

Imperial College  
London

---

**REPORT FROM THE WORKING  
TOGETHER TASK GROUP**

July 2021



## Introduction

# from the Co-Chairs of the Working Together Task Group

As we emerge from the pandemic and enforced remote working, we are about to enter a new world in which we teach and research differently. It's an appropriate time to rethink how we work together: times of change are also times of opportunity.

The events of the past year have given many of us cause to think about how we structure our personal interactions. We set up the Working Together Task Group (WTTG) to explore ways that everyone can contribute their best to Imperial's mission to deliver world class scholarship, education, and research, and to eliminate bullying in all its forms from our working culture, developing kindness and mutual support as underpinning principles.

Fulfilling this objective goes alongside our high ambitions for the College, for the impact of our research and for our educational mission. We want the work of the WTTG to make a difference to the culture of Imperial and to ensure that change is both deep and lasting. We fervently believe that a culture of kindness and generosity is at the heart of exceptional performance in a modern university.

Being at Imperial has always meant working hard and asking much of ourselves and of others; this puts a lot of pressure on us all and progress is never made without deep commitment. There is an inevitable element of competition in research, and any environment in which new discoveries and applications are being tested and honed at rapid pace

is a demanding one. To be world-leading requires us to compare ourselves against the best and to find ways to push the boundaries of academia forward – to be aware of global trends and new ideas, to understand how they impact our work and to build on them.

While we recognise this pressure as part of being at the forefront of innovation, we are certain that a respectful and collaborative working environment is essential to support us all in our mutual mission to improve and innovate. Indeed, it is only in a supportive environment that we can do our best work, one in which people feel their contributions are appreciated.

Now is the right time to think collectively about how to create a working environment in which our individual behaviours embody our collective values. That's what the WTTG has sought to do over the past few months. The Task Group, made up of a range of leaders from across the College communities, has listened to more than 130 individuals who have given us a sense of some of the challenges we face and provided ideas about what we need to change, and how we can go about doing so.

This report summarises the themes that have emerged from our sessions, and the actions we hope to implement over the next academic year. We hope this will guide our culture into one where ambition and excellence are valued, and respect and kindness are deeply embedded in our working lives.

We are grateful to the members of the Task Group and facilitators, who have committed time and energy to the project. We are also immensely grateful to those who have taken part in the listening for action sessions and been so generous with their thoughts, advice and questions.

We have emerged from this process convinced Imperial can be a happy and productive place where talented students and staff feel welcome and succeed as we recover from the pandemic, and that there are practical steps we can take together to ensure this is the case.

Ian and Peter

**Ian Walmsley, Provost**

**Peter Openshaw, Senior Consul**

## Context

The Working Together Task Group was established in January 2021 with a specific focus on listening to our community and delivering concrete proposals that will help set the conditions for a positive working environment and culture for our staff and students. Conversations with staff and students have been central to this work, comprising eight Listening for Leadership Action meetings for staff and students in leadership roles across a range of levels, and six Listening for Action meetings for wider staff and students. A survey was also circulated to invite the views of those who wanted to contribute but were unable to attend a meeting.

This report presents the feedback from these meetings and survey, describing critical barriers experienced in working effectively to deliver Imperial's academic mission and identifying priority areas for action to build a respectful and collaborative culture, where everyone is able to contribute their best in support of the College's effectiveness as a world-leading university.

## Approach

The fourteen Listening for Leadership/Action meetings were held between 17 May and 23 June, 8 for leaders, 3 for wider staff and 3 for students, in total engaging 78 College leaders (including student union officers and student leadership representatives), 41 staff and 15 students from a range of subjects and levels. The feedback from these conversations has been analysed into 32 themes of recurring issues and ideas. The report describes these themes and identifies the most significant barriers to working effectively and which need to inform change to College practices and policies. The report then progresses to propose related practical actions to achieve improvements to College culture and ways of working. A full action plan will be developed for the Autumn term.

## Themes

Each of the themes identified emerged from broader conversations about Imperial culture. During these conversations, groups explored what culture is and how it develops, why culture matters and the existing work that is underway to support the development of respectful and collaborative ways of working. The groups were then asked three questions from which the themes are drawn:

1. What are the challenges you face in working in a respectful and collaborative way?
2. And so what more can the College do to enable you to work respectfully and collaboratively?
3. And (as leaders) what can you do to ensure you contribute to creating a respectful and collaborative culture?

**Before proceeding to consider actions to improve Imperial’s culture and ways of working, here are the 32 themes identified with a brief description below, with some example quotes from the sessions:**

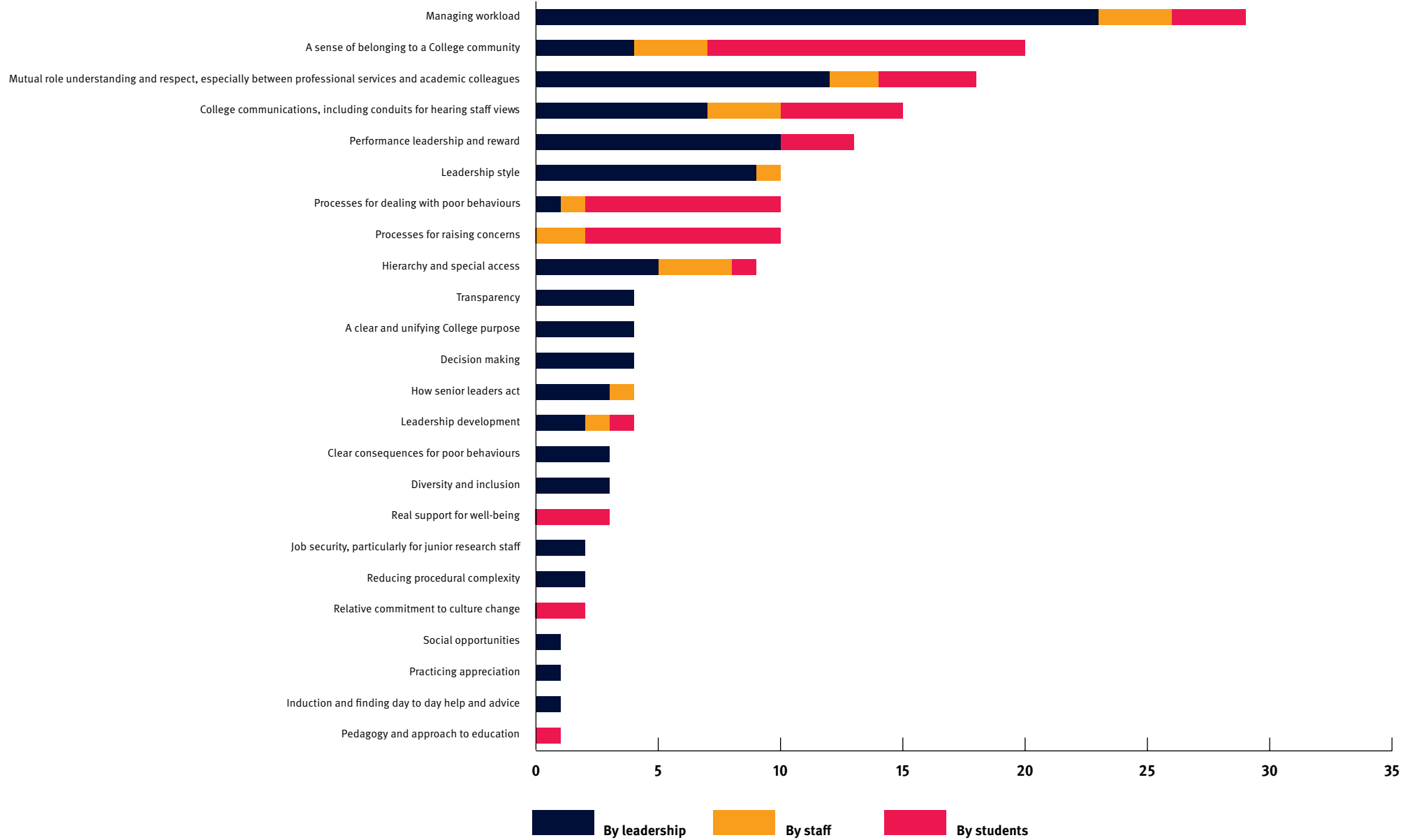
- 1. Social opportunities:** requests for more staff and student meeting spaces, funds and encouragement for community building events and departmental retreats – *“Imperial must create environments where ‘social integration’ approaches support optimum learning and teaching for students”*.
- 2. Actively cultivating collaboration:** interest in more active and intentional collaboration on problems and challenges facing the College, including building networks of colleagues to share good practice. Links collaboration to promotion (also mentioned in 4, below) – *“develop networks further – so people know who is doing similar work and share good practice”*.
- 3. Managing workload:** the impact of high workload was one of the most commonly mentioned issues, ranging from this being generally too high to it creating a pressurised environment that fosters competition and poor behaviours. Staff comments included: *“unrealistic expectations based on the time we each have and the multiple commitments”, “very pressurised deadlines”, “competing with other colleagues/departments for resources”*.
- 4. Performance leadership and reward:** a general sense that only academic excellence is valued and that collaborative and respectful behaviours need to be both measured and rewarded, including influencing promotions. This also includes the need for clearer career pathways. Comments included *“drivers for academic promotion can be at odds with respectful and collaborative behaviours”*.
- 5. Practising appreciation:** balancing Imperial’s emphasis on excellence with an equal attention to celebrating individual and collective achievements. Staff wanted to see a President’s award for Professional Services and more *“sharing the work of others/celebrating success”*.
- 6. College communications, including conduits for hearing staff views:** a sense that communications tend to be both lacking and predominantly local rather than College wide, meaning that colleagues struggle to identify with the College as a whole. This point also extends to colleagues looking for ways to be heard and an interest in technical solutions for both; the College needs more *“meaningful, two-way communication. Reciprocal”*.
- 7. Clear consequences for poor behaviours:** if the College is going to take values seriously then there also needs to be an understanding that poor behaviour will be addressed and evidence that it has been (also relates to points 20 and 23, below), as there is *“a perceived lack of consequence for misbehaviour at any level”*.
- 8. How senior leaders act:** the College’s most senior leaders need to be more visible, accessible and clearly demonstrate College values as there is a *“lack of strong role models at senior leadership level that model behaviours like compassionate leadership and collaboration”*.
- 9. Job security, particularly for research staff:** junior research staff do not feel that they have the time to contribute to the College community as the precarity of their employment position leads to the prioritisation of pursuing funding and positions – *“for junior researchers, a lack of job security places excessive pressures to chase funding, focus on research output, searching for positions”*.
- 10. Hierarchy and special access:** linking to points 6 and 8, above, Imperial is experienced as being very hierarchical which means that certain voices are privileged and so gain access to influence, opportunities and positions that others are excluded from – *“difficult to influence upwards – particularly if you are a minority”*.
- 11. Mutual role understanding and respect, especially between professional services and academic colleagues:** related to 6, above, there is low understanding and appreciation of work undertaken by others across the College and of mutual interdependencies, leading to poor mutual respect. Staff and students commented that there is a need for *“clearer understanding of what differing roles and differing parts of the College actually do”* and that *“divisions between academics and professional staff causes conflict”*.
- 12. Diversity and inclusion:** taken together with 10, above and point 21, below, colleagues commented on the general lack of diversity evident in Imperial, particularly on College committees and the challenges that this represents for staff from minority ethnic backgrounds in particular, *“ethnic group members feel different and it is intimidating – trying hard to fit in and not comfortable”*.

- 13. A sense of belonging to College community:** related to 6, above, the experience of College community seems to be fractured and siloed, with students expressing a sense of marginalisation – *“there is a fundamental gap in the public face of Imperial’s representation of its perception and treatment of students – and the actual reality”* with a *“them and us’ culture needs addressing”*.
- 14. Transparency:** a feature of 6, above, there is interest in greater consultation with the College community and more openness in decision making – *“especially when implementing new management and governance structures, consideration should be given to transparency”*.
- 15. Leadership style:** colleagues’ feedback offers a comprehensive description of the leadership that Imperial needs now, ranging from psychologically informed, to facilitating open conversations, to developing talent with *“kindness and compassion”*.
- 16. A clear and unifying College purpose:** points 6 and 13 would be facilitated through the development of a cohering mission. What does Imperial stand for and what is the College now ambitious to achieve overall? The College needs *“a clear and distinct position on what Imperial stands for to all stakeholders and a joined up approach to delivering that”*.
- 17. Leadership development:** leaders are recognised as local cultural enablers who need appropriate development to demonstrate the kind of leadership that colleagues are looking for, at point 15, above. There was agreement that there is a *“lack of training, support and supervision for managers of people with management level responsibilities”*.
- 18. A college leadership community:** could build a sense of College cohesion, creating connections and building alignment through *“encouraging Forums so that groups working together can discuss matters”*.
- 19. Decision-making:** who and how decisions are made and how they can be influenced needs to be clearer – *“when people are under pressure or in a hurry... Clear terms of reference is an important part of the process”*.
- 20. Processes for raising concerns:** the College needs to introduce ways of speaking out that feel safe to staff; speaking out is currently avoided for fear of retribution. There is a need for *“feeling safe raising concerns”* and for *“explicit mechanisms to raise complaints without fear of retribution”*.
- 21. EDI training, especially for leaders:** leadership development needs to integrate EDI training to ensure that all managers address and reflect on their own practice and bias – *“All current senior leaders to take EDI training / development and address their own practice”*.
- 22. Culture champions:** an idea that could be developed, which involves identifying good leadership practice and inviting these colleagues to mentor others – *“there are clearly a lot of people (such as ourselves) who feel strongly about changing the culture for the better”*.
- 23. Processes for dealing with poor behaviours:** part of the disinclination to speak out is the sense that nothing will happen once a concern is raised, combined with the opacity and complexity of the processes that exist. Comments encouraged more *“calling out bad behaviour and providing active bystander training, whilst building a sense of trust”*.
- 24. Exit interviews:** accompanying point 25 below, there is a sense that the College could learn a lot from the reasons behind staff turnover – *“Exit interviews are important and must not be a tick box exercise but a meaningful compulsory action which takes place a soon as someone resigns. Exit interviews must be a standard process and we must learn how to make them meaningful”*.
- 25. Induction and finding day to day help and advice:** linked but not exclusively related to procedural complexity, staff and student experience would be humanised by a simple structured welcome combined with clarity about where to find answers to regular questions – *“review Induction Training – to support responsibilities re: contributing to a positive culture”*.
- 26. Relative commitment to culture change:** students and the Student Union consider themselves to have demonstrated greater commitment to and action on culture change than leadership have. This needs to change – *“the Student Union’s commitment to create a respectful and collaborative environment into its own espoused commitment to improve the culture for students”*.
- 27. Real support for well-being:** at the moment, well-being support places greater demands on staff and students to access as it is extraneous to the work and role, assuming that the fault lies within the individual rather than within the context and culture of pressure. Students in particular stressed that *“these ‘Listening for Action’ sessions are viewed as a force for good if they are listened to and acted upon by College leadership”*.

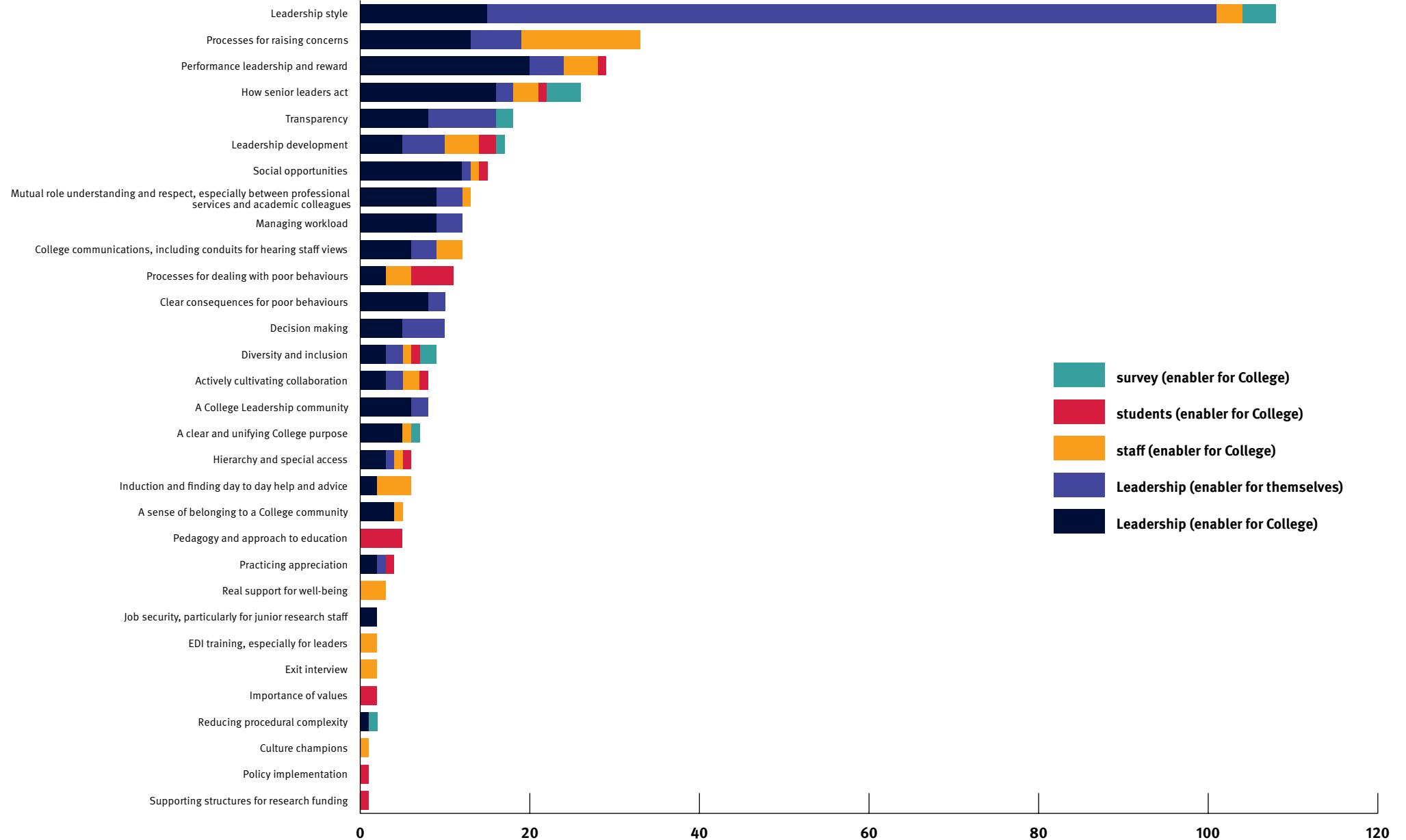
- 8. Pedagogy and approach to education:** students are looking to explore course structures that facilitate breadth of learning rather than pressurised regurgitation – *“some undergraduate students thought that Imperial places marked emphasis on ‘memory recall and exams’ to assess learning. However, this method of assessment means that students are being ‘trained’ to achieve degrees, rather than to become adept in the application of the subject under study”*.
- 29. Policy implementation:** a sense that policies are developed rather than implemented and that implementation needs to be more disciplined – *“Organisational integrity would be increased if an external independent organisation held responsibility to oversee the implementation of Imperial College policies”*.
- 30. Importance of values:** a recognition that values underpin but won’t change anything without related practice and action – *“there was a high level of doubt from attendees that having defined values alone would make any difference to College culture”*.
- 31. Supporting structures for research funding:** reducing pressure on academics by providing additional support for the project management aspects of research funding – *“provide additional mechanisms to support the project management aspects of research funding to reduce pressure on academics”*.
- 32. Reducing complexity:** colleagues aren’t clear about the structure of who is responsible for what and systems and processes take excessive amounts of time to manage owing to their complexity – *“avoid doing more work adding complexity as a default response to every issue that arises. This adds stress and does not lead to better interactions and collaborations”*.

**The following charts introduce the themes and their importance to staff and students, both as barriers to and enablers of effectiveness.**

**Figure 1. Number of comments citing theme as a barrier by leadership, staff and students**



**Figure 2. Number of comments citing theme as an enabler for either the College or themselves (leaders only)**





## Taking action

Imperial wants to take real and practical steps to improve College culture, in the longer term intending to be as ambitious for the working environment as for academic excellence. For now, the College needs some solid starting points that can be implemented and that deliver visible impact. And these starting points are just that; culture cannot be treated as a technical problem that can be mechanically fixed but rather needs to be approached as a socio-relational dynamic – meaning that early actions will create a platform for impact evaluations and for subsequent iterations and improvements.

The Provost's and President's Boards have already committed to the following actions as a result of their Listening for Leadership Action conversation:

### a) To support cross-College culture

- Improve leadership transparency through clear and authentic two-way communication on issues facing the College community
- Using a consultative leadership approach, bringing people into conversations to create solutions to problems
- Build a stronger sense of community and pride, celebrating under-recognised contributions

### b) To improve senior team dynamics

- Actively build mutual respect into interactions with and between different parts of the community
- Build trust and friendship by means of more informal interactions

Alongside these, the WTTG proposes actions that:

- 1 Signal the College's bold and honest intent
- 2 Apply to the College as a whole
- 3 Build on, amplify and accelerate existing work
- 4 Can be developed and are sustainable

The recommendations are also informed by a growing body of work on developing organisational culture, most particularly [from the NHS](#). This, together with considerable academic work on the subject, all confirm the central importance of leadership as the distributed enabler of an intentional culture. Alongside leadership, the literature cites five other significant cultural enablers:

- Vision and values
- Goals and reward
- Learning and innovation
- Teamworking
- Structures and systems

## Recommendations

The WTTG therefore proposes that early action be taken on the seven recommendations outlined below. The proposed actions in bold are those that, when combined, are likely to have the most visible and immediate effect on College culture. A full action plan will be developed for the Autumn term.

<b>1. Values</b>	The conversations about culture were predicated on the existence of a set of College values (collaboration, respect, integrity, excellence, innovation), with a focus on the two that are currently less evident in practice (respect and collaboration). The WTTG Listening for Action exercise lends distributed support to the <b>early agreement and implementation of these values.</b>
<b>2. Senior leadership role modelling</b>	As the recent episode of senior leadership bullying was a principle catalyst for this work, <b>it is now imperative that senior leaders (Provost's and President's Board, HoDs) lead in a way that is visible and demonstrably aligned with College values.</b>
<b>3. Building a College identity and community</b>	<p>Perhaps exacerbated by the pandemic, there is now a real opportunity to build a proud College community that counteracts a prevalent sense of dislocation; a community that colleagues can both identify with and contribute to. Possible actions that would most clearly inform this identify include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>a.</b> Enriching the College strategy with a clear statement of College purpose (i.e. what is Imperial for in 2021 and beyond?) and accompanying ambitions for Imperial's culture (how colleagues will experience working for Imperial).</li><li><b>b. Celebrating the successes and achievements of Imperial's extraordinary individuals and teams at a College level.</b> This would need to cover all staff across academic, research, teaching and professional, technical and operational services and students to contribute to cultivating the mutual respect that many mentioned needed to be encouraged.</li><li><b>c.</b> Workload versus well-being should feature on the College risk register, monitored through HR and absenteeism data. Under the Provost's Board 'workload workstream' we will coordinate with departments to identify activities that can be stopped or reduced in scope.</li><li><b>d.</b> Building on the well-received Staff Forum, <b>introduce new or refined regular College communications</b> for example, a regular President's and Provost's Board message or newsletter alongside more interactive opportunities. Staff are keen to be able to engage with and inform College plans.</li><li><b>e.</b> Improving communications would also contribute to improving senior leadership visibility, especially if senior leaders could hold meetings with staff and students in different parts of the College/attend Departmental meetings regularly and as a matter of course.</li><li><b>f.</b> Which also relates to the need to invest in more open, social spaces and opportunities to encourage staff and students to meet and mingle, encouraging the everyday connection that builds community and sparks curiosity.</li></ul>

<p><b>4. Reward, recognition and recruitment</b></p>	<p>As culture and ways of working become more important to Imperial, <b>both need to be integrated throughout College reward and recognition mechanisms.</b> From now on, valued behaviours need to be integrated throughout performance and promotion conversations. For example, questions such as ‘how have you shown respect and encouraged collaboration?’ need to become the norm. Similarly, Imperial recruitment materials need to emphasise College culture and induction could be reframed as a College Welcome with culture being emphasised. Exit interviews need to record the importance of culture to staff turnover.</p>
<p><b>5. Leadership style</b></p>	<p>Imperial must help leaders to lead well, many of whom are promoted with little leadership experience or development. To address this, Imperial should <b>develop a statement of College Leadership Principles and Practice</b> to inform and guide leaders’ style and stance. Offering guidance on approaches to team and 1-2-1 meetings, the guide should stress the importance of the leaders’ role in shaping local culture, in transparent communications and <b>particularly in managing workload, which was the most frequently cited barrier. Senior leaders need to demonstrate this guide in practice as critical role models.</b></p>
<p><b>6. Leadership development</b></p>	<p>As culture shapers and makers, leaders also need developmental support, starting with a <b>required ‘Orientation/Induction to Leadership’</b> on appointment and being more extensively available to existing leaders. All leadership development needs to ensure leaders reflect on the power inherent in their position, leadership styles, communications, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, addressing poor behaviours and performance under pressure. Leaders also need to receive regular 360 feedback on their impact to inform their development, reward and recognition.</p> <p>3(d), above, could also be facilitated by the creation of a ‘Forum’ in which leaders regularly convene to discuss College challenges as a basis for agreed staff communications.</p>
<p><b>7. Enabling speaking up</b></p>	<p>Whilst developing leaders to address poor behaviours will enable speaking up, taking action on poor behaviours does need to be strengthened, potentially by <b>developing the existing role of Harassment Advisor into that of a Culture Champion.</b> Skilled in encouraging colleagues to speak up, the lead Champion would report to the senior leadership team and provide data to the wider College community. This would need to be accompanied by the development of new or existing straightforward policies for addressing poor behaviours.</p>

*\*We recognise there are different levels of leadership and the actions will need to be appropriate and tailored to these different groups, we do not expect every action will be for every leadership group*

**It will be important that the impact of these recommendations and the resulting actions is evaluated. Because we are seeking a change in working culture, this will require some measures of perception and reception, as well as those that can be assessed more quantitatively.**

## Conclusion

We recognise that this report is the beginning of our work as leaders and as a community. It will take time to embed the change in culture that we all wish to see. However, it is the sincere hope of all those involved in the Working Together Task Group that the discussions we have had across the community, along with the report and recommendations we have compiled from those discussions, will signal the College's commitment to creating an outstanding, collaborative and compassionate culture for staff and students and gives some practical and measurable steps towards making this a reality. The proof of our effectiveness will be judged by how far staff and students at Imperial recognise this to be the case, and can continue to make our community one in which all can thrive.

### Working Together Task Group

**Ian Walmsley**, Provost (Co-chair)

**Peter Openshaw**, Senior Consul (Co-chair)

**Francisco Veloso**, Dean of the Business School

**Emma McCoy**, Interim Vice-Provost  
(Education and Student Experience)

**Deborah Ashby**, Director of the School of Public Health

**Peter Haynes**, Head of Department of Materials

**Richard Martin**, Director of Academic Services

**Harbhajan Brar**, Director of Human Resources

**Tony Lawrence**, Director of Finance

**Michaela Flegrova**, Deputy President (Education),  
Imperial College Union

**Louisa Hardman**, External Facilitator

### With support from the Organisational Development team

**Susan Littleson**, Deputy Director –  
Organisational Development and Inclusion

**Nichola Stallwood**, Head of Learning and  
Organisational Development

**Angus Brown**, Head of Operational Improvement

**Melanie Lee**, Senior Organisational Development Consultant