

## Use of Degree Awarding Powers

*A response to Senate paper 2003/6, by Mustafa Arif, Union President*

### Preamble

This paper is drafted as a response to paper 2003/6 to be presented to the Senate of Imperial College on Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> November 2003. It is unclear whether the paper refers to use of degree awarding powers whilst remaining a College of the University of London (as permitted by recent revisions to the Ordinances of the University, to come into force after July 2004) or the use of degree awarding powers as an institution with university status. Where pertinent this document therefore comments on both possibilities.

This document has been prepared following input from members of the Union Council and extensive discussion at the Union's Executive, Academic Affairs and Welfare Committees.

### Discussion of suggested benefits

Section 4 of paper 2003/6 outlines three potential benefits to the College of exercising its own degree awarding powers.

#### Establishing the Imperial brand

*The College will be able to establish Imperial degrees as a unique mark of quality.*

Degrees awarded at Imperial College are already considered "Imperial degrees". UL degree certificates state the name of the College and virtually all alumni will credit Imperial College on their CV. The Union does not see how exercising the College's degree awarding powers will in any way benefit the Imperial brand.

It is likely that exercising degree awarding powers will undermine the undergraduate Associateships (ACGI, ARCS, ARSM) as well as the Diploma (DIC) which have hitherto been the accepted hallmark of an Imperial degree. As such current and past students who receive a UL degree and an Associateship/Diploma may feel their qualifications are diluted. The Union would be concerned by any negative repercussions on these College awards and would strongly support the creation of AICSM for undergraduate medical students of the College to gain parity.

#### Freedom to develop new programmes

*[The College] will have the freedom to develop new programmes and awards without having to observe the requirements of the University Ordinances (although it would be necessary to draft a framework for College awards in place of the Ordinances).*

Whilst technically true, it is unclear in what way the requirements of the Ordinances are restrictive or what changes the College would seek in a new awards framework. Nevertheless it is right that the College should be able to develop academic programmes without undue interference from the University.



### **Local administration of research degree examinations**

*The College will take responsibility for the administration of research degree examinations, which should lead to greater efficiency, although there will be attendant additional costs.*

The Union would welcome local administration of research degree examinations, irrespective of whether degree awarding powers are exercised. Union Officers have greater familiarity with College officials and processes than with their University counterparts. For the very limited number of research student cases we deal with representation of students to the College would be much easier than to the University.

Paper 2003/6 states that, unlike the first degrees and taught masters degrees the College chose “largely for administrative reasons, to continue to operate within University regulations for the award of research ... degrees”. This is not therefore a direct benefit of exercising degree awarding powers.

### **Discussion of suggested difficulties**

Section 5 of paper 2003/6 outlines several areas where there are potential difficulties for the College in exercising its own degree awarding powers.

### **University of London External Programme**

*Withdrawal from the University of London External Programme might threaten the viability of some academic programmes, for example in Agricultural Sciences.*

UL External Programme students are not members of the Union and hence not the Union’s concern. Nevertheless the Union would be concerned if there were any consequences for internal Imperial College students in affected departments and campuses.

The Union seeks clarification as to why some academic courses may not be viable outside of the UL External Programme. It would be helpful to understand whether the concern is with the marketing of such courses or with the ability of the College to replicate internally the functions of the UL External Programme.

### **Collaboration with other UL Colleges**

*The maintenance and development of joint academic programmes and other forms of collaboration with other Colleges of the University might become more difficult.*

The College operates joint academic programmes with, for example, the Royal Colleges of Art and of Music which are not part of the University and which have their own degree awarding powers. Nevertheless there is concern that where course modules are taught by, or in conjunction with, other UL Colleges that students may be adversely affected.

Concentration of research excellence in higher education may make teaching collaborations more necessary to ensure that students continue to be taught by the leading experts in their field, within disciplines.

The Union therefore seeks clarification as to how collaboration might become more difficult were the College to exercise its degree awarding powers and what further impact secession from the University would have.



## **Implications for staff who hold University titles**

*There will be implications of independence from the University for staff members who hold Professorships and Readerships of the University of London.*

This does not directly affect our members.

## **Independence from the UL brand**

*Independence from the University of London as a brand might be seen as a disadvantage in certain disciplines, for example Medicine.*

There is no question that for the majority of disciplines the College engages in, the Imperial College name has much stronger recognition than that of the University of London. This is also reflected amongst major (non discipline related) graduate recruiters. However, those students pursuing alternative career paths often find that the University of London name has much broader recognition amongst the general public, particularly overseas.

In the specific case of medicine, there has been mixed reaction from medical students' representatives as to the value added by the University of London. In undergraduate medicine, the Imperial College brand is relatively new and unestablished and benefits from an association with the University. However, the view was also expressed that the "London" in the College's branding may be enough to secure recognition.

It is possible, particularly in terms of recognition overseas, or amongst the general public, that the brand of the University of London is well received because of negative impressions associated with the word "College". Clearly, this will vary between, and often within, different countries.

Were the College to exercise degree awarding powers but remain part of the University of London any impact of the loss of the UL brand may be minimised. It is likely, that in the same way that students think of their existing (UL) degrees as being from Imperial, those who wish to credit the University of London will be able to state that on their CV that Imperial is part of the University. Should it be considered desirable, it is not inconceivable that an Imperial degree certificate could make mention of the College being part of the University of London.

## **Loss of access to student facilities**

*The loss of access to University of London facilities (residential, library, sporting and social) might disadvantage our students*

### **Residential facilities – intercollegiate halls**

The University's intercollegiate halls of residence currently form part of the College's undergraduate guarantee. The College's rolling refurbishment programme and planned reconstruction of Southside will make it difficult for the College to meet its obligations to first year undergraduates as well as providing accommodation to other students (particularly overseas postgraduates) who need it. These difficulties would be greatly exacerbated were the College to secede from the University and lose intercollegiate hall places.

There still remains demand amongst the student body for the concept of intercollegiate halls which give the opportunity to mix with a wider range of students. Demand has, however, declined in recent years and is limited by the distance of many of the halls from the main College sites as well as their catered nature.



### **Residential facilities – UL Accommodation Office (ULAO)**

The ULAO is not well promoted to Imperial College students. Nevertheless student representatives have commented favourably on the service it provides. The ULAO maintains a large and diverse list of private sector properties offering much greater choice than the listings produced by the College's Private Housing Office. The ULAO also manage some private properties and have begun working with local councils to set up schemes to vet landlords. They also have an experienced team of legal advisers to help students who have difficulties with their landlord. The Union believes that the loss of ULAO services as a result of secession from the University would adversely affect Imperial students.

### **University of London Library (ULL)**

The College does not currently subscribe to the ULL as it does not stock any specialist science, engineering or medicine texts. Secession would have limited impact, mainly to humanities students, however the Union believes that better use could be made of this University facility.

A limited number of day passes for reference use of the ULL are held by the Central College Library and these are available on request for humanities students or those engaged in literature research that requires access to the ULL. A limited number of postgraduate humanities students are able to apply borrowing rights from the ULL, on request at the Central Library. Take up of the day passes is limited though the Union has received complaints from students that the process of convincing a librarian they need a day pass is too cumbersome and poorly advertised and that they would prefer to be able to loan directly from the ULL rather than wait for inter-library loans.

Secession from the University will hamper the library resources available to humanities students as well as those seeking to view archived PhD theses. The Union would welcome any attempt made by the College to negotiate a discounted subscription to the ULL (on the basis of our science, engineering and medicine bias) to replace the current system of limited passes.

### **Sporting and social facilities – the University of London Union (ULU)**

The University of London Union is constituted, in the University's Ordinances, as the students' union of the University of London. As such it is a union in its own right and independent of the College Unions. Membership of ULU is derived in one of three ways:

- Central registration as a student of the University of London.
- Registration at a College of the University of London on a course *leading to an award of the University*.
- Registration as a sabbatical officer of a students' union at a College of the University of London.

Thus, even if the College were to remain within the University, exercising degree awarding powers would leave only six Imperial students (the ICU sabbaticals) as members of ULU.

The greatest loss would be the ULU sporting competitions which are the mainstay of competitive sport at Imperial. The BUSA competitions are not only more expensive but involve considerable more travel often to unreliable opponents. The ULU leagues,



by being limited to the Colleges of the University not only restrict the geographical locality of opponents but also act as a crude filter on their academic standing. BUSA also hamper participation by placing limits on the number of teams an institution may enter, something that does not happen with the ULU competitions.

In a number of sports, students also choose to compete on a federal basis. This is true of specialist sports for which there are insufficient interest to form College teams. It is also true of elite squads in many other sports. Participation rates in UL sports are consistently higher at Imperial than any other College.

Whilst some of ULU's non-sporting student societies essentially duplicate the work of ones at ICU, others are complimentary and participation rates of Imperial students in ULU societies remain high in comparison with other non-Bloomsbury Colleges. The ULU societies offer an opportunity for Imperial students to meet with a more diverse range of peers.

Usage of central ULU facilities in Malet St by Imperial students is lower than of the students based in and around Bloomsbury. Nevertheless this is currently accounted for in the funding formula for the Colleges' subscription to ULU. Those Imperial students living in the area, particularly those residing in the University's intercollegiate halls of residence do make extensive use of the ULU building.

In addition to individual students, ICU as an organisation benefits from its association with ULU. The central support and co-ordination in student welfare campaigns is of great benefit as is the training, development and networking opportunities that help the Union maximise the utility it receives from its student officers. This is particularly important as, being outside the NUS, we have no other functioning forum for communication with other students' unions.

The Union seeks an assurance that the College will secure an extension of the membership of ULU to include students registered for Imperial degrees, as a before exercising its degree awarding powers. Should the College secede from the University of London, it would be difficult for UL/ULU to accommodate this without opening up ULU membership up to other HE institutions in London. Such a move would change the character of ULU and inevitably lead to a merger with NUS London, leaving ICU with little choice but to re-affiliate to the National Union of Students.

### **UL Careers Service (ULCS)**

This is not covered by paper 2003/6 but is mentioned for completeness. The College does not subscribe to ULCS for career guidance services. However their other services, particularly discipline-specific careers fairs and vacancy circulars are promoted to Imperial students who do make use of these. Secession from the University would therefore have some impact on our students. The Union would like to see better use made of the ULCS offering to support the College's own Careers Service.

### **Existing students' contracts**

*The contract between existing students and the College provides for the award of degrees of the University of London.*

The Union welcomes the College's recognition of its contractual obligation with existing students. The College should not therefore plan to exercise degree awarding



powers until existing students have completed their studies unless it receives agreement from them.

The precedent set in the Department of Computing several years ago when the undergraduate degree programme was changed for existing students was that the College needed each and every student to voluntarily sign a declaration agreeing to the changes. The Union believes that the same principle should be applied if, at any time, the College attempts to transfer the registration of students between degree awarding bodies.

## **Other Issues**

Other issues not addressed by paper 2003/6

### **Future Consolidation of HE in London**

If, as seems likely, there will be another round of consolidation in the Higher Education in London, it is probable that the smaller Colleges of the University of London will be directly affected. It is possible that by leaving the University, the College may limit its opportunities to consider mergers with them.

### **Student representation on the project team**

Use of degree awarding powers fundamentally affects students because it is students who receive the degrees. The Union strongly believes that there should be student representation on the project team formulating the plans for implementation.

## **Summary**

From an academic perspective, the Union remains to be convinced that there are any tangible benefits of exercising the College's degree awarding powers. Indeed, there may be a detrimental impact on Imperial students. The largest single area of concern for the Union is the membership status of the University of London Union. Whilst these difficulties may be resolvable, the Union questions the College's judgement in affording the effort of going down this route when there appear to be no benefits.

Secession from the University of London would have a significant negative impact on Imperial students and the Union is opposed to it.

