**NUS Liberation Conference 2022**

Connor Parish, Disabled Student (Voting Delegate)

**Pre-Conference Policy Ballot Voting**

Prior to the conference I was given all the policies which were open to discussion at the NUS Liberation Conference and was asked to vote for my top 3. After reading through them all, I voted in no particular order for the following polices, which I wished to be discussed at conference: Mental Health; Guide and Assistance Dogs & Decolonising & Diversifying Medical & Healthcare Education. I voted for these three as they were policies which most represented my delegation of disabled students.

**Day 1: Introductory Session, Talks and Voting**

Upon arrival at the first ever in-person Liberation Conference on day 1, we started in the auditorium for a welcome speech from the current President & Vice-President (Liberation & Equality). This was followed by an interesting talk and Q&A session run by Dr Koja Koram (Lecturer of Law at Birkbeck School of Law, University of London) in collaboration with NUS about decolonisation & decolonising education. At this point we were given the opportunity to listen to the two candidates for the VP (Liberation & Equality) role perform their manifesto speeches and vote for the role. I voted for Shane Simpson; however, the other candidate Nehaal Bajwa was successful as being elected in the role, starting 1st July for a two-year term.

**Day 1: Caucuses**

Following lunch, we were divided into our liberation groups of which we were the delegate for (Black, Disabled, LGBT+, Trans & Women) – of which I attended Disabled. Albeit this was advertised and supposed to be a space/ perfect opportunity for NUS and attending unions to discuss campaigns and issues seen by students currently at educational institutions, and to discuss how to resolve them – this was not the case. Due to accessibility issues and the general set up by NUS this turned into either a social networking opportunity or time spent in complete silence. This was a great opportunity to socialise and meet new people, however as disabled delegate – the caucuses groups were unfulfilling and unsuccessful in being what was advertised, and no advancements in disabled student issues/campaigns were made or even discussed.

**Day 1: Campaign Workshops**

After break, NUS and associated charities/ social groups led campaign workshops, with the options being: Decolonisation Hub’: Networking & Movement Building; Divest to Decolonise: Campaign Kickstarter; Divest Borders: International solidarity in practice; Mobilising to transform our campuses sexual violence & Building healthy activist spaces.

I attended a workshop led by ‘Not on my Campus’ titled: ‘Mobilising to transform our campuses: Building a transformative root to step approach towards tackling Sexual Violence on our Campuses’. This was an amazing informative session which provided a safe space for all those in attendance to discuss issues on campuses and best practices/ potential red flags. Near the end was an open discussion section where we spoke how to mobilise, campaign, and embed a survivor-centred, trauma-informed, and intersectional cross-campus movement to tackle sexual violence on our campuses. We also discussed how this movement should be shaped in partnership with students and survivors. Not on my Campus ended the session by discussing their future campaigns and outlined what support and guidance, transparent, accountable, and inclusive institutions should have and practical tips and advice to build impactful campaigns and coalitions that can win them. This workshop was another great opportunity to network and learn from different union’s polices and experiences and what we could bring back to our own SU.

**Day 2: Policy Workshops**

Day 2 began with 3 workshops to discuss the voted policies: Women’s public safety and spiking; Sexual violence on campus: Beyond and against policing and carcerality & Mental health.

As disabled student delegate I attended the Mental Health Policy workshop as felt this was the policy which best fitted the liberation group, I was representing. The policy workshop again similar to the caucuses workshop, was not successful due to the layout and the implantation of the new NUS Democratic Procedure System. The new system meant that in our policy sessions we were outright told “we cannot discuss matters of policy wording and detail, but only to focus on broad/basic direction and concepts”. Albeit if this were a pre-conference drafting/brainstorming session, this comment would have been appropriately accepted, however in a workshop when the motion had already been submitted and we were there as delegates to vote on this policy – this was highly inappropriate and felt like our democratic vote was being stolen from us – as wording is incredibly important when considering a motion and our vote for/against it. In essence as a voting delegate, I attended this policy workshop to be told my democratic voice was worthless as I have no say/ minimal oversight on the policy itself as it is written by the ‘NUS Steering Committee’ not by the collective delegates in attendance.

I feel as a delegate my concerns and/or praises weren’t listened to, nor noted by NUS - the workshop was productive in a sense that we could listen to each other’s views and thoughts of mental health services and issues in educational institutions, but due to the new NUS system, it did mean that as we left the workshop, no policy had been created, let alone voted on, and we had to leave our full faith in the steering committee, which after that session, I don’t have much to give.

**Day 2: End of Close**

The end of the conference took place in the auditorium where once again we had a speech from the Vice-President Liberation and Equality. The main section of the conference close, was taken by selected delegates summarising the policy workshops for those who were not in attendance. This was very useful as we got to learn about the other policies in place as we could only attend one. It was also interesting to note that all three policy workshops were run in the same/ similar fashion to ours and that all the delegates on stage where in agreement with the issues with how NUS ran them and that none of the policies were really spoken about in a democratic way/ voted on.

**Post Conference Committee & Policy Voting**

Post conference, I was given the opportunity to read the manifestos for those running in NUS Liberation Elections and vote for who I believed would be best suited to the roles. The roles I was able to vote for was Liberation Campaigns Disabled Place; Liberation Steering Committee Disabled Place; Liberation Steering Committee LGBT+ Students Place and Liberation Steering Committee Open Place.

As well as voting for the roles, as a delegate I was able to vote on the polices: Sexual violence on campus: Beyond and against policing and carcerality & Mental health. In terms of the policies themselves, no visible changes had been made since the original manifesto was released and certainly did not include any of our views/opinions brought up in the policy workshop. Due to this I choose to vote abstain on the policies as do not agree with the lack of democracy in the way NUS dealt with the conference/policies.

**NUS Open Letter - Summary**

As a result of the way the conference was run and issues which arose during conference, I decided to sign an open letter to NUS and the full-time officer team, written in conjunction with the other signing delegates. In summary the letter voiced our frustration at the lack of disabled accessibility at the conference, our concerns regarding the President-Elect’s, recent and ongoing support of homophobic and anti-sematic world leaders and the full lack of respect and democracy by NUS in any of the Caucasus/ policy workshops.

**NUS Open Letter**

Dear NUS-UK Leadership & Senior Management,

We are appalled and disgusted at the events of the past four days at National and Liberation Conferences.

Elected conference delegates, who should be the voice of our national union, have been silenced time and time again by arbitrary decisions. Dissent and negative feedback has been ignored in favour of a false “broad consensus” for policies which delegates have had no opportunity to oppose, to alter, or to speak to conference on. Additionally, we haven’t been able to contribute to the discussion. During a panel at the National Conference, we were told that questions were open to the floor. Plenty of people wanted to ask questions but only pre-submitted questions were chosen which few delegates knew how to do. Delegates have been hand-picked by conference facilitators and those who spoke out have been made to feel uncomfortable. DPC are willingly ignorant of the rules despite the Priority Ballot being run incorrectly. These are not the actions of a democratic union.

We feel that this event is giving us nothing more than an opportunity to socialise and network. We did not get a say on our policies, we are simply spoken down to and given opportunities to chat. Alarmingly, in policy sessions we have been told that we ought not to discuss matters of wording and detail, but rather to focus only on broad-strokes direction and concepts. This would have been appropriate at early drafting or brainstorming sessions, but when motions have already been submitted for us to consider and ultimately vote on, wording is incredibly important and deserving of scrutiny. Instead, the implementation of the feedback from our engaging & important discussions into written lines of policy has been delegated to the Steering Committee; we have to take it on faith that our opinions will be duly represented and not unintentionally misinterpreted, and we have minimal oversight of this process. To add insult to injury, we find out on day one of Liberation Conference that our President-elect has supported deeply homophobic and antisemitic remarks. Despite loud outcry from UJS, NUS has been silent on this.

Conference is fed up, and you know it. Two delegates were able to speak out on the undemocratic and frustrating nature of the conference and got the most applause of the entire conference session. And yet, our leadership pats themselves on the back for the “democratic” success that they have brought us.

Liberation Conference is more of the same story. There has been no opportunity for disabled students to collaborate on their campaigns and policy agenda - indeed on this second day there are no disability centred discussions - other than a 90-minute caucus which, while for many delegates the most valuable session of conference, was not remotely sufficient time especially for those whose communication is impacted by their disability/ies. We talk the talk on accessibility as a core part of our New Vision, but whilst the measure of streaming events to a low sensory space has been incredibly significant and welcomed, there have been no live captions for the video feed (other than in one session), and whilst there was a live BSL interpreter for National Conference this accommodation was not afforded to Liberation Conference. There has been no livestream provided for the Liberation Conference, both to delegates outside the venue and those in the "low sensory livestream room", excluding many disabled activists who are clinically vulnerable to the ongoing pandemic or otherwise unable to travel. Conference has unfortunately been an inadequately accessible or supportive environment for disabled delegates.

After all of this, the question we keep on asking ourselves is: what is the point? Why are delegates attending conference if policy has already been made? Why are we members of a national union which ignores our voices? What are we supposed to tell our students when they ask us what we got out of this conference?

We ask that you consider the following measures:

1. That our President-elect apologise for her support of homophobic and antisemitic comments and resign.
2. That NUS-UK Leadership & Senior Management apologise to delegates, who have been spoken down to and feel miserable after their time at National and Liberation Conference.
3. That NUS-UK Leadership & Senior Management produce a plan on how to ensure the new reform regime is truly democratic, gives delegates the opportunity to speak to conference, and will no longer silence students.

The sad reality is that if our concerns are ignored, disaffiliations will follow. Several of us have had conversations with our Executives and truly believe we can no longer justify our membership under these conditions. We are committed to the student movement, to collective democracy, and to national collaboration. Is NUS?