**NUS Conference 2021 Report – Phoebe Robichaud-Gavin**

*This is Phoebe’s conference report – the below is her explanation of how and why she voted on various motions at NUS conference.*

I would just like to preface by saying thank you to all the students who voted for me as NUS delegate. The National Conference which took place from 6th - 8th April 2021 was great fun and a great success. I have met, albeit virtually, some great students from universities all over the country and have secured some amazing contacts that will hopefully lead to some collaboration with other universities for future events for the University of Suffolk. I have also networked with other universities and their students and learnt about how they run things, fun activities and important policies which I hope to bring to our lovely university, and they were also excited to hear about our amazing SU and have even taken on board some of the things that we are doing, such as the new Green Suffolk Project. I’m really excited about the future and the connections that the University of Suffolk is making. In this report I will be summarising the policies we voted on and what they mean; explaining the amendments which myself, Mauro and Dan participated in creating; how I voted and the outcome of the votes.

The NUS National conference took place over three days and there were six main policies that were discussed: Fees and Finance; Mental Health; Sexual violence, NDAs and Relationship abuse; Erasmus+; Student Housing and the Cost of Living. On top of this there were other presentations about a range of subjects from activism and effective, safe campaigning to decolonisation of education and how to create an inclusive environment at our uni.

Fees and Finance: I voted in favour of the policy and all of the amendments.

The government’s handling of the covid-19 pandemic was less than desirable for UK University students. Students have not been able to study, socialise or engage in the university experience. On top of this inequalities have been widened as student places of employment such as bars, restaurants and leisure facilities have been closed meaning many students faced extra, unnecessary financial burdens. It was agreed that higher education students have been ignored, forgotten, scape-goated, neglected, bullied, mis-led, lied to and robbed by the government, some universities and the media. In short, the policy finds that students are not receiving education that is worth the thousands of pounds of tuition fees that we have paid during COVID-19 as we have not had access to the resources normally available and it is unfair that we should have to pay this amount.

Amendments: The policy was adjusted to include part time and PhD students and also acknowledged the fact that international students were at more of an unfair disadvantage financially with tuition fees as they are not entitled to student finance and need to be supported more. This policy still includes ALL students.

Also, calls for fee compensation could bankrupt many universities who still have staff to pay. As a movement we wanted to include protection for staff members so the fee compensation should come from the government.

This policy and all the amendments were successful and now the NUS will move forward with this policy and take action to implement it. They will also push the government to re-evaluate the marketisation of higher education as it is clearly not working. Only 3% of students fully repay their loans.

What will the NUS do now?

1. NUS must organise a national tuition fee strike campaign for the 2021/22 academic year if the government fails to meet these demands.
2. Call for returning students or those with confirmed spaces to sign up to the strike.
3. Seeking legal advice on the best method of doing this.
4. Organise a robust strategy and protecting students from the risk of being penalised individually.
5. NUS to hold a day/s of action and protest in response to the treatment of students during the pandemic. (When safe to do so.)

Mental Health: I voted in favour of the policies and all the amendments.

Over recent years there has been a mental health crisis amongst UK students and the pandemic has only exacerbated the issue. The aim of this policy is to transform the structures which cause deteriorating mental health and having wellbeing at the heart of higher education policies including properly funded mental health support.

Amendments: These included making the language of the policy and the action plan clearer and more understandable, also to look at putting in place extra resources and support for groups which may have further or alternative needs, such as international students, FE, BAME, Disabled students, carers, care-leavers and LGBTQ+. Also to include that universities work with local outside organisations so that support can be continued after university and making education more accessible to disabled students.

This policy and all the amendments were successful.

What will the NUS do now?

1. Get mental health training for admins, lecturers, departments and academic staff in general, urgently.
2. NUS to promote a 3-stage goal. Short term to tackle students facing mental health issues due to the covid-19 pandemic. Long term goals to reform the services for counselling in university.
3. Lobby for changed in government systems for universal change around mental health, including all liberation groups.

Sexual Violence, NDAs and Relationship abuse: I voted in favour of the policy.

There is a sexual violence crisis amongst UK universities, colleges and student accommodation which is not being addressed. 62% of students and graduates have experienced sexual violence at university. 70% of female students have experienced sexual assault at university as well as 26% of male students, 61% of non-binary students and 73% of disabled students.

Further to this: 75% of respondents to a survey reported having unwanted sexual experiences at least once. Only 6% reported their experiences to the police or to the university. Only 2% were satisfied with the reporting process. 1 in 7 experienced domestic abuse.

This policy wants to tackle this issue by working with The Red Flag and The Last Taboo campaigns which are two gender inclusive campaigns founded by University of York students. Also, some universities still use non-disclosure agreements to keep victims quiet which should not be tolerated. This policy aims to create a safe environment for students where they feel no fear of sexual violence or relationship abuse. There would be steps to make warning signs more clear and educate all staff and students on these issues and how to report then in a comfortable and confidential manner. Adequate support facilities should be available. NDA’s would not be used in cases of sexual misconduct in universities and colleges and they should be transparent in their use of NDAs. Students should be educated on the use and different types of NDAs.

No amendments

This policy was successful.

What will the NUS do now?

1. Facilitate lines of communication for Students Unions’ and key decision makers and encourage the national expansion of the two campaigns.
2. NUS to actively engage with the promotion of the campaigns.
3. NUS to carry out national research to further understand the issues of sexual violence and relationship abuse amongst university students.
4. The NUS is to use the findings of their research to seek productive change.
5. NUS to lobby the government and relevant funding bodies to ensure universities prohibit the use of NDAs in cases of sexual misconduct.

Erasmus+: I voted in favour of the policy and all amendments.

Erasmus+ is a programme that provides opportunities for students to study, train and work in 34 European Union countries. Following Brexit, the UK is no longer allowed to participate so the government created the Turing Scheme as a replacement. The Turing scheme is not an exact like-for-like so the NUS would like the Erasmus+ scheme to be reinstated in full alongside the Turing Scheme as we are still a European country despite leaving the European union and UK universities welcome students from all over the world.

The Turing Scheme, planned to launch in September 2021, will receive over £100 million in funding for up to 35,000 students to go on exchanges and placements overseas. However, due to visas and other associated costs, the House of Lords noted that the scheme may disproportionately affect people from a disadvantaged background. Also, the Erasmus+ scheme includes other vocational opportunities and includes staff. The government have already started to identify the differences and problems with the schemes before the NUS will bring them up, and want to continue a prosperous relationship with Europe so it is likely the government will be on our side for this one.

Amendments: Include staff and other vocational opportunities, allow students to stay in EU countries for more than 90 out of every 180 days without a visa. Government should ensure that the visa process does not affect those from a disadvantaged background and should be very accessible. Government to provide additional support for higher education institutes to cover costs associated with studying abroad for students.

This policy and all the amendments were successful.

What will the NUS do now?

1. NUS to raise awareness around the deficits of the Turing Scheme and highlight to students and the public that it does not fully equate to Erasmus+

Student Housing: I voted in favour of this policy and all amendments.

The global pandemic highlighted key issues within the private and university accommodation sector where there are varying levels of regulation across the UK. Students were lied to and exploited for fess and the general public agrees that students should not be liable to pay for empty houses. Students have no accommodation rights and are unable to leave complex, unhelpful contracts. Housing is a basic right, but students have long been used as cash cows. Student halls of residence are consistently more expensive than private housing, yet students are discriminated against and not allowed to rent some places and are therefore tied into contracts and subject to financial struggle. Students have to take on part- and full-time work to cover additional costs but this limits time to study, socialise and engage in external activities. Students are unaware of their rights and the standards they should expect from landlords. Furthermore, students are not normal renters so accommodation should adapt to their needs. Students are staging the largest rent strike in 40 years just to be listened to.

Amendments: It should be brought to light that students are not free-loaders and are not demanding irrational asks, they just want the bare minimum that their hardships are acknowledged. Also, students’ jobs have been disrupted during the pandemic yet there has been no financial help that was offered to non-students. Even though student loans are means tested, parents are not always able to support their children. Two parents could be on a £35,000 salary and their child would receive the lowest maintenance loan. It is likely they would not have thousands of pounds of disposable income to support their child. Furthermore, university students are adults and may not receive any help from their parents. Means tested maintenance loans do not work. The most expensive accommodation option should be no more than the lowest amount of maintenance loan available.

This policy and all the amendments were successful.

What will the NUS do now?

1. Raise awareness of tenants’ rights: Provide a hub with clear information on students tenants rights which could also serve as a platform for student housing campaigns.
2. A functional lobbying body to improve aspects of the student tenant experience including deposit returns, housing conditions and pressure selling. This would minimise the risk to individual students through rent strikes.
3. Create an association and a network of students to discuss and tackle this issue.
4. Provide support for SUs to give advice to students about housing.
5. Define goals for reducing student exploitation and create a democratic association.

Cost of Living: I voted in favour of this policy and all the amendments.

The covid-19 pandemic has shown the barriers students face in terms of cost of living and access to resources. Some students have been unfairly impacted by this for example access to technology when all lectures are online. Furthermore, maintenance loans are continuously shown to not be enough to support the cost of living as a students and this is even worse for mature students, international students and disabled students. Support packages are heavily reduced for postgraduate study. However, students from all backgrounds face the prospect of a negative economic impact. Too many students are priced out of their education and this does not support the NUS commitment to fighting for a free, liberated and truly accessible education for all.

Amendments: On-campus services should not turn a profit for example laundry facilities, transport, on-campus shops for groceries and books and student housing. Review/campaign on transport costs, council tax discounts for mature students, FE and apprentices. Review prescription costs for students. Campaign for funding for course tools/materials that are required for courses and cost in excess of £600. Review/campaign on equalising minimum wage and working on tax credits and parents tax credits for mature students.

This policy and all the amendments were successful.

What will the NUS do now?

1. NUS to continue to develop a proposal for the living income for students.
2. NUS to campaign against the additional costs of student life beyond the course itself and continue the research behind the poverty commission report.
3. Campaign and review the issues raised in the amendments.
4. NUS to campaign to turn senior management bonuses into subsidies for students.
5. International students should be taken into account when campaigning the cost of living i.e. hidden costs and other disadvantages.
6. NUS to work and support NUS Scotland.
7. NUS should ensure better financial support for postgraduate study.
8. #FundOurPostgrads Campaign

We also voted for NUS committee members, I voted for all those who I met as they were all fantastic but sadly I didn’t get to meet everyone, I voted for Megan Ball, Akansha Agrawal, Ruth Day and Connor Moylett. The results are as follows:

National Scrutiny Council: Akansha Agrawal, Sarah Bafo, Megan Ball, Ayman Benmati, Emily Casey, Ellie Gomersall, Peter Hopwood, Niel Lewis, Lotte Marley, Aysha Saeed, Saranya Thambirajah and Seun Twins.

Democratic Procedures Committee: Ruth Day, Maisan Maseeh, Connor Moylett, Meg Price and Maryam Shah.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be your NUS Delegate.

Phoebe Robichaud-Gavin.