confusion for those with mental health challenges. ICU Advice Service data reports that 51% of students approaching the Advice Service for mitigating circumstances cases identify as disabled or prefer not to say.

Similarly, students with disabilities who report anxiety, report that oral assessments can exacerbate their condition and place them at a disadvantage over other students. In the case of those with chronic or ongoing conditions/disabilities, the need to provide repetitive evidence for every separate instance of mitigation can be distressing and worsen the condition itself. During consultations with students who identify as working class, they reported feeling a strong sense of imposter syndrome, less confidence in asking or answering questions and the lack of specific additional support to address their unique challenges. They cited the lack of consistency across departments to mean there was disparity in support provided to individual students.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, student experience of community and belonging was also impacted by their inability to engage in in-person learning and interactions. Midway through the first year of the BEC Project when the COVID-19 pandemic forced learning and teaching onto online platforms, some participants felt that the Internet provided further opportunities to interact with others, while many other students felt disconnected from their peers and Imperial. Through ICU Advice Service data, it was found that 77% of cases pertaining to academic misconduct are from international students.

Overall, different student groups at Imperial experience learning and community in disparate ways and these diverse experiences need to be considered in the framing of broader College-level policies focused on enhancing learning and teaching.

Academic Support – Workload and Mental Health of Students

Based on ICU's engagement with students over the previous few years, workload is understood to be a complex issue and one of the most cited challenges by undergraduate Imperial students. Broadly, workload can be understood to mean the number of hours the average student is engaged with academic activities and engagements. This could include direct learning within and outside classrooms, assignments, and exam preparation, as well as academic activities related to the curriculum (e.g., participating in learning through departmental societies). Workload is not simply the number of hours expected of the student to be involved in academic activities, but the hours they spend on academic activities which ultimately enables them to fully participate in and experience the academic environment.

In the NSS 2022, among a total of 985 free text comments provided, 91 references were made to lack of support and supportive structure, 73 references to stress and workload,
Overall, students chose to highlight their negative experiences around workload-related cultural issues within the academic community through the following thematic areas:

- An acceptance that high workloads and competition is part of Imperial culture.
- Aspects of teaching, learning and its administration can increase stress and anxiety.
- Taught students and their voice are not always recognised and valued by departments.
- Poor communication, including absence of communication from departments is a common source of stress.
- Student support (welfare, mental health, pastoral) is not adequate to the demand.
- Some student-staff interactions are interpreted as absent, inappropriate or unhelpful.

Through interviews   it was highlighted that performing well at Imperial College includes dedicating a significant portion of their week to academic activities only. This attitude is reflected in the College's narrative of pursuing and prioritising excellence at all times and solving some of the world's biggest challenges through learning, innovation and research. In these interviews, it was conveyed that Imperial is an environment where students believe that they need to reflect those standards individually and continuously, by virtue of being selected to be part of a world class institution that most often outperforms other universities in STEMMB globally. The Working Class Officer suggested that this pressure to perform exacerbates the imposter syndrome that first-generation university students or working-class students already feel when they join university. Additionally, working-class students may be disproportionately impacted by workload because they may take up part-time work.

As evidenced through the NSS comments, the Imperial institution normalises a culture of excessive workload and the absence of work-life balance which, consequently, discourages students who are struggling to cope with this from seeking help in a timely manner. The resultant pressure on their health and a persistent lack of work-life balance is observed across communities at the College. For example, during the ICU consultation in December 2022 with student representatives in the Community and Welfare Forum, they mentioned workload for students and staff as the biggest issue affecting the culture within the Imperial students' community. They further elaborated that the lack of work-life balance impacts their ability to not only participate in sporting or social activities but also inhibits their ability to engage in activities that enhance their CV. This was substantiated during conversations with the College-run Careers Service where students often request advisers within the service to write a CV or supporting statement for them citing too much academic pressure that does not allow them to focus on career related activities.

Through further consultations with students at TARF, the Union discovered that although many students are concerned about the overall workload, they suffer varied magnitudes of impact on their life and health. Representatives from Mechanical Engineering reported students having an unrealistic number of tutorial sheets to complete and lectures to attend as well as being compelled to stay up late one or two nights during the average week to keep up with their peers. Additionally, there are individual departments like Physics where the sentiment of overwhelming levels of workload is shared across all year groups yet there is a perceptible culture of maintaining status quo in all matters of education and student engagement.

The Union engaged in specific conversations with education leads across the three relevant (for TEF) Faculties at Imperial, and each of them recognised workload as one of the key areas of feedback they receive from students. They highlighted some of the measures undertaken at the Departmental level to understand how students experience workload and work towards mitigating it. With the devolved nature of Imperial's governance and the unique environment within each department, there is no one-size-fits-all solution which would work for students. The Department of Computing has started asking students to fill in surveys stating how much time they spent on each coursework after submitting them so that they can compare what the expected and actual time spent on coursework is. In the 2021-2022 academic year, they dedicated a specific Teaching Operations Committee to the topic of workload and invited student reps, with a focus on identifying specific problems, solutions proposed from discussions with staff and students, implementation of these ideas, and more radical, long-term ideas.

The College has resources available for mental health concerns including a Student Counselling and Mental Health Advice Service, Departmental Wellbeing Advisers in the Faculty of Engineering, and Faculty Wellbeing Advisers shared by all departments within the Faculty of Natural Sciences. The Departmental Wellbeing Advisers in the Faculty of Engineering were originally shared across multiple departments; in recognition of their success and student demand, provision increased such that each department now has their own dedicated Wellbeing Adviser. Each student also has a Personal Tutor from their department, as well as a departmental Senior Tutor who oversees the Personal Tutors. When approached by students on mental health matters, Personal and Senior Tutors will normally signpost students to the advisers or students may refer themselves directly. In the Student Experience Survey 2022, 73.6% of undergraduates said that they were overall satisfied with the advice and support given by their Personal Tutor. The counselling service is available for students through these advisers or directly by self-referral.

The Union undertook a review of the counselling service in August 2022.

The survey demonstrated that respondents felt able to talk to their counsellor about their issues, and the mean usefulness rating for these sessions was 3 out of 5. Suggested improvements to the service were to reduce the waiting time (mean wait time was reported as 3 weeks), and to increase the availability of the sessions, as it was felt that   not always address the extent of their difficulties The data and feedback collected through the survey was shared with the Head of Student Counselling and Mental Health Advice at Imperial College.

4. Student Outcomes

The College scores very well across the progression metrics evaluated for TEF and is ranked as the UK's number one university for graduate employability in The Guardian University Guide (2018 to 2023). Imperial students find their skills and knowledge to be well suited for their relevant industries, and the University Admission Centre UK found that Imperial College graduates have, on average, the highest starting salary of any other graduates from UK higher education providers (£33,500 per year). According to HESA data, 79% of graduates surveyed indicated that that they agreed or strongly agreed that they were using what they had learnt during their studies in their current activity. Overall, 24 of the College's 38 progression metrics have a benchmark of 90% or higher, and all but two (Ethnicity Other and Ethnicity Black) have an indicator value above the corresponding benchmark. Ethnicity Other has a benchmark above 95% and is considered an outstanding performance and Ethnicity Black is 1.6 percentage points below the benchmark.

The College launched the I-Explore programme in 2020, with all Imperial undergraduates taking a for-credit module from outside of their subject area in either their second or third year. This may be a module from another STEMM subject,

or a multi-disciplinary project. The programme aims to expose students to allied and relevant subject areas with the view towards broadening their career and workplace opportunities. The Imperial Horizons Programme offers modules focused on Humanities, Social Sciences, Languages, and Global Challenges. In 2021-22, the Student Experience Survey saw a response rate of 25.9%, 69.3% of undergraduate respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'By learning alongside researchers who are experts in their fields, Imperial students gain the practical, entrepreneurial and intellectual skills to tackle societal problems'. Additionally, 79.5 % of undergraduate respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'the College provides a broad range of activities, services and support for students beyond their studies, helping them develop their wider talents'.

A recent pilot initiative in the Faculty of Engineering funded by the Royal Academy of Engineering seeks to address lower levels of progression and retention in widening participation students and support them from pre-enrolment to progression into the second year of undergraduate study. The programme focuses on academic progression, retention, enrichment, and belonging. The first stage of the project is the pre-enrolment residential programme, which is designed to support cohort building, develop soft-skills and provide students with the opportunity to engage with lecturers and current students from their chosen departments.