

# Strengthening NUS Democracy

**Proposed by:** Democratic Procedures Committee

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## Believes

1. National Conference 2016 voted for 12 principles for a more inclusive, transparent democracy that gives NUS' members real power to make informed decisions. (Appendix A)
2. All of the outgoing and incoming elected NUS full-time officers (FTOs) promised to work with the membership to return to National Conference 2017 with ideas for what this democracy could look like in practice. This motion contains those ideas.
3. Overseen by a Task Group of students, NUS officers, trustees and committee members (Appendix B), these ideas have been informed by a vast quantity of research, consultation and analysis, including but not limited to:
  - a) An evaluation of NUS' democracy using the Quality Students' Union criteria informed by surveys of NUS UK conference delegates, NEC members, students and interviews with NUS and students' union officers.
  - b) Desk-based research into processes used by democratic membership organisations and countries.
  - c) A survey of 2839 students asking how they'd like to make democratic decisions.
  - d) Two rounds of consultation with students' unions and a survey of 1430 students seeking their views on the ideas in this motion.
  - e) A breakdown of motions debated at NUS UK conference in 2015 and 2016 to establish the extent to which they are relevant to members from the different nations of the UK.
  - f) Support and advice from the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Westminster, and public participation experts Involve.
4. During the consultation and analysis, the following problems with NUS' democracy were consistently identified:
  - a) FE students' unions are underrepresented in NUS' decision-making and face major financial and other barriers to participation.
  - b) A hostile culture around NUS' decision-making puts people off from getting involved and speaking at democratic events.
  - c) HE delegates and NUS FTOs, NEC and/or committee members deliver a disproportionate number of speeches at conference and men feel more comfortable speaking on stage than women<sup>1</sup>.
  - d) Turnout in delegate elections is low, as is delegates' accountability to students and students' unions.
  - e) NUS has a lot of officers, too much policy and no way for members to prioritise policy effectively or hold officers to account.
  - f) There often isn't enough time in the agenda at conferences to properly debate complex issues.
  - g) There's not enough technical information to inform those debates.
  - h) The democratic processes and language NUS uses are too complex.
  - i) The vast majority of Education and Welfare policy debated at NUS UK events are specific to England and not applicable to members in devolved Nations (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland).
  - j) NUS is yet to follow the lead of many students' unions who have moved online their democratic processes, increasing engagement.
5. These type of concerns about NUS' democracy have been consistently echoed by students at the 23 unions which have held NUS affiliation referendums since National Conference 2016.

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<sup>1</sup> 58% of men feel comfortable compared to 31% of women

## Further Believes

1. That any behavioural change consistently called for within NUS' democratic culture cannot be achieved without structural change, because we adapt to fit the 'rules of the game' as they are at the moment.
2. As NUS celebrates its 95<sup>th</sup> birthday, it's vital that we consider whether practices and procedures that were relevant in 1923 - many of which we still use today - have a place in a modern democracy that needs to be responsive and relevant to our members.
3. The student movement is ahead of the curve on so many things but right now democracy is not one of them. Doing nothing is not an option. We must act to create a more inclusive, robust and transparent democracy. We have to change, and this is our opportunity to do it.
4. The ideas in this motion are arranged into four sections: A, B, C and D. Each section aligns with the four principles for a good democracy:
  - (i) Inclusiveness
  - (ii) Considered judgement
  - (iii) Popular control
  - (iv) Transparency

Graham Smith from the Centre for the Study of Democracy developed these principles which are central to the principles voted for by National Conference in April 2016. (Appendix A)


5. This part of the motion sets out the benefits of making these changes. The resolutions of the motion set out what we need to do to make them happen. A table aligning each of the resolves to the principles and the problems they are designed to address can be found in Appendix E.

### Section A. Ensuring members have access to and power over decisions affecting them

6. Holding meetings on a more regional basis would reduce the time and cost of taking part - making it more inclusive to less well-off FE and small HE students' unions. It would also help to build a sense of community and foster a culture of local collaboration between students' unions.
7. We will be a more powerful movement if there are clear roles specified for NUS, students' unions and students in achieving a policy demand and a network for coordinating this activity across the UK.
8. To ensure NUS UK policy proposals are always relevant to those debating them, NUS needs a means of debating and agreeing policy demands specific to England.
9. It is necessary to be clear which officers are responsible for leading on these policies in England. This would also help clarify which officers are accountable to all members, UK wide.
10. A more decentralised and federated structure that gives members the power to make decisions at the lowest level possible would help futureproof our democracy in the context of increasing devolution. NUS UK would be reframed as a joint endeavour between Nations and Regions which support (rather than undermine) each other in more stable, harmonious union.

### Section B. Using inclusive, high quality debate to inform considered decisions

11. A lot of the policy proposals at conferences are generally agreed with by everyone. If these sort of policy proposals were agreed in advance, more time at conferences would be available for debating more complex and/or controversial issues.
12. If the style and language of the debate were more straightforward and simple to understand then it would be easier for those with less experience to engage fully in the process.
13. Giving more people the opportunity to have the time and opportunity to speak at conferences would broaden the range of views that inform the debate.
14. Requiring the policy proposers to include technical information in motions would expand the information used to inform the debate beyond the political arguments.

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15. Good facilitation is crucial to ensuring a high quality debate and that a range of views are heard. If the person choosing who speaks has perceived factional allegiances, then it will lessen trust in the process.

#### Section C. Modernising our democracy to increase engagement

16. The 'plan of work' in the Nations has helped to democratically align the priorities of NUS Scotland, Wales and NUS-USI with their membership. A ballot of NUS' membership would help steer which NUS UK policies should be prioritised.
17. Enabling more members to vote online in NUS elections would increase the legitimacy of the elected NUS officers. Placing election speeches and manifestos online to enable members to vote after the event better reflects the financial and time demands placed on NUS' modern membership who may be at work (particularly in the case of apprentices) and/or in compulsory lessons (particularly in the case of FE students) during conferences.

#### Section D. Increasing the transparency and accountability of elected representatives


18. The only time members can directly hold FTOs to account is at conferences, which limits accountability those events, and those who have the resources to attend conferences. Greater accountability to members needs to be provided throughout the year.
19. The voting record of students' unions' delegates must be made public to increase transparency and the ability of students to hold them to account for decisions made in their name.


### **Resolves**

#### Section A. Ensuring members have access to and power over decisions affecting them

1. Bring students' unions in England together on a regional basis instead of Zones to debate ideas and agree local actions. See Appendix C for a list of these regions. Similar gatherings would continue to be held by the Nations through NUS Scotland, NUS Wales and NUS-USI.
2. To establish an organising network for each Region and Nation. The purpose of this network is to co-ordinate action on regional and national policy decisions. The network will be democratically controlled, through students' unions, and include both HE and FE members in order to maximise activity across as many institutions as possible.
3. To introduce a conference for students' unions in these Regions to come together and agree policy that is specific to England. This conference will elect a Welfare Officer, FE and HE Officer to be accountable for leading on and delivering policy demands.
4. To establish a clear criteria based on the devolved powers of governments in the UK (for DPC to interpret) about which policy proposals are decided at which level; *i.e.* Region, Nation or UK-wide.
5. To bring the National Society of Apprentices into the membership of NUS so Apprentices can access the democracy and representation of NUS. For the purposes of delegate entitlement, each apprentice would be counted as 0.4 of a FT student as some apprentices are already counted as 0.6 of a FT student at an FE college already in NUS membership.

#### Section B. Using inclusive, high quality debate to inform considered decisions

6. Introduce a pre-conference ballot to agree more consensual policy proposals in advance.. This ballot would be designed to identify proposals that have a broad consensus, and so would require a significant majority (calculated including abstentions) to be passed without debate. Because not everyone will necessarily understand specific issues that students from liberation groups might face, the Liberation campaigns can force a debate on any proposals agreed using this ballot.
  7. Add a section to motions for the policy proposer to include any financial, legal or other relevant technical information.
  8. Add a section to motions for the policy proposer to specify what action NUS will take and what action students' unions could take in achieving the goal.
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9. To replace the use of acronyms and jargon in our democracy with more accessible language wherever possible e.g. calling 'motions' 'proposals'.
  10. Introduce a debating style for the controversial proposals that allows more time for small group discussion, for people to seek clarification and ask questions as well as comment on the proposal.
  11. Replace the conference chair with a neutral student who is recruited by DPC and trained to facilitate the debate in an inclusive and impartial manner. Decisions regarding the democratic process (e.g. a count) will be made by DPC and will remain subject to democratic challenge.

#### Section C. Modernising our democracy to increase engagement

12. Introduce a post-conference ballot for members to prioritise the policy passed at conferences.
13. Increase the number of students' unions who can vote in NUS officer elections by streaming election speeches online and making candidates' manifestos available digitally for those who are unable or can't afford to attend conferences. These speeches will also be recorded so that those who are unable to watch them live can do so after the event. The ballot will be open in order to accommodate this.
14. To count the elections and priority ballots using the *inclusive Borda* count method (see Appendix D for an explanation of this process). In order to cast their online ballot, each students' union will receive a unique login password and be directed to NUS' website.

#### Section D. Increasing the transparency and accountability of elected representatives

15. Introduce monthly online accountability surgeries for NUS FTOs. Appointments can be booked in advance by members so that questions and concerns can be raised with officers using a videoconferencing platform (for example Skype).
16. Introduce an online process for students' unions to register dissatisfaction with a NUS FTO. A member can request a petition to be placed on NUS' website with an explanation of their concern. If a substantial number of students' unions sign the petition (e.g. more than 10%) it will force a vote of no confidence, if less than this number sign (more than 5%<sup>2</sup>), the officer has to prepare a formal report on their work.
17. Alongside sessions at events, as the accountability of officers will be conducted through the mechanisms above, it will no longer be necessary for the membership to elect a 'block of 15' onto NEC to do it on their behalf. However, vital engagement will be maintained by establishing an FE and HE network (including sections such as Postgraduates) with members from different regions feeding into the relevant NUS FTOs.
18. NEC will function primarily as a body made up of the elected leadership of NUS to make timely decisions outside of conferences.
19. Make students' unions' delegates' voting records public in order to increase the accountability of these representatives. This will be done after the event so that the relevant constituencies can hold their representatives to account for decisions made on their behalf.


#### **Further Resolves**

1. National Conference is the sovereign decision making body of NUS UK and is required to approve any changes to the Articles and Rules within its constitution including those that relate to NUS Wales, Scotland, NUS-USI and Liberation Campaigns.
2. Therefore if National Conference votes to approve the ideas in this motion then Democratic Procedures Committee (DPC) will work to write the specific changes that would need to be made to the Articles and Rules in the NUS UK constitution. These detailed changes will then be brought to an extraordinary National Conference to be scrutinised, amended and voted on.

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing NUS has 543 members





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3. To inform the decision of the extraordinary National Conference, these Rules and Articles changes will be subject to an Equality Impact Assessment.
  4. If these Rules and Articles changes are approved by the extraordinary conference, then DPC will lead a formal review of the new system after a period of three years. This evaluation will be based on the principles outlined in appendix A and informed by feedback from students and students' unions.

## **Appendices**

### **A – Principles voted for at NUS UK National Conference 2016**

Vision: Democracy within NUS should take active steps to put the power in the hands of the members to make transparent decisions through informed and inclusive debate that ensures that diverse voices are heard.

1. Students' unions are the constituent members of NUS.
  2. Students are members of their students' union and therefore their association with NUS is dependent upon their students' unions' membership of NUS.
  3. Democratic decisions within NUS should be made by its constituent members
  4. These democratic decisions are about reflecting what is in the best interests of students.
  5. The membership should feel that decision-making processes are representative and inclusive. However once a decision is made representatives of NUS should remain conscious that not everyone will agree with the decision.
  6. NUS and their elected leaders should act in the interests of students. The membership should then hold the elected leaders to account for their actions using a clear process that enables them to first question officers, and then take further action, within the democratic structures of NUS, if they are not satisfied with the answer.
  7. The primary role of elected officers within NUS is to lead the movement and harness its collective power to achieve its goals. Their work should therefore focus on how to secure these demands.
  8. Democratic decisions should be conducted using processes that maximise the principles of inclusiveness, popular control, transparency, considered judgement and efficiency as defined above and in Quality Students' Unions.
  9. The complex and diverse decisions made during the policy cycle would be best made by a complex and diverse group of our members. NUS should therefore give guidance and assistance to students' unions to be more democratic and ensure that their representatives are diverse.
  10. The autonomy of the Liberation campaigns should be supported so that those who define as such can determine the means via which they challenge their oppression across national borders whilst operating more centrally to make the wider movement more progressive.
  11. The NUS Nations lead on and achieve the movement's goals within a specific national context. The scope of their autonomous policy setting focuses on how to respond to devolved policy.
  12. There should be total clarity over what decisions are made where, why and who is accountable for the decision being implemented. The language used within our decision-making should be accessible and free from jargon and this language should be able to be replicated across Nations and different students' unions.
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## B – Stakeholder composition of the Task Group

- NUS UK National President\*
- NUS UK Vice President Union Development\*
- 2 members of NEC\*
- 2 members of the Charity board
- 2 members of the Services board
- 2 members of the NUS UK board
- 2 Liberation officers\*
- A Nations President \*
- A member of Democratic Procedures Committee\*
- A member of Elections Committee
- 2 Students' Union officers\*
- 2 Students' Union staff
- Two officers from Scotland (to ensure coordination with the NUS Scotland Governance review)\*

\*Elected students or student officers

## C – Regions

These regions are informed by a range of considerations including but not limited to major transports links, the Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill, Local Enterprise Partnerships and other third sector membership organisations. The proposal would be to start with these regions but leave sufficient flexibility in the Rules for us to try different configurations based on membership feedback:


- North West
- North East
- Yorkshire and The Humber
- West Midlands
- East Midlands
- East of England
- South East
- London
- South West

## D – Inclusive Borda count

*Inclusive Borda* counting is more aligned with the values of the student movement as it moderates the risk of 'tyranny of the majority' by reducing the chances of a candidate being elected who is supported by majority of the electorate but strongly opposed by a large minority.

It is similar to single transferable vote (STV) in so far as voters number the options (candidates or ideas) in order of preference. But instead of having a quota, Borda simply adds up the number of points each option receives in order to identify a winner. The number of options dictates the number of points. So if there are 5 options then a first preference receives 5 points, a second preference receives 4 points and so on.

Without the quota, *inclusive Borda* counting affords greater value to voters' lower preferences than with STV as every preference counts. Therefore, it is possible for the majorities' first preference not to win if it is last preference of the minority.



## E – Table of problems and solutions and principles

The table below seeks to clarify which problems (outlined in the Believes of this motion) the solutions (outlined in Resolves) aims to solve. Where relevant, it also outlines how each of these solutions satisfy the principles voted for by National Conference in 2016.

<b>Problem</b> (See Believes 4)	<b>Solutions</b> (See Resolves)	<b>Relevant principles</b> (See Appendix A)	<b>Explanation</b>
4A	1	8 (inclusiveness)	It reduces the cost and time of travelling to events, both of which are major barriers to FE engagement.
4A	12, 13 and 15	8 (inclusiveness and popular control) 3 and 6	If FE members continue to struggle to attend centralised events such as NUS UK conference, voting online ensures they still have a voice in elections and policy prioritisation. Online surgeries ensure they can question FTOs and hold them to account.
4B and 4C	10 and 11	8 (inclusiveness)	People are more likely to feel comfortable sharing their views and asking questions in small groups. Better facilitation will also help a more diverse range voices be heard.
4D	19	8 (transparency)	If delegates' voting records are made public then it will be easier for students to hold them to account for their actions.
4E	12, 13, 15	8 (popular control) and 6	These ideas will enable members to directly prioritise policy and hold officers to account.
4F	6	8 (considered judgement)	Agreeing some motions in advance will leave more time to debate more complex or confusing proposals.
4G	7	8 (considered judgement)	This will require those make policy proposals to provide technical information to inform the debate.
4H	9	8 (considered judgement and transparency) and 12	This will ensure that the language used within NUS' democracy isn't a barrier to engagement.
4I	3 and 4	7, 11 and 12	This will ensure that the debate is always relevant to everyone in the room. It will also make it clear which officers have the final say on devolved issues and make it clear who is responsible for which policies and accountable to which parts of the membership.
4J	6, 12, 13, 15, and 16	8	All these processes will be conducted online.