

NUS GOVERNANCE

Proposed by the President.

Seconded by the Deputy President (Education and Welfare), the Deputy President (Clubs and Societies), the Deputy President (Finance & Services), the CGCU President, the RCSU President and the ICSMSU President.

Background

Last autumn, after a hard fought referendum, the members of Imperial College Union voted by a narrow margin to affiliate to the National Union of Students (NUS). Those in favour of us staying out, including myself, argued that whilst the NUS sounded like a good idea in theory in practice it was a poorly run, irrelevant, inefficient monolith incapable of dragging itself out of the 1970's and into the 21st Century. On the other hand, those in favour of joining (Kirsty!) argued that whilst some of our criticisms were valid that the NUS was indeed capable of changing to ensure that it could start resembling something like an effective national voice for students. The last NUS Annual Conference voted overwhelmingly for the NUS to conduct a no-holds barred governance review to have a thorough look at the way the NUS takes decisions. The results of this review have now been presented, a summary of which is included with this paper.

So what is wrong with the NUS?

- Financial mismanagement - the NUS has run a substantial deficit for the past five years.
- NUS policy being based on sweeping political statements rather than the reality of the bread and butter issues facing students today.
- Lack of clarity over the NUS's confederal structure which has resulted in many Union's feeling that the real power in the NUS lies with political groupings and not students' unions.

What are the proposals

- The introduction of an NUS board, like a Trustee Board but more on brand, with the final say in all financial and legal matters to ensure that the NUS does not continue to lose money year after year. It will also be responsible for holding senior managers to account.
- The abolition of the part time officer positions on the NEC, regarded by many as one of the root problems of the NUS.
- The acknowledgement that the NUS is a confederation of Students' Unions and as such they should feel less marginalised from the decision making process than they currently do.
- A cap on the cost of Annual Congress (to replace Annual Conference). Whilst it has not been publicly stated the only way to achieve this will be to reduce the number of delegates every Union is allowed to send.
- More formative stages in the policy process so that NUS policy can be properly discussed before it gets to Annual Congress.

Why these proposals are good

If implemented the NUS will in theory be able to run itself far more efficiently than it currently does. It will hopefully lead to a leaner organisation that will benefit from a culture of professional management rather than the amateurish approach of the last 30 or so years. The new political structures will also hopefully lead to policy that is more grounded in the reality of how things actually are rather than how highly politicised hard left fringe interest groups believe they should be. It should be noted that whilst there are still a considerable number of arguments to be had over some of the specific details, the direction of travel towards a more professional NUS has broad support from Labour, Conservative, Lib Dem and non-affiliated student officers. The only groups to oppose the proposals so far are the hard left who have a vested interest in the current structures and have so far refused to engage with the consultation process.

What next?

Those Unions who are in favour of NUS reform have been advised to submit a request to the National President for an Extraordinary Conference to discuss the proposals and pass a new draft NUS constitution. Amendments to this draft constitution can then be discussed and submitted by Unions in the run up to Annual Conference in Spring where the new NUS constitution will hopefully be passed at this second reading and the process of implementing the new structures can begin.

Imperial College Union notes

1. The reforms laid out in this paper which were proposed by the National Executive Committee.
2. The NUS's constitutional requirement that all proposed changes to the constitution have to be passed by 2 consecutive conferences.
3. An Extraordinary NUS Conference can be requested by 25 Unions.
4. NUS sabbaticals have stated that if the NUS does not change then the organisation will not have a long term future.
5. That there is only significant socialist opposition to the reforms.
6. The National President has publicly stated that the hard left are opposing these reforms out of self-interest and not out of genuine concern for the future of the NUS.
7. The NUS's VP (Education) has stated that NUS's democratic structures are "broken" and that the NEC received "poor management advice" when presented with over optimistic sales projections for the NUS Extra Discount card.
8. The unhealthy state of NUS's finances. In recent years the NUS has used the proceeds from the sale of capital assets to meet running costs.
9. That the NUS has acknowledged it has lost several key arguments with the general public.
10. That with around 30% turnout last autumn our members voted 53% in favour of NUS affiliation.
11. The motion that Imperial College Union submitted to the last NUS Annual Conference, asking the NUS to support our Access to Rivers Policy, was not discussed due to time constraints.

Imperial College Union believes

1. That the narrow margin of victory for the pro-affiliation campaign suggests that there is a reasonably large degree of scepticism as to the benefits of NUS affiliation.
2. That the establishment of an NUS board means that the NUS will be less likely in the future to suffer from poor financial management.
3. That the proposed reforms will make it more likely that NUS policy is evidence based, more relevant and more likely to get the NUS taken seriously by students, decision makers and the general public.
4. Despite the recent positive steps to reduce affiliation fees our current fee of £44,000 is still too high.
5. That the hard left are opposing the governance review out of political self interest and not out of genuine concern for students.
6. NUS's current democratic structures are inaccessible to the detriment, not just of the members of ICU Canoe Club, but to all students.

Imperial College Union further believes

1. That if this attempt at NUS reform fails then it is a waste of our financial resources and Sabbaticals time engaging with an organisation that refuses to change due to the vested interests and wrecking tactics of the hard left.

Imperial College Union resolves

1. To support the broad direction of movement outlined in the proposed NUS Governance reforms.
2. To mandate the President to write to the NUS President adding Imperial College Union to the list of Unions requesting an Extraordinary Conference to debate the governance proposals.
3. To propose and support reforms which will make the NUS better value for money.

Imperial College Union further resolves

1. Should the governance reforms fail to be passed by both Extraordinary Conference this term and Annual Conference in Spring, with particular interest in the establishment of an NUS Board with absolute financial and legal responsibility for all of NUS's activities, then Imperial College Union should reconsider whether or not we wish to remain NUS affiliates.