A review of Imperial College's institutional culture and its impact on gender equality

1. Background

In 2015, the College commissioned Dr Alison Phipps from the Centre for Gender Studies at the University of Sussex to undertake a research project following a series of events involving the men's student rugby team, which culminated in an investigation of the 2015 Varsity tournament on the grounds of sexism and unacceptable behaviour. In her statement on the Varsity incident, the then Vice-Provost for Education Professor Debra Humphris said: 'As an institution that strives for excellence, we must take a leading role in moving towards a more mutually respectful community.'

The Provost's Board agreed that the research questions for the project would be:

- How do we assess and understand institutional culture as it impacts on gender equality?
- How does Imperial College's institutional culture impact on gender equality?
- How do we evolve our culture to promote gender equality?

The Provost's Board recognised that some of the project findings might not show the College in its best light but the opportunity for the organisation, and the wider sector, to learn and respond to the research was considered more important than any natural concern about potential negative publicity. This report has been prepared in conjunction with the researchers who have agreed that it contains key elements of the research and the full set of recommendations.[1] This document may be circulated freely. It is hoped that this report will encourage further discussion and engagement with staff and students on ways we can evolve our culture to be an exemplar of an inclusive and respectful place to work and study.

The research project lasted a year and was supported by Dr Liz McDonnell as co-researcher and Jess Taylor, an expert organisational change consultant, who co-facilitated a process of action inquiry and contributed to the final report submitted to the College. At the outset, it had been agreed that the research findings would be confidential for internal review but that a report would be made available for wider circulation and publication. The research findings were submitted in August 2016, and reviewed by the President, the Provost, the Vice-Provost for Education, the Provost's Envoy for Gender Equality, the Chief Financial and Operations Officer, the Director of Human Resources and the Chair of the Steering Group for the Project.

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[1] Direct quotes from the dataset have been removed.

2. What is meant by institutional culture?

Culture is the tool kit of habits, skills and styles with which individuals construct their behaviour[2]. In a University, this means work/teaching/study practices and established modes of interaction. Culture also includes beliefs: in a university these would be around what the institution is, and what it means to exist within it. These are linked to values – for example, excellence and equality – which can be top-down or bottom-up, internal- or external-facing, and stated and/or experienced (in other words, an institution's stated values may not be what its staff and/or students experience in practice). Institutional cultures interact with social categories such as gender, race and class. This refers to the types of people who are dominant or marginalised, and favoured ideas or ways of being. Institutional cultures produce particular ways of working and behaving and some people, usually from more privileged social groups, are better equipped to survive institutional cultures than others. These dynamics do not just concern gender: from the start, Drs Phipps and McDonnell adopted an intersectional approach[3] to the project.

3. Research methodology

The research project involved multiple methods starting with the issues and experiences of the volunteer participants. The approach was qualitative, stressing the importance of collecting in-depth data which were rich and detailed, and seeing value in each case and person who contributed. The approach captured aspects of institutional culture and intersecting inequalities in different ways. The first phase of the research involved documentary analysis, in depth and more informal interviews, focus groups, an open-text survey, participant and non-participant observation, and an anonymous WordPress blog. In the second phase an Action Inquiry process was implemented. Most of the face-to-face data collection occurred at IC's South Kensington campus, although drop-in sessions and interviews were also conducted at St Marys, Hammersmith and Charing Cross Hospital sites[4].

Action Inquiry had not been envisaged during the original commission, but was introduced (and approved by Provost's Board) after the preliminary data analysis as the best way to give the institution tools to evolve its culture. Sussex University provided additional funding to the researchers (through an ESRC Impact Acceleration Grant) for work with organisational change consultant Jess Taylor on this aspect of the methodology. Twelve themes that resonated with different aspects of the College's culture (positive and negative) were identified and, with help from key stakeholders and the Steering Group, four themes emerged as most significant.

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[2] Swidler, A (1986) 'Culture in action: Symbols and strategies', in *American Sociological Review* 51(2): 273-286

[3] Intersectionality is a term which refers to the interconnected nature of social structures and identities such as race, class, gender, sexuality, age and disability. Crenshaw, K (1991) 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', in *Stanford Law Review* 43(6), 1241–99

[4] Several attempts were made to visit the Silwood campus but this was not ultimately possible due to a lack of participation.

These were *Empathy*, *Authority*, *Silence/Dissent* and *Failure*. Action Inquiry provided further opportunity to develop an understanding of the College's culture and explore these themes in more detail. The process also provided staff and students with opportunities to develop skills in personal, group and systems awareness which could be used as a basis for further work once the research project had been completed. This methodology was highly commended by the staff and students who took part, as an effective forum that led to meaningful participation.

Within the limited time frame of the project (one year) data were collected from 249 staff and students. Of those who declared their status it was recorded that 127 staff and 85 students participated. Students were noticeably harder to recruit than staff which was disappointing given the origins of the study. Research participants were primarily self-selecting, although some individuals were specifically approached, for example members of FemSoc, students involved in sport, Women's Tutors, SU Sabbatical Officers and a number of staff in managerial roles. All the contributions were anonymised in the results and this was a factor in encouraging people to come forward. Participants who identified as being from under represented/minority/ marginalised groups were actively encouraged to attend. This included, but was not restricted to, (self-identified) women and non-binary people, BAME people, people from different cultural backgrounds, people with disabilities, people who identified as LGBTQIA+, people who considered themselves to be working class, people on short-term contracts, part-time staff, international staff, and those who felt their age (younger or older) or religious background made a difference to their experience of studying or working at Imperial. This strategy worked well and some participants from these groups said that they had felt encouraged to be involved.

4. Findings: Institutional culture at Imperial College

The researchers observed that Imperial College's institutional culture is structured around the core concept of 'excellence'. Excellence was the most commonly mentioned external-facing value by staff and students in the research interviews, who were quick to identify this aspect of the College's mission and brand. For most, the meaning was restricted to excellence in research despite the fact that the College's publicised mission statement gives equal prominence to research and education in the excellence context. Pedagogic excellence and the social contributions of its work were not cited as key features of the College's culture.

Most participants believed the College was achieving its goals for research excellence and the outputs were commonly thought of as 'innovative' and 'cutting edge', resonating with the College's external projection of itself as 'a community of problem-solvers dedicated to finding innovative solutions to the world's biggest challenges[5]'. Participants saw research excellence in metricised terms, positioning

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[5] College Strategy 2015-20

the College as a top-level player within the UK and in the world.   The College's culture in pursuit of excellence was described as very competitive and wanting to be the best.

Many participants said the College was a place in which an individual could excel. Staff elaborated on the various ways in which the College supports talent and achievement, for instance through the Postdoc Development Centre and other training courses and coaching opportunities. There were also references to staff being able to work flexibly for a variety of reasons ranging from family commitments to medical conditions, which was very much appreciated. The majority of the participants were passionate about their work and studies.

A word cloud was produced by the researchers representing the frequency of different descriptors survey respondents used in relation to the College's culture.

Figure 1: words used to describe Imperial College's culture

The word cloud included 246 positive descriptors, such as 'open', 'friendly', 'diverse' and 'supportive'. There were also 213 words which could be described as 'ambiguous', which means that they can be interpreted as either or both positive

and/or negative. Three of these - 'competitive', 'ambitious' and 'driven' - were three of the four most commonly cited words in the cloud. There were also 186 words with negative connotations: for example, 'cutthroat', 'intimidating', 'blaming', 'arrogant'.

Many participants in the survey and other methods felt that the external focus on excellence had emphasised internal competition rather than collaboration. This competition was noted as often being individualistic and adversarial. Competition, pressure and stress were identified as weaknesses by roughly equal numbers to those who had defined 'research excellence' as a strength.

The researchers observed that excellence was considered to be a primary shaping value externally and internally and this had served the College well in many ways but their data suggested that this dominant focus had a negative impact on wellbeing and social equity. They argued that the competitive, individualistic pursuit of research excellence often comes at the expense of other values, which are not held in parity.

The impact of the Imperial culture on staff and student wellbeing was commented on throughout the research. It was felt that there was an all-consuming focus on academic performance, and negative attitudes towards those who did not do well or who were not as driven as others. There was a reported lack of community spirit in the College's culture including departments being 'played off against each other'. Participants spoke of feeling pressure to be 'good enough' as a result of the competitive pursuit of excellence. It was felt that engagement between members of the College lacked empathy, and there was sometimes insufficient support for staff and students to manage the demands and expectations set by themselves and others. It was suggested that the College, in the words of one participant, 'threw people in at the deep end' and if you were able to 'swim' then you belonged to the institution and could be confident you were 'Imperial material'.

Despite the existence of positive mechanisms within the institution, it was felt that being in need of support could still be construed as shameful, weak, and evidence of failure. This was additionally complicated for people who experienced marginality across more than one intersection (women with disabilities, for example, or LGBT people of colour). Participants had questions about who was most deserving of support and under what conditions. Participants also discussed high levels of 'self-management' and of hiding perceived vulnerabilities, that reduced authentic presence (e.g. the ability to be themselves at work or study).

The research findings noted comments that the lack of communal space on the campus had contributed to a lack of a community spirit. It was suggested that the College had 'an impersonal culture' and groups could therefore self-segregate in the absence of mechanisms for them to connect. Participants mentioned fragmented units or silos, and a divide between professional services staff and academics which could lead to losses of continuity and poor knowledge exchange.

There were many examples given to the researchers of bullying and discriminatory behaviour towards staff and students. These examples predominantly reflected hierarchies in work or study arrangements. Bullying also intersected with categories such as class, gender (and gender identity), race, disability and sexual orientation. The researchers reported that many of the participants linked it with the 'elite' white masculinity of the majority population, although a few examples of unacceptable behaviour by female staff and students were also cited. Examples of misogynistic and homophobic conduct were given and one interviewee expressed concern that the 'ingrained misogyny' at Imperial was so deep that it had become normal. The researchers contended that this type of unacceptable behaviour is more likely to occur in a highly pressurised, competitive environment and that research participants had suggested that there was too much focus on finance and individual academic research interests to the detriment of staff wellbeing or student welfare and needs.

Although the College describes itself as a supportive environment, and many positive examples of that support were cited, a number of participants felt that senior management would turn a blind eye to poor behaviour if the individual involved was of value to the College. Although the symbolic and real power of figureheads with good intentions and aspirations was recognised and appreciated, most participants identified leadership as a phenomenon which occurred at a distance rather than in closer, and more facilitative, ways. Leadership at Imperial College was described in terms of power differentials in individuals' ability to influence the system or 'do things their way'.

Despite Imperial's 'no tolerance' stance on harassment and bullying and initiatives such as 'Have Your Say', the researchers heard that people did not 'speak up' about many issues, ranging from discrimination and abuse to more subtle practices that leave people feeling vulnerable, unheard or undermined. When questioned on why this might be, the participants suggested that this was due to three main factors: the fear that nothing will be done, the fear of losing one's job due to speaking out, and the fear that it will make things worse in other ways. 'Speaking up' also intersected with equalities issues, and women in particular reported being silenced in various ways. Relations between PIs and contract researchers were especially difficult, and often gendered as the PI was very often a man and the researcher a woman.

It was reported that there was also a clear sense of staff and students feeling afraid to speak up about issues and not receiving clear information or answers due to unclear institutional processes and one-way communication channels. The researchers used the visual metaphor of a complex system of pipework to represent the different ways in which communication (and action) pathways worked at the College. These were seen as affected by blockages, pressure, rust, leaks and creative deviations as people found individual ways of getting things done within the system. Participants also described a lack of connection between pipes within the

system as people worked in silos and those at the higher levels who tended to close themselves off. This representation of Imperial College as machine rather than organism resonated with observations on a culture of fear and silence, and the lack of empathy and community spirit at the College. It was suggested that there were multiple internal disconnections, rather than the flow-through which would enable the institution to engage in productive knowledge-sharing and collaboration and to offer support in more effective ways.

The problem of representation without meaningful participation was also noted: for instance, individuals from particular social or cultural groups being invited to represent those groups at meetings but not feeling heard or indeed comfortable to participate at all. Some of the participants identified a surface commitment to diversity and representation but a lack of substantive system processes to support this. The obstacles to participation in the way of doing things at Imperial, and the associated issues of fear and insecurity, were reported as leading to feelings of hopelessness, demotivation, and low morale among some staff and students.

It was suggested that the College's culture intersected with and exacerbated equality and diversity issues and hindered the College's efforts to ensure that all students and staff were able to thrive. It was noted that the College has a portfolio of equality and diversity policies and initiatives which were known of and viewed positively by some participants, for instance *Supporting People* and *Imperial Expectations*, training around recruitment and unconscious bias, the various staff networks and clubs and societies for students, and units such as the Postdoc Development Centre, the Disability Service and the Equality & Diversity Unit. Female academics were especially appreciative of support with maternity leaves through the Elsie Widdowson Fellowship, and the College's participation in the Athena SWAN scheme. However, many of the participants felt that these activities had failed to make inroads into problematic aspects of the institution's culture. Some participants felt that Athena SWAN had merely scratched the surface of issues or had just provided a veneer which concealed continuing inequalities and that events such as the annual Athena SWAN lecture were little more than a 'box ticking exercise.'

There was a feeling from some participants that the College did not promote equality and diversity at all. This was especially true of the student population: some participants were clearly unaware of the policies the College has in place. The researchers noted that it is difficult to promote equality and diversity within an institution which is 'so profoundly gendered, classed and raced'. This meant that intersecting equality issues must be tackled at a cultural level as there is a limit to what can be achieved by top-down policies and initiatives. They proposed that a strong commitment to staff and student wellbeing would undoubtedly help to mitigate the impact of inequalities at Imperial, but that there should also be a substantive process of cultural change.

5. Recommendations

The researchers proposed a wide range of recommendations for consideration by the College community. They urged the College to implement changes that would ensure that its excellence in research is matched by excellence in other areas. They presented a model contained within the acronym SHAPE, which would help the institution to develop 'emotional excellence' at institution, department, team and individual levels. The capacities within this model are described more fully in Appendix 1.

In order to move towards the SHAPE model, the researchers made the following recommendations to the College:

1. Imperial should continue with the process of Action Inquiry, working with the four themes already begun in our research and convening an additional set specifically focused on the SHAPE model of Emotional Excellence and how to develop this at IC. Sets should contain students and staff from all levels of the institution.

2. The College should also host an Open Space conference focused on how to evolve its culture based on our research findings. Open Space is a democratic, self-managing framework that enables participants to create their own programme of workshops around a central theme. Open Space conferences have no keynote speakers, no pre-announced schedules and no panels. Instead, participants self-organise based on what matters to them. Open Space enables a 'whole systems' approach to exploring complex issues. It cultivates connection and coalition across difference and supports collective commitment to implementing changes envisioned during the process.[6]

3. The College should work to transform the processes which conserve power within the institution in particular spaces and with particular types of people and values. This will require more deep thinking and the development of a variety of different actions, but we present some initial suggestions below.

4. IC should employ Action Inquiry as a process for democratic decision-making. This should involve students and staff at all levels of the institution and should be implemented whenever a decision is taken which has an impact on the whole College community (amendments to the Strategy, for example, or new building projects).

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[6] For more information on Open Space, see for example Owen, H (2008) *Open Space Technology: a user's guide*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

5. We note that IC has already committed to increase the number of Council appointments for people with protected characteristics. This is a positive step, but if appointees are predominantly from industrial and financial sectors it might bring demographic diversity without a corresponding diversity in values and priorities. IC should therefore commit to providing three external membership places on the College Council to civil society representatives from NGOs, public sector and community groups.

6. The College should consider adding student and staff representatives to the permanent membership of Provost's Board, and/or creating a 'suggestions box' where anonymous concerns can be raised and opinions aired (and a process of accountability for addressing these).

7. IC should create, or source, a leadership programme for all members of the institution which enables participants to develop at least some of the capacities contained within SHAPE. This should not be focused on techniques of management and monitoring but on leadership as a collective process of enabling transformative change.

8. The Provost should appoint a Vice-Provost for Student and Staff Equality and Wellbeing, who has full membership of Provost's Board and responsibility for developing Emotional Excellence and integrating equality & diversity provision within the institution. This individual would work closely with the Provost's Envoy for Gender Equality, and other key members of staff and student representatives.

9. IC should create a Centre for Emotional Excellence, housing welfare and wellbeing services and providing a venue for training around skills such as emotional intelligence and self-development courses. This should be located in a prominent position on the South Kensington campus.

10. Imperial should create a partnership with another university (domestically or internationally) known for strong critical and political social science/humanities, covering areas of research, teaching, and governance. This could include practices such as consultation on policies and procedures, strategic membership of committees, faculty teaching exchange, and joint funding bids/research projects focused on embedding science in social and political issues.

The researchers also made recommendations on how the College might measure success of changes to the institutional culture. The College was cautioned against the temptation to turn the report findings into a set of measurable targets which could exacerbate feelings of high pressure and stress. Creating accountability, conversations and reflection on how far goals are being achieved was considered more important as a mechanism to build trust, self-reflection and improve

connectivity within the organisation. It was recognised that cultural change is a complex process that takes time to evolve. Progress can be partially assessed through training, surveys and feedback, and particularly through ongoing engagement with staff and students through the Action Inquiry and other processes.

Finally, the researchers noted that their research findings should be the start of wider engagement and discussion on issues that had been identified – the beginning, not the end of a process of cultural evolution. The College was commended for commissioning the study and its willingness to face issues and contemplate change.

6. Acknowledgements

The Provost's Board would like to thank Alison Phipps, Liz McDonnell and Jess Taylor for their collaboration with the College on this project. There were challenging aspects to the commission but the researchers were generous with their time and demonstrated a personal commitment to work constructively and positively with the College during the research and the development of next steps.

Alison and Liz have asked that that this report acknowledge their gratitude to all the staff and students who were so generous with their time, thoughts and experiences. They thank members of the Steering Group and IC Students' Union, particularly Lucinda Sandon-Allum, Jennie Watson and Sky Yarlett for their contribution to, and enthusiasm for, their work. They also thank Louise Lindsay who acted as 'champion' and was a great supporter of the research.

Appendix 1 – the SHAPE model of Emotional Excellence

Emotionally Excellent organisations and people are:

Self-aware
Honest
Altruistic
Political
Empathic

"SHAPE should be nurtured at institution, unit, team and individual levels and these qualities seen in all aspects of College life, from the evolution of the IC Strategy to the operations of Provost's Board, to the interactions within individual research teams. The process of developing Emotional Excellence through SHAPE can be seen as cyclical and holistic: emotionally excellent institutions SHAPE emotionally excellent individuals, and vice versa". Phipps and McDonnell

Self-awareness:
- *The capacity to recognise how emotions impact on opinions, attitudes and judgments*
- *The capacity to accept oneself and maintain motivation and connection with oneself and others*

Honesty:
- *The capacity to communicate feelings and perspectives in an upfront and respectful way*
- *The capacity to engage in self-reflection for personal growth*

Altruism:
- *The capacity to establish, grow and maintain diverse relationships in which others' needs are considered*
- *A deep commitment to creating social change*

Political consciousness:
- *The capacity to recognise, and work to mitigate, disparities of power*
- *A strong commitment to equality & diversity as a political principle*

Empathy:
- *The capacity to be present to and understand other people's thoughts and feelings*
- *The capacity to listen actively and authentically*