

# Imperial College London

## Disability Action Committee

Thursday 17 June  
14:30 – 16:00  
MS Teams Meeting

### Minutes

Present:

Mr John Neilson	College Secretary – Chair (JN)
Mr Mark Allen	Careers Consultant, Careers Service (MA)
Mrs Chris Banks	Assistant Provost (Space), Director of Library Services (CB)
Prof Michael Bearpark	Professor of Computational Chemistry, Chemistry (MB)
Mr Harbhajan Brar	Director of Human Resources (HBR)
Ms Lindsay Comalie	Senior Organisational Development Consultant (LC)
Dr Lorraine Craig	Associate Dean (Learning and Teaching), Engineering (LC)
Ms Sophie Cutforth	Student Wellbeing Advisor, Business School (SC)
Ms Kani Kamara	Head of the Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Centre (EDIC) (KK)
Ms Susan Littleson	Deputy Director– Organisational Development & Inclusion (SL)
Mr Adrian Mannall	Co-Chair of Able@Imperial (AM)
Ms Kalpna Mistry	Staff Network Coordinator (KM)
Mr David Mooney	Senior Inclusive Consultant and SpLD tutor (DM)
Ms Elizabeth Nixon	Internal Communications Manager (EN)
Ms Maureen O'Brien	Head of the Disability Advisory Service (DAS) (MOB)
Ms Lisa Phillips	Co-Chair of Able@Imperial (LP)
Ms Paula Phillips	Institutional Affairs Manager, Medicine (PP)
Ms Adya Rao	ICU Disabilities Officer (AR)
Mr Shervin Sabeghi	Deputy President Welfare, Imperial College Union (ICU) (SS)
Mr Roddy Slorach	Senior Disability Advisor (RS)
Cynthia So	Secretary to the DAC (CS)
Ms Maggie Taylor	Assistant Building Manager (MT)

Agenda Item

### 1.0 Welcome and apologies

- 1.1 JN welcomed the Committee to the meeting.
- 1.2 Apologies were received from: Mr David Ashton, Ms Hannah Bannister, Dr Benita Cox, Prof Stephen Curry, Mr Richard Farish, Mr William Hollyer, Ms Angela Kehoe, Mr Claire O'Brien, Prof Peter Openshaw, Mr Jon Tucker, and Mr Tim Venables. Ms Sophie Cutforth was attending on behalf of Dr Benita Cox and Mr Jon Tucker.

### 2.0 Minutes of the last meeting 1 March 2021

- 2.1 The minutes of the last meeting were deemed to be an accurate record of events.

### 3.0 Matters arising not on the agenda / Action tracker

3.1 The action tracker was considered. The following points were noted:

- 5 March 2020, minute 3.4 – Mental Health at Work Commitment: LC said that this was a hangover of an old action and there was no plan to take forward the Mental Health at Work commitment charter as listed. There was a need to review the College's current mental health commitment particularly over the last year. A point was made that this action was raised when Stephen Curry was creating the EDI Strategy, but there was currently a lot of energy being put into the Race Equality Charter. There should be a discussion about which of these many commitments and charters to take to and in what order.
- 25 June 2020, minute 4.4 – Digital Accessibility Project: SL said that this was taken to the EDI Strategy Group meeting. There was a conversation which raised more questions. Stephen Curry and SL began a document which they discussed and worked on with Okan Kibaroglu and Vickie Sheriff to ascertain their vision for the project, their current status, and steps they could take to reach their envisioned endpoint. This would go back to the next EDI Strategy Group meeting in July.
- 12 November 2019, minute 3.3 – Adjustments to student assessment: David Ashton had said that this action was still ongoing.
- 7 June 2017, minute 3.2 – Financial implications of interruptions of studies for PhD students: David Ashton had said that this action was still ongoing. JN suggested that David should be invited to send a different representative to this group to help progress his actions since he was very busy.

**Action: Secretary**

#### 4.0 Action plan

4.1 The action plan was considered.

#### 4.2 Respond to the challenges of COVID-19:

- JN said that the next Staff Wellbeing survey would close on the following day (18 June) and suggested an agenda item for the next meeting in the Autumn Term about the result of this survey.

**Action: Secretary**

#### 4.3 Raise awareness:

- There were no comments.

#### 4.4 Remove barriers:

- MT said that all the works that were outlined from the previous best practice guides had been completed. These were mostly accessible toilets including beacons and alarms. The works came in just under budget. The next round of surveys was originally due at the end of 2020 but were now going to take place the week commencing 2 August 2021. These surveys would look at new areas that had come online including at White City. The building manager at Hammersmith had also expressed a desire to look at all the accessible toilets within College-owned locations at Hammersmith. They would be looking at those for beacons, shelves, etc.

- KM said that the Calibre graduation was going ahead on 30 June 2021.

#### 4.5 Improve support:

- DM said that the third phase of the Inclusive Technology Enhancement Project had shown great student uptake. They were now trying to engage with wider departments. The pandemic had impacted on abilities to prioritise this but the project had been given the green light to run, funded by Student Services, for a further year. They were working on establishing a “business as usual” case to integrate it more into the mainstream, and conversations were developing with the Ed Tech and Learning and Teaching teams to see where this could sit naturally.

- 4.6 JN suggested that six weeks before the next DAC meeting, the Committee should be approached to gather ideas for what should be included in the Action Plan for the next academic year.

**Action: Secretary**

#### 5.0 **Update from the Return to Campus Working Group**

- 5.1 HBR said that the Return to Campus Working Group had been fairly active. They had looked at the data from the Pulse surveys and recognised it was key that staff who needed access to particular equipment did not have to move around to different working spaces. The Working Group had four workstreams: Space, Technology, People, and Safety. The Space workstream was looking at moving towards more of a hybrid working situation, but they would do an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) to make sure they were moving in a positive direction. The People workstream was looking at the long-term arrangements around flexible working and what those would mean for contracts and remuneration. Staff members’ individual needs would be considered with particular reference to accessibility requirements. They were meeting on a fortnightly basis and they were putting out College-wide communications in terms of the key items discussed. The [meeting slides were available online](#).

- 5.2 A question was asked about home equipment and computers. Since people had been working at home for a long time now, many of their computers were worn out. Who should be paying for those to be replaced? HBR responded that the Technology workstream was looking at how to ensure that staff had the right equipment to maximise flexibility and reduce desktop machines, and what equipment and training were needed to support this blended approach. They were not yet clear about the degree of hybrid working. HBR would remind Juan Villamil, Chief Information Officer and head of the Technology workstream, that this was an issue for all staff who were using their own personal equipment and they would talk through the long-term approach for this.

- 5.3 A question was asked if a sufficiently clear statement had been made to staff yet about whether special adaptations e.g. for desks would continue to be provided even if the College moved to a more flexible way of working. HBR responded that the Working Group had discussed this but he was interested to hear if people thought there had been a clear statement. It was not about saying that everything was going to be flexible. Some individuals would not be able to work on a hot desk or in a bookable space. This was being looked at on an individual area basis. CB, the head of the Space workstream, said that the tagline was “as flexible as possible and as fixed as necessary” to take into account this exact type of issue.

- 5.4 A point was made that many staff had been struggling with working at home because of workstations that were not ideal, for example at a kitchen table or another temporary arrangement. Many people had accumulated muscular problems and neck problems, for example. The onus was on College to stress that people needed more ideal workstations in order to continue working from home, in a way that would impact neither their future productivity nor their future health. People could become disabled by working in less-than-ideal environments. HBR responded that an integral part of the thinking was doing risk assessments, and part of this was looking at where individuals were working. These issues would need to be kept on the agenda.

## **6.0 Developing our mental health support**

- 6.1 LC said that within the senior HR team, they were meeting to think about how they responded to health and wellbeing concerns in a joined-up, strategic way. They were aware of the mental health concerns coming out of COVID and concerns around returning to campus. The fourth Wellbeing Pulse survey was open till 18 June. After that, there would be an opportunity to look at a year's worth of data and see the patterns. Over the past few surveys, it was evident that people were finding it harder to manage their wellbeing and mental health. They had seen slight dips in managerial support, and bigger dips in people's ability to take breaks. They were looking into how they could manage that and the pressure put on people, and how to ensure people could look after their wellbeing. A response to wellbeing needed to be implemented across the College, not just in HR. For Mental Health Awareness Week, there was a good take-up and breadth of topics, including a session on trans mental health. They were also focusing on managers, with a pilot of Managing with Mental Health in Mind that would build on Mental Health First Aid Half Day to encourage managers to have those conversations. The Managing for Wellbeing programme was also being piloted in a new form. LC asked the Committee what they were seeing in their areas and whether they had any good practice to share.
- 6.2 A point was made about the report that was presented at the Provost Board about workload management. This remained a problem for Professional Services, where the tools that existed for academics were not available. The latest Pulse survey indicated that workload was going up and the opportunity to take breaks was going down. LC agreed that back-to-back meetings were a problem. Some organisations were having no-meeting days and LC was personally trying to keep Fridays free from meetings, but this was not always possible and there should be collective thinking for what could be done in different areas.
- 6.3 A point was made that making the environment more inclusive benefited everybody, not just those who had mental health difficulties. LC said that an environment where people felt comfortable to speak up and declare their disability was linked to the ongoing piece of work around culture and values.

## **7.0 Improving declaration rates**

- 7.1 EN said that the work on improving declaration rates overlapped with the work that was being done on workplace adjustments. An item was due to go out in the next Staff Briefing on 25 June to remind staff about workplace adjustments, including guidance for staff who might want to adjust their existing adjustments and highlighting support available for line managers.
- 7.2 Continuing, EN said that when it came to declaration rates, the Faculty of Medicine had a higher rate of no data than other parts of the College, and the plan was to see if anything in particular could be done in that area. They would stick to the current

approach this summer but in the future might change to a different approach and welcomed any feedback or suggestions.

- 7.3 KK said that one thing that could reassure staff and students was to give examples of where data monitoring had informed initiatives to remove barriers for staff and students. KK asked the Committee how they felt about collating examples of this and feeding those examples into the You Make Imperial campaign.
- 7.4 A point was made that this was an issue that every institution struggled with. Disabled staff members were often afraid to declare their disability because of anxiety about what the College might do with the data. The data would enable a business case to be made. It would be helpful to have real stories and case studies. If a few individuals were prepared to talk about how workplace adjustments had benefited them, that might make people feel comfortable that the College would use the data for positive purposes. KK said that she had already seen examples of where that approach had been immensely powerful with individuals in the College sharing their experiences, and that had laid the foundations in terms of making it okay to talk about disabilities, but this would be taking it to the next level, to encourage people to declare and show examples of where this has helped. KK would make individual approaches to members on the Committee for ideas.

**Action: KK**

- 7.5 EN added that it was about having an accurate picture of the community. A lot had already been done on telling individual stories, and she would not want to confuse the issue since declaring was not equated with workplace adjustments for individuals. From a data perspective, it would be helpful to have an organisational picture for decision-making.
- 7.6 A point was made that the data itself, which showed that the number of people declaring had gone up since 2018, was a positive part of the story.
- 7.7 A point was made that there was a lot of good practice out there, for example [End the Awkward](#), promoted by the charity SCOPE, which addressed the question of societal stigma.
- 7.8 A point was made that the data was not fixed in that people might have become disabled during their employment, and people's perception of what counted as a disability might also be an issue.

## **8.0 Update from Imperial College Union (ICU)**

- 8.1 AR said that the ICU was continuing to work with the College to try and fulfil individual students' needs as necessary. AR had met with Able to discuss the possibility of organising a joint staff-student disability panel event. This would be scheduled for Autumn Term 2021. As AR's term of office was about to end, she would let the next Disability Officer know about her plans when handing over. The venue was likely to be virtual as this would be better in terms of accessibility.
- 8.2 JN thanked AR for sharing and agreed that holding the event virtually would probably result in wider participation. He noted that how the event was publicised would make a big difference and it should be promoted through all the relevant networks.

## **9.0 Update from Disability Advisory Service (DAS)**

- 9.1 MOB said that there had been an increase in screenings for SpLDs, autism and ADHD. The DAS were now starting online and in-person assessments again and working through the requests. There had also been a significant increase in mentoring. These increases were a good sign that students were seeking the support they needed during this challenging year of the pandemic.
- 9.2 Continuing, MOB said that the DAS had also been working collaboratively with EDIC and consulting with SS and AR on neuro terminology. They were reaching out to other stakeholders and interested staff at the College for their input as well. While they recognised that individuals wished to self-identify with different terms, there was a need for consistency across the College. Neurodiversity was not a diagnosis that people could seek, although they might wish to identify as neurodiverse or neurodivergent. DM said that neurodiversity had been an emerging term for a number of years, and that there were groups of staff and students promoting the positivity of autism and SpLDs. However, because it was an emerging term that had been defined by different people at different times, they wanted to ensure that it could be clearly understood by staff and students. Clarity around labelling and terminology was highly important. MOB and DM were hoping to present the final definition at the next DAC meeting.
- 9.3 A question was asked about the inclusive technology enhancement project and what the feedback on that had been like. MOB responded that 66 attendees in the third year of the project were not previously known to or registered with the DAS. The service was for everybody and inclusivity was not just for disabled students. Initially it had been termed assistive technology, but it was renamed inclusive technology. These tools could be used every day regardless of ability or disability, and that was the message DAS was trying to get across. The ultimate goal was that students would become as self-sufficient and independent as possible using the technology that was available, but seeking support when they needed it. DM said that the enthusiasm around the project had been very positive and that its positioning was very important in relation to the digital and blended learning models of the upcoming academic years.
- 9.4 A point was made about autistic students. There was an advisor in the DAS who had done excellent work on autistic students. In recent years the high level of underdiagnosis amongst women with autism had been called to attention. The new advisor had taken an active interest in this and set up a new autism group, where autistic students could meet up and discuss issues amongst themselves. The service that the DAS provided was not easy to quantify in terms of numbers, but the importance of it lay in the quality of their work for students. As a STEM university, Imperial should want to attract more students who are on the neurodiversity spectrum.
- 10.0 Update from Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Centre (EDIC)**
- 10.1 KK said that a lot of work had been done in terms of supporting the EDI seed fund projects that had come about as a result of applications via Able and the other staff networks, Angela Williams' BAME mental health workshops being one of them. The Committee should invite Angela to a future DAC meeting to share the outcomes of her project. The Committee should also consider extending invitations to all the individuals who were working on relevant projects so they could share their findings and best practice with the group, for example Dr Emma Watson who was in the scoping phase for a disability-related project.

**Action: Secretary**

10.2 Continuing, KK said that the Disability Working Group was working on recommendations from the report created by CS in 2018 as well as recommendations from the College's application for the Disability Confident Leader award. Their priority had been reviewing the current recommendations and their next priority was to go to the representatives from HR, Finance, and Estates to confirm which of the actions would be achievable before the next application for Leadership status. KK also said that EDIC was starting the work around ensuring that line managers had briefings to provide them with information and resources to support staff who had declared disabilities. The EDIC team had all had a "train the trainer" session to ensure every team member would be able to deliver this briefing, and they would make their initial focus the local EDI committees within departments and faculties, and after that determine which other groups within College should be the next priority.

### **11.0 Update and future plans from Able@Imperial**

11.1 LP said that Able would work closely with KK going forward on the briefing sessions for managers. They were also planning to raise awareness by organising drop-in sessions for staff and managers. They had also been working with Imperial As One recently with the aim of putting on a poetry workshop for disabled staff, and they were looking forward to running the joint staff-student panel with Imperial College Union in the new academic year.

### **12.0 AOB**

12.1 As JN was about to leave the College in July, LP thanked JN for being a brilliant executive sponsor of the Able network. JN thanked everybody for their work on disability equality at Imperial and wished the Committee best of luck in keeping the agenda at the forefront of the College's attention. The rest of the Committee also thanked JN for being a sponsor and a chair. HBR said that a paper was going to Provost's Board for ensuring a seamless handover to another senior member of the College to take over the work of sponsoring the disability staff network and chairing the DAC.