



# State of the Unions

## How to restore free association and expression, combat extremism and make student unions effective

BRIEFING PAPER

By Maximilian Young and Lucky Dube

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Student unions are student-led groups that are supposed to represent students on campus to university administrations, provide useful services, and support clubs and associations.
- Student unions cost taxpayers and students £165 million per annum, an average of £75 per student per annum or £225 over a three year degree course. This is evenly split between taxpayers and students. They employ 600 full-time student sabbatical officers.
- Student unions are perceived as ineffective by students, lack democratic legitimacy, and undermine freedom of association and expression.
- This has little to do with money available: student unions that receive higher block grants from universities tend to be poorer performing in the National Student Survey.
- Only one-in-ten students actively participate in student union elections. Nevertheless, students are forced to be members of student unions, undermining freedom of association.
- Many student unions are using taxpayer and student money to pursue a narrow political agenda that is irrelevant to representing students. These campaigns tend to follow a specific, “social justice,” political agenda focused on tackling alleged “structural oppression” against minority groups.
- In pursuit of this agenda, student unions have sought to control student activity, such as stopping students from wearing sombreros, putting on fancy dress, buying Bacardi rum, clapping, whooping and cheering, and eating meat.
- Student unions have also sought to limit free speech, by limiting or blocking the selling of certain publications, failing to prevent or encouraged violence at meetings, seeking to approve speeches in advance, blocking the formation of free speech societies, imposing meeting rules, barring certain groups from freshers’ fairs, and requiring excessive red tape for speakers of which they disapprove.
- This agenda has made many students, including Jewish students, Christians, conservatives, and traditional feminists, feel uncomfortable on campus.
- Student unions also fund the National Union of Students’ (NUS), whose many officers are engaged in full time political campaigns on issues like defunding the police and decolonisation. Just 3% of students elect delegates to NUS, which makes it even less representative than even individual student unions.

- To address ineffectiveness, extremist activities, and lack of democratic legitimacy, student union system should be reformed by:
  - splitting a student union into social activities, a sports association, and an academic council, elected through a system of class and faculty representatives rather than centrally;
  - limiting funding from university grants to social, recreational and entertainment activities; student societies; sports; and academic representation.
  - making student societies independent from unions and directly supported by universities and members;
  - returning excess funds to students;
  - allowing establishment of broader student representative councils, but with voluntary membership and without compulsory student funding;
  - preventing pass-through funding of student or taxpayer money to national bodies, like the NUS;
  - not allowing student bodies to limit freedom of expression; and
  - strengthening provisions in law to prevent universities from limiting freedom of expression, including by using procedural mechanisms to frustrate freedom of expression or passing along security costs to student societies.

## THE TOP 10 EXCESSES

1. **Banning speakers:** Julie Bindel from Manchester, Peter Hitchens from Portsmouth
2. **Censoring language:** banning academics from using the phrase ‘as you know’ at Bath, Oxford student union trying to ban “academic hate speech,” and Manchester student union censoring the poem “If”
3. **Banning types of food:** beef at LSE, Edinburgh and UEA
4. **Banning fancy dress:** Kent, Oxford, Edinburgh
5. **Banning or preventing the registration of student societies:** Nietzsche Society at UCL, Turning Point at York, Protection of Unborn People at Glasgow
6. **Banning certain physical gestures:** clapping at Oxford and Manchester, or waving one’s arm at Edinburgh
7. **Controlling the activities of student societies,** e.g. Cambridge SU banning the Officer Training Corps from displaying firearms or Leeds SU punishing the hockey club for having a chavs party
8. **Financing political campaigns:** against fossil fuels, against Brexit, or for demilitarisation
9. **Running idiotic campaigns:** to boycott companies with operations in Israel
10. **Banning certain publications from being distributed and certain songs from being played**

This year, universities are preparing to welcome a new cohort of students in exceptional circumstances. Freshers' fairs, if they happen, will be socially distanced, social gatherings almost non-existent and many formal lectures indefinitely postponed. Universities now have a fundamental challenge in providing students with both a meaningful experience and valuable education. The risk of student disillusionment is high.

Student unions and the NUS bear a responsibility to help address these challenges. Their mandate, after all, is to represent the interests of the student body. Their focus should be on how to better the student experience, by enhancing recreational activities, improving students sports and delivering more effective academic representation.

Students unions have to make a choice; either they represent their members, helping students and apprentices with the cost of living, guiding them as they make their way through college and university, or they become bastions of obsessive political campaigning, going down obscure political alleys that appeal to a few, rather than the many. Across our universities and colleges, far too often, freedom of expression and intellectual curiosity on campus are being deeply eroded because of minority political activism.

It is thus clear that all is far from right with student unions, their focus and activities, and that a thorough and open-minded review is required. How should we tackle these problems? How can students get a better deal from the money that both they and the taxpayer spend on student unions? This report provides a wealth of data and analysis that should be most useful for policy-makers.

At the moment, the biggest winner in terms of student unions seems to be apathy. There are only around 10% of students who actually vote in student union elections. The findings from the National Student Survey give some student unions pause for thought, given their negative perception. The survey also shows that student unions relying on university grants perform poorly in terms of academic representation.

I am a trade union member. I know all the benefits that a good trade union can offer its members. Student unions must modernise in order to be fit for the 21st century. The range of policy proposals set out in this report deserves careful consideration. The suggestion that the old Scottish approach of split functions could provide a useful model is certainly an intriguing one. By making the political part of student unions voluntary, ordinary students would no longer be required to finance political activities of which they did not approve. At the same time, resources could be focussed on those functions that students do appreciate, such as decent social and recreational facilities, better student sports, and more effective academic representation.

These are interesting ideas and certainly worthy of further debate.

**Robert Halfon MP**

Chair, House of Commons Education Committee

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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Student unions are student-led groups that are supposed to represent students on campus to university administrations, provide useful services, and support clubs and associations.

Student unions cost some £165 million per annum, a burden borne roughly equally by taxpayers and students themselves, with the average cost per student standing at about £75. Students have no choice as to whether to join their student union or spend the funds in other ways, undermining the principle of freedom of association. Student union funds are used to employ some 600 full-time student sabbatical officers, many of whom are involved in political campaigning.

Student unions are not representative of students. Only a very small percentage of students (around 10%) vote in student elections - 90% are unwilling to participate. Some students only vote because student unions provide them with free pizza and other inducements, utilising grant money provided by universities.

In the National Student Survey, student unions are identified by students as the least effective institutions. While universities generally receive 80% satisfaction rates, barely over half of students, a mere 56%, think that their student union does a good job of representing their academic interests. Some student unions, generally the most political ones, perform significantly worse than others.

Most student unions engage in extensive political activity in order to promote their particular agenda and force student compliance. This ideology claims that minority groups need to be “liberated” from “structural oppression”. Most student unions have appointed a full-time sabbatical “liberation” officer, or a welfare or diversity officer tasked with achieving this liberation, plus a range of part-time liberation officers, each representing a particular minority group. In pursuit of this agenda student unions have variously sought to control student activity, such as stopping students from wearing sombreros, putting on fancy dress, buying Bacardi rum, clapping, whooping and cheering, and eating meat.

Identity politics, which divides students into groups which require liberation, and student union intolerance and censorship combines to make the university experience less pleasant for students in general and particularly unwelcoming for those students who might threaten the current orthodoxies of student unions – Jewish students, Christians, conservatives, traditional feminists, for example.

Student unions play a critical role in the worsening free speech crisis on campus. They have banned speakers they don't like, blocked the sale of particular publications, failed to prevent or encouraged violence at meetings, sought to approve speeches in advance, blocked the formation of free speech societies, imposed rules on how meetings should be conducted, barred certain groups from freshers' fairs, and imposed such complex bureaucratic procedures that inviting a speaker to a meeting requires many weeks of advance notice and large quantities of form-filling.

Individual student unions provide some £4 million of financing to the National Union of Students (NUS), which purports to represent students nationally. However, only 3% of students vote in the elections that choose delegates who decide NUS policy and select its officers. The policy platform developed by the NUS is adopted by the vast majority of student unions with startling uniformity. There are some 19 full-time NUS officers all of whom are engaged in political activity aligned with an extreme agenda. The current NUS president wants to defund the police, abolish the Prevent counter-terrorism programme, and run campaigns on decolonisation, demilitarisation, and divestment. Unions have banned particular student societies whose views they did not share. They finance campaigning work on broad political issues such as fossil fuel, arms and tobacco divestment, demilitarisation, Brexit, an Israel boycott, Prevent, and decolonisation.

There are useful examples both from around the world and within the UK which can help the crafting of necessary reforms to the current broken system. The old Scottish model, still in operation at Glasgow University, in which functions are separated into a student union providing the social activities, a sports association, and a student representative council, should be adapted for application across the UK.

University grant funding should be restricted to:

- Student social, recreational and entertainment facilities, in the form of a student union solely devoted to providing these services
- Student societies
- Student sports activities, in the form of a sports association
- Student academic representation, though a system of subject representatives.

Recreational, sporting, and academic activities should be the responsibility of different bodies, each of which should be precluded from expanding its activities into other areas.

Student academic representation should continue to be organised, as it is now, through a system of class and faculty representatives. At present, the Student Union Vice President (Academic) is chosen by a tiny proportion of students through a campus-wide student union ballot. Instead, this position should be chosen indirectly by the academic class and faculty representatives who are interested in and familiar with the issues that are relevant to students in each subject and faculty.

Student societies should be freed from control by student unions and able to establish themselves, set up bank accounts and adopt a constitution without supervision by other students. Support services to student societies, for example the organisation of freshers' fairs, could be organised by the social union or by the university.

As is currently the case, student societies should be funded largely by students themselves through membership fees. Additional grant funding could be provided to cover special or extraordinary expenditure, such as, for example, new equip-

ment for a musical society. Such funding could be dispensed by a committee of the recreational/social student union, as occurs in Glasgow University for example.

The funding of the sporting, recreational, academic, and other student services should cost less than is currently being spent on integrated student unions. The remainder of the circa £75 per student should be returned by universities to students themselves to spend as they see fit.

If students wish to establish representative bodies to deal with matters other than recreational facilities, sports, academic representation, and funding of student societies, then they should join such bodies voluntarily and finance them themselves. No student should be required to join such an essentially political body or be required to foot the bill for an organisation they do not necessarily agree with or participate in.

For such a student representative council (SRC) to gain any official recognition by the university, over 50% of students must join it and vote in its elections. If an SRC fails to gain the support of more than 50% of students, then the university should not include representatives from it on university committees, or give it official status in other ways.

Student representative organisations, and recreation or facility student unions, in receipt of university grant funding should not be permitted to pass on any funds to national bodies such as the National Union of Students. If such national bodies wish to attract student members then they should do so on a voluntary, individual basis.

All student representative bodies should be subject to stricter governance controls to help prevent them being manipulated by a minority. The practice of allowing tiny numbers of students to take decisions on behalf of the entire student population at “general meetings” of students should cease as should that of providing inducements for students to vote in the elections to such institutions.

No student representative body of any type should have any involvement in regulating the rights to free speech on campus. Responsibility for implementing the very limited legal obligations regarding such meetings should rest solely with universities, who should not be permitted to delegate their responsibilities, or any part of the process, to student unions or others. The provisions in law regarding free speech in universities should be strengthened to prevent universities or any other bodies using procedural mechanisms to frustrate the right to free speech.

The practice of passing security costs onto the student societies who invite speakers should cease. Universities should be responsible for ensuring adequate security and paying for it, if necessary. Universities should take firm disciplinary measures against students who seek to disrupt meetings.

The Office for Students (OfS) should become the main regulator of student bodies, representative and otherwise, in respect of both free speech and other matters. The OfS should also oversee the transition to the new arrangements.

This paper follows by (1) outlining the funding and lack of representativeness and effectiveness of student unions; (2) investigating the often silly, if not censorious, political activities of student unions and the National Union of Students (NUS), and how student unions are contributing to the free speech crisis; and (3) options for reforming the student union system.



### RESOURCES CONSUMED BY STUDENT UNIONS

Each university has a student union (SU) largely financed by the university, utilising funds provided by both taxpayers and students. Student unions account for considerable resources, employing significant numbers of student sabbatical officers, most of whom are engaged in political campaigning.

Student unions are financed by universities to the extent of some £165 million per year, according to analysis of 138 university student unions (See Table 1).<sup>1</sup> These universities cater for 2,217,421 students. Therefore, the average grant from a university to a student union is about £75 per student.

The amounts paid by each university on a per capita basis vary greatly. For example, Keele University provides £216 per student and the University of West London provides £240 per student. By contrast, the grant per student is only £30 at the University of Chester, and £29 at Robert Gordon University. As would be expected, the size of the block grant to a student union is largely correlated with the number of students. Total number of students explain 65% of the variation in block grant income (See Annex 1).

Student unions receive additional income from providing commercial services, such as bars, cafes, shops and entertainment. However this makes a relatively modest contribution to ‘usable income’ because it is largely spent on provision of the commercial services. This is despite most commercial service premises being provided to them for free by the university. Imperial College Student Union explains:

*“While the commercial services income is stated as £3.85 million, this represents the **takings** at the Union’s outlets – FiveSixEight, Union Bar, Metric, h-bar, Reynolds, Union Shop, Shop Extra and the online Union Shop. If you factor in the direct costs of selling the products – called the cost of sales – plus the wage costs of the people staffing our outlets, the surplus made is roughly £0.61 million, which is what we call the ‘usable income’ from commercial services.”*

There are some student unions who are less dependent on block grants, and receive larger commercial contributions to their income, indicating greater market success (See Annex 1). This could indicate that they are doing a better job of delivering to students the main services that they are interested in, namely social, recreational and entertainment facilities.

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<sup>1</sup> This includes only higher education, not further education. Financial information is derived from the most recent published accounts. Most student unions are companies limited by guarantee and their accounts are available at Companies House. A few are not companies and their accounts can be found at the Charities Commission or the Scottish Charities regulator.

**TABLE 1: STUDENT UNIONS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM**

UNIVERSITY STUDENT UNION	YEAR	STUDENTS	UNDER-GRAD	POST-GRAD	FINANCE YEAR	INCOME (£000)	EXPENDITURE (£000)	UNIVERSITY GRANT (£000)	FULL TIME SOs	GRANT PER STUDENT
Aberdeen	2018-19	14,775	10,185	4,590	2018-19	1,900	1,831	975	5	66
Abertay Dundee	2016-17	3,714	3,501	213	2017-18	313	306	248	2	67
Aberystwyth	2018-19	7,845	6,735	1,110	2018-19	1,324	1,305	750	5	96
Anglia Ruskin	2018-19	24,490	19,630	4,860	2018-19	2,189	2,146	1,501	6	61
Arts, Bournemouth	2018-19	3,390	3,240	150	2018-19	314	316	271	2	80
Aston	2017-18	15,500	11,935	3,565	2017-18	2,677	2,713	824	4	53
Bangor	2018-19	10,195	7,810	2,385	2018-19	1,435	1,392	531	5	52
Bath	2018-19	18,070	13,415	4,655	2018-19	5,054	5,179	2,117	6	117
Bath Spa	2018-19	7,770	6,060	1,710	2018-19	1,392	1,421	518	4	67
Bedfordshire	2018-19	13,925	11,400	2,525	2017-18	1,318	1,265	831	4	60
Birkbeck	2018-19	11,390	7,045	4,345	2018-19	404	388	340	7	30
Birmingham	2017-18	31,344	22,412	8,935	2018-19	6,419	6,432	2,891	7	92
Birmingham City	2018-19	25,860	20,480	5,380	2018-19	3,986	3,612	1,173	5	45
Bishop Grosseteste	2018-19	2,250	1,665	595	2017-18	191	188	134	2	60
Bolton	2018-19	6,945	5,605	1,340	2018-19	490	478	225	1	32
Bournemouth	2018-19	17,875	14,700	3,175	2017-18	5,230	5,171	1,190	4	67
Bradford	2018-19	9,660	7,435	2,225	2018-19	1,704	1,619	1,345	4	139
Brighton	2018-19	20,465	16,760	3,705	2018-19	3,484	3,335	1,124	4	55
Bristol	2019-20	25,250	20,311	4,939	2018-19	5,129	5,043	1,800	7	71
Brunel	2018-19	14,790	11,125	3,665	2018-19	2,796	2,806	1,110	5	75
Buckinghamshire New	2018-19	11,000	9,705	1,295	2018-19	2,036	2,095	1559	3	142
Cambridge	2018-19	23,247	12,354	10,893	2018-19	840	821	350	6	15
Cardiff	2018-19	33,190	23,960	9,230	2018-19	9,934	9,931	2,925	7	88
Cardiff Metropolitan	2018-19	10,675	8,375	2,300	2018-19	2,540	2,519	916	2	86
Central Lancashire	2018-19	23,160	17,505	5,655	2018-19	3,690	3,670	1,163	4	50
Chester	2018-19	14,900	10,800	4,100	2018-19	1,299	1,416	446	5	30
Chichester	2018-19	5,470	4,375	1,095	2018-19	1,563	1,546	346	2	63
Christ Church	2018-19	14,170	11,300	2,870	2018-19	989	966	710	4	50
Coventry	2018-19	34,985	29,005	5,980	2018-19	3,077	3,013	2,442	7	70
Cranfield	2018-19	4,490	0	4,490	2017-18	871	854	195	3	43
Creative Arts	2015-16	4,805	4,500	305	2017-18	485	545	392	2	82
CUL	2018-19	20,210	11,020	9,190	2018-19	1,072	1,013	940	3	47
Cumbria	2018-19	7,235	5,865	1,370	2018-19	535	591	443	3	61
De Montfort	2018-19	25,810	21,750	4,060	2018-19	2,281	2,197	1,262	5	49
Derby	2018-19	19,145	14,775	4,370	2018-19	3,060	3,037	989	4	52

**TABLE 1: STUDENT UNIONS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM (CONT.)**

UNIVERSITY STUDENT UNION	YEAR	STUDENTS	UNDER-GRAD	POST-GRAD	FINANCE YEAR	INCOME (£000)	EXPENDITURE (£000)	UNIVERSITY GRANT (£000)	FULL TIME SOs	GRANT PER STUDENT
Dundee	2018-19	15,910	11,425	4,485	2018-19	6,347	6,547	815	6	51
Durham	2019-20	17,559	14,604	2,955	2018-19	2,665	2,519	957	5	55
East Anglia	2018-19	17,925	13,215	4,710	2018-19	10,719	10,753	412	5	23
East London	2018-19	13,395	9,750	3,645	2018-19	973	860	711	3	53
Edge Hill	2018-19	13,830	10,410	3,420	2018-19	1,755	1,690	590	3	43
Edinburgh	2017-18	35,732	25,951	9,781	2018-19	3,995	4,012	3,244	5	91
Edinburgh Napier	2018-19	13,595	10,395	3,200	2016-17	745	870	423	3	31
Essex	2017-18	14,760	11,370	3,390	2018-19	9,741	10,326	1,903	7	129
Exeter	2018-19	23,613	18,932	4,681	2017-18	6,439	6,289	1,551	5	66
Falmouth	2018-19	6,425	5,800	625	2017-18	1,299	1,247	849	4	132
Glasgow Caledonian	2018-19	16,860	13,785	3,075	2018-19	758	760	649	4	38
Glasgow School of Art	2018-19	2,285	1,620	670	2018-19	1,082	1,142	108	2	47
Glasgow*	2018-19	30,805	21,060	9,745	2018-19	5,083	5,170	1,728	6	56
Gloucestershire	2017-18	9,250			2017-18	926	920	417	4	45
Goldsmiths	2019-20	8,410	5,989	2,421	2018-19	2,867	2,830	1,190	4	141
Greenwich	2018-19	18,940	14,430	4,510	2018-19	3,234	2,967	1,281	4	68
Harper Adams	2018-19	5,375	4,740	635	2018-19	1,146	1,157	162	2	30
Heriot-Watt	2018-19	10,900	7,905	2,995	2018-19	2,630	2,647	662	4	61
Hertfordshire	2018-19	24,280	18,145	6,135	2018-19	4,134	4,105	1,968	4	81
Highlands & Islands	2018-19	9,525	8,435	1,090	2018-19	663	617	599	3	63
Huddersfield	2018-19	17,295	13,680	3,615	2018-19	2,716	2,696	1,351	5	78
Hull	2018-19	16,090	13,240	2,850	2018-19	5,151	7,756	1,635	5	102
Imperial	2018-19	19,115	9,985	9,130	2018-19	9,994	10,544	1,814	5	95
KCL	2018-19	32,890	19,200	13,690	2018-19	8,962	8,832	6,009	6	183
Keele	2018-19	10,865	8,455	2,410	2018-19	5,113	4,542	2,347	5	216
Kent	2018-19	19,265	15,550	3,715	2019-19	12,720	12,470	3,014	5	156
Kingston	2018-19	16,820	12,690	4,130	2018-19	1,668	1,747	1,315	4	78
Lancaster	2018-19	15,979	11,419	4,560	2018-19	8,168	8,386	872	6	55
Leeds	2018-19	36,250	26,255	9,995	2018-19		12,296	3,465	7	96
Leeds Arts	2018-19	1,850	1,800	50	2018-19			32	1	17
Leeds Beckett	2018-19	23,275	17,915	5,360	2018-19	2,172	2,360	1,525	5	66
Leeds Trinity	2018-19	3,415	2,710	705	2018-19			222	2	65
Leicester	2018-19	16,850	12,195	4,655	2018-19	2,674	2,492	1,525	6	91
Lincoln	2018-19	15,875	13,560	2,315	2018-19	4,838	4,805	1,629	5	103
Liverpool	2018-19	29,695	22,735	6,960	2018-19	4,236	3,888	1,580	4	53

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Liverpool Hope	2018-19	5,100	3,865	1,235	2018-19	323	294	257	3	50
Liverpool John Moores	2018-19	24,120	19,465	4,655	2018-19	1,488	1,351	1,038	4	43
London Business School	2018-19	2,075	2,075		2017-18	2,391	2,475	288	0	139
London Metropolitan	2018-19	9,200	7,085	2,115	2018-19	766	786	591	4	64
London South Bank	2018-19	17,125	12,600	4,525	2018-19	1,331	1,254	945	4	55
Loughborough	2018-19	18,025	13,660	4,365	2018-19	11,409	11,651	1,815	5	101
LSE	2018-19	11,850	5,055	6,795	2018-19	4,669	4,859	1,559	4	132
Manchester	2018-19	40,250	26,855	13,395	2018-19	7,709	8,359	2,402	8	60
Manchester Metropolitan	2018-19	33,050	26,315	6,735	2018-19	5,225	4,881	2,471	5	75
Middlesex	2018-19	19,630	14,765	4,865	2017-18	1,310	1,406	950	4	48
Newcastle	2018-19	22,515	18,483	4,032	2018-19	4,045	4,236	2,254	7	100
Newman	2018-19	2,800	2,175	625	2018-19	181	182	150	2	54
Northampton	2018-19	11,980	9,655	2,325	2018-19	2,727	3,364	1,659	4	138
Northumbria	2018-19	26,450	20,700	5,750	2018-19	4,347	4,301	2,624	5	99
Norwich, Arts	2018-19	2,305	2,205	100		62	62	43	1	19
Nottingham	2018-19	33,540	25,070	8,470	2018-19	11,633	11,545	2,559	8	76
Nottingham Trent	2018-19	33,255	26,525	6,730	2018-19	6,654	6,465	1,725	6	52
Oxford	2018-19	23,965	11,955	12,010	2017-18	1,182	1,191	843	6	35
Oxford Brookes	2018-19	16,670	12,785	3,885	2018-19	1,451	1,565	1,191	4	71
Plymouth	2018-19	23,155	20,080	3,075	2018-19	5,796	5,707	2,099	4	91
Plymouth Marjon	2018-19	2,775	2,275	500	2017-18	204	192	146	2	53
Portsmouth	2018-19	25,515	21,090	4,425	2017-18	2,236	2,122	1,300	5	51
Queen Margaret, Edinburgh	2018-19	5,225	3,505	1,720		318	303	241	2	46
Queen Mary	2018-19	20,565	14,305	6,260	2018-19	7,136	7,022	2,405	4	117
Queens Uni Belfast**	2018-19	24,700	18,735	5,965				3,000	6	121
Reading	2018-19	17,800	12,585	5,215	2018-19	5,414	5,183	1,465	5	82
Robert Gordon	2018-19	16,787	10,576	6,211		870	822	493	6	29
Roehampton	2018-19	12,665	10,730	1,935	2017-18	1,201	1,504	733	3	58
Royal Academy, Music	2018-19	885	440	445	2018-19			42	1	47
Royal Agricultural	2018-19	1,150	1,045	105	2018-19	400	385	196	1	170
Royal Central School of Speech & Drama	2018-19	1,055	660	395	2018-19			15	1	14
Royal Holloway	2018-19	11,040	8,105	2,935	2018-19	6,738	6,780	890	4	81
Royal Veterinary	2018-19	2,525	2,045	480	2018-19			212	1	84
Salford	2018-19	20,815	16,670	4,145	2018-19	1,988	2,007	1,029	5	49

**TABLE 1: STUDENT UNIONS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM (CONT.)**

UNIVERSITY STUDENT UNION	YEAR	STUDENTS	UNDER-GRAD	POST-GRAD	FINANCE YEAR	INCOME (£000)	EXPENDITURE (£000)	UNIVERSITY GRANT (£000)	FULL TIME SOs	GRANT PER STUDENT
Sheffield	2018-19	30,195	19610	10585	2017-18	11,575	11570	3265	8	108
Sheffield Hallam	2018-19	30,720	24320	6400	2018-19	3206	3114	2474	6	81
SOAS	2018-19	5,800	2,695	3,105	2017-18	1,452	1,438	423	4	73
Solent	2018-19	9,910	9260	650	2018-19	781	729	638	4	64
South Wales	2018-19	22,330	17530	4800	2018-19	2845	2789	1232	4	55
Southampton	2018-19	22,715	15790	6925	2018-19	6743	6823	2403	5	106
SRUC	2018-19	1,760	1680	80				90	3	51
St. Andrews	2018-19	10,747	8984	1763	2018-19	3027	2959	618	6	58
St. Georges	2018-19	4,685	3,735	950	2018-19			329	4	70
St. Mary's, Twickenham	2018-19	5,490	3535	1955	2018-19	782	723	477	3	87
Staffordshire	2018-19	14,855	12635	2220	2018-19	3551	3540	1127	4	76
Stirling	2018-19	12,500	8565	3935	2018-19	1692	1680	476	4	38
Strathclyde	2018-19	22,645	15055	7590	2018-19	2958	3041	1726	6	76
Suffolk	2018-19	7,690	7080	610	2018-19	370	409	265	2	34
Sunderland	2018-19	14,710	11925	2785	2018-19	1097	1060	974	3	66
Surrey	2018-19	16,815	13430	3385	2018-19	3688	3610	1800	5	107
Sussex	2018-19	22,319	14925	7394	2018-19	6450	6378	1800	6	81
Swansea	2018-19	18,445	16300	2145	2018-19	7376	7399	1110	6	60
Teeside	2018-19	20,401	18263	2138	2018-19	3096	3244	1024	3	50
Trinity St. David	2018-19	11,135	9,255	1,880	2018-19	769	717	665	4	60
UCL	2018-19	41,180	20,005	21,175	2018-19	10,641	11,343	2,337	7	57
Ulster	2018-19	17,510	11,305	6,205	2018-19	2391	2,237	1,613	7	92
Arts, London	2016-17	18,290	14,760	3,530	2018-19	3,429	3,437	1,300	4	71
Warwick	2018-19	25,797	15,998	9,799	2018-19	8,997	9,267	2,917	7	113
West England	2016-17	29,497	22,172	7,325	2017-18	6,176	5,938	1,500	5	51
West London	2018-19	11,055	9,055	2,000	2018-19	3,379	3,256	2,652	3	240
West Scotland	2018-19	17,025	14,215	2,810	2018-19	1,123	1,134	881	4	52
Westminster	2018-19	18,880	14,775	4,105	2018-19	2,779	2,633	1,335	5	71
Winchester	2018-19	7,765	6,455	1,310	2018-19	1,916	1,881	310	3	40
Wolverhampton	2018-19	19,045	15,410	3,635	2018-19	1,083	1,102	965	4	51
Worcester	2018-19	10,075	8,410	1,665	2018-19	1,034	998	533	3	53
Wrexham Glyndwr	2018-19	5,890	5,190	700	2018-19	517	536	350	2	59
York	2018-19	19,465	14,030	5,435	2018-19	5,354	5,305	1,260	5	65
York St. John	2018-19	6,620	5,830	790	2018-19	1,235	1,219	486	3	73
<b>TOTALS</b>		<b>2,217, 421</b>	<b>1,650, 779</b>	<b>555, 110</b>		<b>442, 648</b>	<b>445,165</b>	<b>164,515</b>	<b>589</b>	

\*Figures for Glasgow represent all 4 student institutions. \*\* Figures for Queens Belfast are an estimate.

The total block grants, which amount to £165 million, excludes many other university contributions: premises and serviced accommodation and university services; one off grants for capital projects and other unspecified purposes and grants for clubs and societies. Including these would add substantially to the total. For example, University College London student union received £2.68 million of donation-in-kind in the form of accommodation provided by the University in 2018-19.

The Conservative Government (1981-8) introduced the current system by which universities fund student unions. Previously, student unions were financed by public funds, from subscriptions nominally charged to individual students and paid for through the student award system. The cost imposed on the taxpayer of student unions increased substantially during the 1970s, from an estimated £3m in 1970-71 to £13m in 1976-77, an increase in subscription rates of 220% after taking account of the increase in student numbers. In order to prevent further out-of-control increases from public funds, then Education Secretary Mark Carlisle changed the system to one of block grants from the recurrent funds of parent institutions.

While this approach prevented the costs from continuing to spiral out of control, it did not provide for effective statutory control over student unions' use of public funds. Some control has resulted from the restrictions imposed as a consequence of the charitable status of most but not all student unions.

The block grants paid by universities to student unions were, originally, ultimately derived wholly from public funds but subsequent to the changes in student financing they are now effectively paid for half by the taxpayer and half by students themselves. Higher education is now largely financed by state-subsidised student loans, which students repay only if their income exceeds a certain threshold.

The up front cost of teaching each cohort of undergraduate students is around £17 billion (with the total taxpayer contribution being about £21,007 per student).<sup>2</sup> Most of that money comes from student loans, which students repay on an income-contingent basis, paying 9% of their income above a certain threshold (currently £25,725). Once graduate loan repayments are accounted for, the cost of providing higher education is roughly evenly split between the government and students, due to the high write-offs on student loans (currently around 45% is expected to be written off). Less than one-fifth of graduates are forecast to repay their student loans in full. Therefore, both students and taxpayers have an incentive to ensure that these funds are spent effectively and not wasted on counter-productive and unnecessary activities.

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<sup>2</sup> Claire Crawford, Rowena Crawford, Wenchao Jin, Institute for Fiscal Studies, "Estimating the public cost of student loans" (April 2014), <https://www.ifs.org.uk/comms/r94.pdf>.

## STUDENT UNION ELECTION TURNOUT

Student unions are unrepresentative of students. By their behaviour, students are overwhelmingly uninterested in student unions and their activities. They do not bother to vote in student union elections, even with the ease of online voting.

Turnout figures in student union elections are astonishingly low, generally ranging between 7% and 15% of the student population, sometimes lower. Not all student unions release these dire turnout figures. An analysis of 40 university student unions, which do release turnout figures, shows that the average turnout is 10.8% (See Table 2).

**TABLE 2: STUDENT UNION ELECTION TURNOUT**

UNIVERSITY STUDENT UNION	YEAR	TURNOUT %
Surrey University	2020	8
Teesside University	2020	3.4
Bristol University	2018	10.57
Solent University	2019	13
Sussex University	2019	13.8
Portsmouth University	2020	15.5
Salford University	2019	11.2
Stirling University	2020	12.5
Strathclyde University	2020	14.1
London Metropolitan University	2020	11
Robert Gordons University	2020	6.8
Queens University Belfast	2020	17
Cumbria University	2020	12.4
Newcastle University	2020	13.6
Sheffield Hallam	2020	6.3
Plymouth University	2020	15.5
Trinity St. David University	2020	3.06
West Scotland University	2020	11.3
Wolverhampton University	2019	7.22
University College London	2020	11.79
Kings College London	2020	11.2
Manchester Metropolitan	2020	7.56
Kingston	2019	6
York	2020	23.8
Chester	2020	11.1
Nottingham University	2020	5.95
Lancaster University	2020	9

Reading University	2020	13.9
Wolverhampton University	2020	6.7
University of the West of Scotland	2020	11.3
Lancaster University	2020	8.3
SRUC	2020	8
University of East Anglia	2020	15.3
Royal Holloway	2020	13.3
Brunel	2020	11.3
South Wales	2020	3.4
Harper Adams	2020	14.6
Stirling University	2020	12.5
Birmingham City	2020	14.5
Greenwich	2018	8
Average turnout of all the above		10.84
Average turn out in 2020		11% ±1.6%

Take, for example, the recently concluded 2020 elections for five sabbatical officers and a host of part-time officers at Surrey University. The turnout was 8%, meaning that a staggering 92% of students were ostensibly uninterested in their student union. The average voting student was 21.3 years old, compared with an average for the student body as a whole of 24.9 years old. This could suggest that the longer a student spends at the university, the less interested he or she is in the student union, or that older, post-graduate students show even less interest than undergraduates. The Teesside University student union's elections turnout in 2020 was only 607 students, just 3.4% of all students.<sup>3</sup>

Faced by this overwhelming lack of interest, student union officers attempt to induce students to vote using student union funds. Strathclyde University's relatively large 14.5% turnout was only achieved with "500 timbits, 8 bananas, and 28,460 slices of pizza."<sup>4</sup> Portsmouth University students encouraged voting by providing a wristband that qualified voters to receive 20% off purchases in the student union shop and free upgrades from regular to large hot drinks.<sup>5</sup> A common approach is to provide incentives if vote totals exceed a certain amount. The University of East Anglia student union offers free ice cream if the vote total exceeded 2,000,<sup>6</sup> as well as free chips or doughnuts for the first 200 voters of the day.<sup>7</sup> Leicester offered pizza if votes exceeded 1,500.<sup>8</sup> At Liverpool University it was Greggs vouchers

<sup>3</sup> "About TUSU Elections", TeesSU, <https://www.tees-su.org.uk/elections>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "Why Vote? Benefits and Your Wristband" UPSU, <https://www.upsu.net/student-voice/elections/why-vote>.

<sup>6</sup> "The Union are providing incentives to get students to vote in the elections" The Norwich Tab, October 3, 2017, <https://thetab.com/uk/norwich/2017/03/10/the-union-are-providing-incentives-to-get-students-to-vote-in-the-elections-26624>.

<sup>7</sup> "SU Prizes" University of East Anglia Students' Union, 2020, <https://www.uea.su/elections/prizes/>

<sup>8</sup> "Incentives Zone" Leicester Students' Union, February 19, 2020, <https://www.leicesterunion.com/>



and Starbucks coffee.<sup>9</sup> At Oxford University, where the student union has recently been in the news for trying to censor textbooks, the approach has been to offer cash prizes for the colleges and departments with the highest turnout.<sup>10</sup> Durham University Student Union follows a similar model.

Overall turnout figures should not be used to suggest that student union leaders have exactly that level of support from students. For example, in this year's election results from London Metropolitan University, just under 11% of students voted.<sup>11</sup> But only 9% voted in the individual election for the student union president, who was elected with the votes of only 7% of the student body. Moreover, turnout figures in 2020 are not lower than usual because of Covid-19. If anything they appear to be higher in many student unions. For example, the Harper Adams University turn in 2020 was 14.6%, whereas in 2019 it was only 3.8%.<sup>12</sup>

The level of student engagement with the National Union of Students is even more dire. NUS officers are elected and policy set at annual conferences to which each participating university student union elects delegates. In the case of London Metropolitan University, 6% of students voted for NUS delegates. That is a high figure. At Glasgow Caledonian University in 2018 a mere 1.5% voted for their NUS delegates.<sup>13</sup> At Aberdeen University only 79 students voted for NUS delegates, amounting to 0.5% of the student body.<sup>14</sup> At Liverpool Hope University the equivalent figure was 146 students, or 2.8% of the overall student population.<sup>15</sup> At London Southbank University 5% of students voted for NUS delegates in 2015.<sup>16</sup> At Tees-side University 3.1% of students voted for NUS delegates in 2020 and at UCL the figure was a tiny 0.9%.<sup>17</sup> Data is not available for all universities, but based on details provided by 25 student unions which publish figures, one can conclude that less than 3% of students participate in the elections for NUS conference delegates. This exposes the NUS's claim to represent 7 million students as false. Of the 25 student unions surveyed across several years, the average turnout is 2.8%. The average turnout in NUS delegate elections in 2020 only is estimated at 3.2% ±1%.

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ents/event/1360/.

**9** "Student Officer Election: More Votes = More Prizes" Liverpool Guild of Students, March 9, 2020, <https://www.liverpoolguild.org/articles/student-officer-election-more-votes-more-prizes>.

**10** "Kate Cole Elected OUSU President For 2017/18" The Oxford Student, February 9, 2017, <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2017/02/09/kate-cole-elected-ousu-president/>.

**11** "Students' Union 2020 election results" London Metropolitan University Students' Union, July 3, 2020, <https://www.londonmetsu.org.uk/news/article/6564/Students-Union-2020-election-results/>.

**12** "Elections Results" Harper Adams Students' Union, 2020, <https://www.harpersu.com/elections/>.

**13** NUS UK Conference 2018, Delegate Election Results [https://nusdigital.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/document/documents/41310/044e5236830ccbb1ea4e3217b2318d07/NUS\\_UK\\_Conference\\_2018\\_Delegate\\_Election\\_Results.jpg](https://nusdigital.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/document/documents/41310/044e5236830ccbb1ea4e3217b2318d07/NUS_UK_Conference_2018_Delegate_Election_Results.jpg)

**14** "NUS Delegate Elections 2020 Full Results" Aberdeen University Students' Association, 2020, <https://www.ausa.org.uk/pageassets/elections/current/nusdelegateelections/NUSDelegateElections20FullResults.pdf>.

**15** "NUS Delegate Elections 2020" Hope SU, January 24, 2020, <https://www.hopesu.com/articles/votes-are-in-nus-delegate-election-results>.

**16** "NUS Conference Delegate Election Results" London Southbank Students' Union, February, 2015, <https://www.lsbu.org/representing/elections/results/nus/>.

**17** "NUS Conference Delegate" Students' Union UCL, 2020, <https://studentsunionucl.org/election/nus-conference-delegate-elections/position/nus-conference-delegate>.

Despite only 3% of students expressing any interest in the NUS, the remaining 97% are obliged to fund it on a compulsory basis. 18

**TABLE 3: NUS DELEGATE ELECTIONS TURNOUT**

UNIVERSITY STUDENT UNION	YEAR	% TURNOUT
Glasgow Caledonian University	2018	1.5
Liverpool Hope University	2020	2.8
Aberdeen University	2020	0.5
London Southbank University	2020	5
Teesside University	2020	3.1
UCL	2020	0.9
Wolverhampton University	2018	2.39
Goldsmiths University	2020	4.1
Greenwich University	2018	1
Brighton University	2020	1.8
Staffordshire University	2015	4.4
London Metropolitan University	2020	6.8
Solent University	2015	0.9
Sheffield Hallam University	2018	3.3
Kingston University	2020	2.07
St Mary's University	2018	6.48
University of the Creative Arts	2019	1.8
Birmingham City University	2020	4.6
Roehampton University	2019	0.26
Salford University	2015	1.7
Kings College London	2020	2.75
University of West of Scotland	2020	4.4
Warwick	2019	4.8
York	2019	1.3
Cambridge	2020	2.1
<b>Average turnout of all the above</b>		<b>2.83</b>
<b>Average turn out in 2020</b>		<b>3.2% ±1%</b>

Students are not just apathetic about student unions, but rather, often complain about the lack of value. A student newspaper editor has argued in The Guardian:

“Unions generally blame apathy for student ignorance of their function, but that’s seems a weak excuse for poor performance. [Sic.]

The real issue is that many unions have become merely symbolic of student representation, and have little influence on decisions affecting the student body...

..Nottingham SU has conducted debates on such pressing issues as “should bottled water be banned from the union shop?” and “should we lobby the university for transexual toilets?” No wonder students are turned off – these issues simply aren’t representative of the average student’s concerns.

Students on three-year courses pay around £130-£190 for the privilege of union membership through tuition fees. The question is: can student unions justify that cost?”<sup>18</sup>

It could be argued that to solve the unrepresentativeness of student unions, ordinary students should simply get involved, vote in student elections, and stand for student sabbatical positions. However, in practice busy students appear to prioritise education, work, and other ways to spend their time. Students are, nevertheless, forced to fund and be members of the organisations.

Furthermore, student unions make decisions that they claim to be representative, with very little engagement of the broader student population. Most student union constitutions allow for policy to be decided at general meetings. The quorum for decisions at such meetings is unusually low (Table 4).

**TABLE 4: NUS DELEGATE ELECTIONS TURNOUT**

UNIVERSITY STUDENT UNION	STUDENT POPULATION	QUORUM	VOTES NEEDED TO PASS	% OF STUDENT POPULATION TO PASS
University of Manchester	40,250	100	51	0.1
Imperial College	19,115	200	101	0.5
Birkbeck University	11,390	50	26	0.2
Nottingham University	33,540	500	251	0.7
Edinburgh University	35,732	200	101	0.3
Coventry University	34,985	100	51	0.1
Cardiff	33,190	500	251	0.8
Kings College London	32,890	125	63.5	0.2
University of West England	29,497	150	76	0.3
Southampton University	22,715	250	126	0.6
SOAS	5,800	50	26	0.4
Derby University	19,145	50	26	0.1

<sup>18</sup> “Are student unions worth the money?” The Guardian, March 21, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/mortarboard/2012/mar/21/are-student-unions-worth-the-money>.

As can be seen, a very small number of students, all below 1% of the student population and as low as 26 individuals in some cases, are able to pass policy that is binding on the student union and is taken to represent the position of all students.

Sometimes, the student union will reach the quorum by distributing free pizza, then the meeting will proceed with the more controversial decisions - e.g. banning meat or blocking a speaker deemed controversial - taken near the end once uninterested students have finished their pizza and left. One such example comes from Stirling University, where in February 2020 a motion was passed at a general meeting that reversed a position of political neutrality, allowing student union officers to campaign on political issues. The motion was passed by 37 votes to 12. According to the student newspaper this was done after most students had left the meeting.<sup>19</sup> Thirty-seven students constitute 0.3% of the student population.

The derisory turnout in student union elections reveals that students are alienated from the current system and view it as primarily a playground for student politicians.

Some student unions have recognised that there is a problem. For example, Greenwich University Student union commented that “The Union spends over £100,000 a year to pay four students to make decisions on your behalf. Only 8% of students vote to elect them.”<sup>20</sup> Meike Imberg, the then union president, said “We need to radically change the way we are representing our students and the structures of how students can get involved with us. Something needs to change.”

The final section of this report outlines a range of reform proposals to both funding and structures that would give students more control and also enable resources to flow away from politicking to areas that are appreciated by students, such as social, recreational and entertainment facilities, and sports, as well as the crucial academic representation work that is being performed poorly by many student unions. Our proposed reforms also address the important principle of the right to freedom of association. No student should be forced to join a political organisation against their will.

### **SABBATICAL OFFICERS: NUMBERS AND ACTIVITIES**

There are a large number of full-time student sabbatical officers in student unions throughout the UK - around 600 in higher education establishments (See Table 1). A sabbatical officer is a full-time paid student representative who is taking a sabbatical year out of their studies, or at the end of their studies. In order to reduce the number of quasi-permanent full-time activists, the Education Act 1994 restricted the number of years a student could serve as a sabbatical officer to two.

The mix of sabbatical officers differs from institution to institution. There is usually a president and usually one who is primarily responsible for academic issues.

<sup>19</sup> “Union neutrality repealed as controversial new motion passes” Brig Newspaper, February 8, 2020, <https://brignews.com/2020/02/08/union-neutrality-repealed-as-new-motion-passes/>.

<sup>20</sup> “The Big Choice” Greenwich Students’ Union, 2020, <https://www.greenwichsu.co.uk/thebigchoice/>

Most student unions have one or more sabbatical officers whose responsibility is “liberation” or “equality,” (See Table 5). They are often paired with the “welfare” role, as is the case at Goldsmiths’ SU and Aberdeen University Students’ Association, for example.<sup>21</sup> Liberation and equality officers have no specific remit for day-to-day activity. Instead, their time is spent promoting identity politics at union council meetings, in running specific campaigns, and at meetings with university staff. The typical description of the liberation officer’s role from student unions is exceptionally vague, such as to “ensure students of all backgrounds and cultures, including those from marginalised groups, are represented on campus.”

At Newcastle University Students’ Union,<sup>22</sup> for example, the first objective of the officer is campaigning, as is the case at Leicester.<sup>23</sup> Some student unions pay part-time liberation officers to represent specific groups and assist the full-time welfare officer in “liberating” the university campus. One example of this is at Edinburgh University Student Association, where part-time liberation officers must identify as and represent the following groups: Black & minority ethnic students, disabled students, LGBT+ students, trans and non-binary students, and women students.<sup>24</sup> There are at least 120 full-time sabbatical officers in UK student unions concerned with liberation and equality.

There is very little evidence, beyond the organisation of events and campaigns, of the efficacy of these roles. Nor does there appear to be any great enthusiasm among students for these liberation posts, with turnout figures in elections for these posts even lower than for other posts.<sup>25</sup> Indeed at one university, SRUC, no-one could be found who even wanted to stand.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore “welfare” officers provide little meaningful welfare services. That is done by the university and others. Job descriptions claim welfare officers “organise and lead campaigns”, “raise awareness”, “create an inclusive environment”, “lead policy and campaigns that will help to shape your University experience”, “focus on supporting the improvement of overall equality and inclusion in the University” and “develop policy”. Inexperienced student welfare officers cannot and should not compete with experienced professional welfare advisers. Student mental health issues, for example, are best dealt with by experienced mental health advisers rather than student politicians. Of course it is implausible for ordinary students to place their trust in an inexperienced student politician purporting to perform a welfare role.

<sup>21</sup> “Sabbatical Officers” Aberdeen University Students’ Association, <https://www.ausa.org.uk/representation/sabbaticals/>.

<sup>22</sup> “Welfare & Equality Officer” Newcastle University Students’ Union, 2019, <https://www.nusu.co.uk/yourvoice/officers/welfare/>.

<sup>23</sup> “Tony Magaia, Liberation Officer” Leicester Students’ Union, 2020, <https://www.leicesterunion.com/officers/equality/>.

<sup>24</sup> “About the Liberation Officer Role” Edinburgh University Students’ Association, 2020, <https://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/yourvoice/elections/march/stand/liberation/>.

<sup>25</sup> “Election Results 2020” Strathclyde Students’ Union, 2020, <https://www.strathunion.com/pageassets/elections/Strath-Union-Election-Results-2020-Voting-Breakdown.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> “2020-2021 SRUC Students’ Association Team” SRUC Students’ Association, 2020, <https://www.srucsa.org.uk/20-21-team/>.

Every university in the United Kingdom partakes in the National Student Survey (NSS). Response rates are consistently high: 311,432 students participated in the survey in 2020, despite the NUS and many student unions trying to persuade them not to take part.<sup>27</sup> The survey is the most important method of determining the levels of student satisfaction with the education they receive.

In 2020, 83% of students reported overall satisfaction with their course, and 84% were satisfied with the teaching on their course; 79% were satisfied with the academic support they received and 86% with the learning resources. Universities come out of the survey looking relatively good. Student unions on the other hand, do not.

The question that relates to student unions is “The students union (association or guild) effectively represents students’ academic interests.” This question only concerns the effectiveness of student unions in performing their core academic representation functions, not all their functions.

A mere 56% of students, barely over half, thought that their student union did a good job of this, a much worse performance than universities. Student unions are failing in their most important function.

Some student unions perform significantly worse than others. There are many student unions which perform, in the words of the NSS, “significantly below the benchmark” of the average SU performance (See Table 5).<sup>28</sup>

**TABLE 5: ACADEMIC REPRESENTATION: THE WORST PERFORMING STUDENT UNIONS**

STUDENT UNION	SCORE	BENCH-MARK	% BELOW BENCH-MARK	SU PER CAPITA BUDGET	FREE SPEECH RANKING	LIB/EQUAL SABS?	LIB OFFICERS
Durham	28.9	53.06	24.16	63	Amber	1	3
Edinburgh	39.53	56.32	16.79	89	Red	1	5
Lancaster	37.48	54.15	16.67	55	Red	1	6
Bristol	40.74	54.08	13.34	91	Amber	1	6
Oxford Brookes	45.94	56.71	10.77	71	Green		5
Manchester	44.74	55.44	10.7	59	Red	1	5
York	43.3	53.13	9.83	61	Amber	1	6

<sup>27</sup> “Boycott the NSS” King’s College London Students’ Union,” <https://www.kclsu.org/change/campaigns/past/boycottnss/>; “Boycott the NSS 2019 – CUSU” <https://www.cusu.co.uk/takeaction/boycott-the-nss/>

<sup>28</sup> The benchmark is slightly adjusted in each case to take account of each institutions particular mix of students, in order to allow fair comparison

<b>Warwick</b>	43.98	53.33	9.35	113	Red		5
<b>KCL</b>	46.38	55.27	8.89	183	Amber	1	4
<b>Uni of Brighton</b>	48.56	55.93	7.37	55	Green	1	
<b>Aberdeen</b>	48.09	55.28	7.19	52	Red	2	5
<b>Arts, London</b>	50.32	57.39	7.07	71			5
<b>Kent</b>	46.9	53.54	6.64	88	Green	1	3
<b>Cumbria</b>	50.84	57.23	6.39	61	Red		1
<b>Bedfordshire</b>	52.88	59.04	6.16	60	Green	1	3
<b>Northampton</b>	52.55	58.63	6.08	138	Red		4
<b>Falmouth</b>	50.39	55.92	5.53	132		1	8
<b>LSE</b>	48.23	53.55	5.32	132	Amber		5
<b>Goldsmith's</b>	49.43	54.74	5.31	161	Red	1	5
<b>Canterbury Christchurch</b>	52.57	57.72	5.15	50	Amber		7
<b>Solent</b>	50.32	55.26	4.94	64	Amber		4
<b>Sheffield Hallam</b>	51.13	56	4.87	81	Red		4
<b>Birmingham</b>	51.29	55.36	4.07	92	Red		6
<b>UCL</b>	51.37	55.41	4.04	129	Amber	3	4
<b>City</b>	54.66	58.41	3.75	47	Red		5
<b>West of Scotland</b>	53.47	56.8	3.33	52	Green		
<b>Sussex</b>	52.04	55.24	3.2	81	Red	1	5
<b>Exeter</b>	50.28	53.3	3.02	66	Amber	1	1
<b>Kingston</b>	53.17	55.7	2.53	78	Amber		4
<b>Average student grant per student</b>				85.3			

These poor performers are not small student unions without enough resources to perform the academic representation function properly. To the contrary, the list includes many of the most significant universities in the country.

Student unions that receive higher block grants from universities tend to do worse than those who receive less (See Annex 1). The average per capita university grant to the poorly performing student union, at £79, is above the overall average of £74. This demonstrates that it is not lack of resources that is causing the poor performance.

Student unions that perform significantly below benchmark in NSS Q26 have, on average, higher block grant to income ratios than the sector as a whole (See Annex 1). This provides some evidence that student unions which successfully provide commercial services are appreciated by students more than those which are more occupied with other activities such as political campaigning. The student unions which focus most on politics unsurprisingly focus less on providing the social and recreational services that students really appreciate.

There are also other measures than can be examined. If one looks at how the poor-performers are rated in the Spiked free speech rankings, the largest number, 12 of 29, are red, signifying a very restrictive approach to free speech. The second largest number, 10, have an amber rating, indicating a partially restrictive approach. However, given that so many student unions do badly in these ratings, it is difficult to measure the effect a poor rating has on NSS Q26 performance.

Also significant is the amount of resources that poorly performing student unions devote to “liberation”. The table shows how many full and part-time student officers are devoted to identity politics, variously described as liberation, diversity, and equality. For example the full-time Durham “Welfare and Liberation Officer” states that her role “champions equality and diversity, by supporting both self-defining students and our Associations to come together and run campaigns. As Welfare and Liberation Officer I support student representatives to effectively improve welfare and liberation across the campus.”

At Lancaster University Student Union the full-time Vice-President (welfare) “is the political lead on equality, welfare and diversity issues.” She is occupied in “publicising and supporting the campaigns and events ran [sic.] by the six part-time officers, particularly during Black History Month and LGBTQ+ History Month”. Lancaster Student Union has six liberation and campaign groups each led by a part time officer: disabled, black, international, LGBTQ+, women and mature students.<sup>29</sup>

There is a similar picture at most of the other student unions on the worst-performing list. The following section of this report describes the activities of some of the most politically active student unions. Many of those cited, for example, Durham, Manchester, Birmingham, Kent, LSE, King’s College London, Edinburgh, York, Kingston and Goldsmiths, are also on the list of the worst performers in academic representation, although it is difficult to measure precisely how much resources go into such political activities.

By contrast the student unions that perform better in academic representation tend to be the smaller and have less of a fixation on identity politics. For example, Winchester University Student Union does not have a sabbatical officer or part-time officers devoted to ‘liberation’ issues, nor does it run campaigns on political issues. Sixty-three per cent of students report satisfaction with its academic representation work.

St. Andrews University Students Association also did relatively well, with a score of 69%. The association takes a much more traditional approach. Its sabbatical officers still wear the old St Andrews red gown, for example. The students association makes an effort to work with the university rather than against it. For example the sabbatical officer responsible for academic representation describes her role as follows: “I work closely with the Proctor’s Office and other University staff to

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<sup>29</sup> “Liberation Groups” Lancaster University Students’ Union, 2020, <https://lancastersu.co.uk/liberation-groups>.



work on policies and ensure the high level of teaching St Andrews is known for is maintained and improved upon. I also uphold the student voice on numerous University committees such as Learning & Teaching Committee and the Academic Monitoring Group”.

Student unions are struggling to provide effective student representation. Reforms are required to address the problem. A key issue is the lumping of academic representation in with all the other functions of a student union and putting a student politician in charge. As will be discussed further in the final section of this report, student academic representation needs to be de-politicised, separated from the rest of the student union and given considerably more attention.

### STUDENT UNION POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Sabbatical Officers and Student Unions across the UK engage extensively in political activity that is outside the remit of their function of student representation. The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) notes that political activity brings three key opportunity costs. “First, it takes time and effort away from other priorities. Secondly, it disengages the many students who do not identify as left-wing radicals. Thirdly, it is the gift that keeps on giving to journalists who want to want to ridicule ‘snowflakes’.”<sup>30</sup>

Most student unions see themselves essentially as political institutions. For example, Goldsmiths College Student Union states it will “make sure liberation is at the heart of everything we do”.<sup>31</sup> Liberation is ‘the act of working to challenge and reverse the effects of structural oppression in society’.

There is substantial appeal to the concept of structural oppression. Lancaster University Student Union provides a fairly typical explanation:

“Many of our students face oppression in our society. We aim to fight against this oppression, and to fight for the liberation of marginalised groups. There are currently six Liberation and Campaign groups at the Students’ Union, each being led by a part-time officer. They represent Disabled, Black Students, International, LGBTQ+, Women and Mature students. Any student who self-defines as a member of these communities is welcome at their respective group..... Liberation and Campaign Groups are intersectional. This means that they recognise the intersections (or overlaps) between different identities and the knock-on effects. It is possible for students to self-define into one, some, or all of the Liberation and Campaign Groups. As a result, groups often work together to achieve the best results.”<sup>32</sup>

Thus much current student union political activity is centred on the promotion of identity politics, a harmful and divisive creed. As former Labour Minister Tom Harris has written:

“Identity politics is at root an inescapable path to division. That is its entire point: to divide society into black vs white, biological sex vs trans orthodoxy, Muslim vs non-Muslim and forcing everyone

<sup>30</sup> “If student unions score so poorly, is it time for universities to dip their hands in their pockets to fund a new NUS International Students’ Officer?” Higher Education Policy Unit, July 9, 2019, <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/07/09/if-student-unions-score-so-poorly-is-it-time-for-universities-to-dip-their-hands-in-their-pockets-to-fund-a-new-nus-international-students-officer/>.

<sup>31</sup> “Liberation Groups at Goldsmiths” Goldsmiths Students’ Union, 2020, <https://www.goldsmithssu.org/news/article/6013/We-try-to-make-sure-that-liberation-is-at-the-heart-of-everything-we-do/>

<sup>32</sup> “Liberation Groups” Lancaster University Students’ Union, 2020, <https://lancastersu.co.uk/liberation-groups>.

to pick a side. It is division on which its advocates feed and thrive; without division there can be no “progress” towards achieving their aims, the most important of which is the continued proliferation of division itself.”<sup>33</sup>

The result of this focus is that student unions concentrate on campaigning activity that is unconnected to the interests of the vast majority of students.

Students at a Freshers’ Fair at the University of East Anglia were given sombreros by staff from Pedro’s Tex Mex Cantina, a Mexican restaurant in Norwich. Student union officials took the sombreros away from them, describing the hats as racist.<sup>34</sup> The restaurant workers were banned from further distribution of the sombreros.

The University of Sheffield’s student union decided in October 2019 to follow the NUS’ guidelines on Halloween costumes and place a ban on wide-brimmed sombreros and colourful scarves, on the grounds that they are racist. Posters were funded by the SU and put up around campus that read “My culture is not your costume,” and “My disability, impairment, condition or illness is not your costume.” The Sheffield University SU further distinguished itself by banning white students from attending a meeting to discuss the formulation of an anti-racism campaign.<sup>35</sup>

Meanwhile Kent University Student Union banned cowboy outfits because they might offend others.<sup>36</sup> (There were no reports of cowboys being offended.) Also banned by the student union were costumes on themes including “the Crusades, Nazi uniform, priests and nuns, and Native Americans, ISIS bomber, Israeli soldier and The Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him)”. Other student unions have also banned fancy dress. For example at Edinburgh University the student union has a strict costume policy that forbids students from dressing as Caitlyn Jenner, gangsters or Arabs.<sup>37</sup> Not to be outdone, in February 2020 Oxford University SU banned vicars and tarts parties.<sup>38</sup> “Highly sexualised themes can have distressing impacts on marginalised communities”, they stated. Aberystwyth Student Union has recently banned parties held on a drag theme on the grounds that they “make a mockery” of the transgender experience.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>33</sup> “Can Starmer stop Labour spiralling into the identity politics abyss?” Tom Harris, CapX, June 25, 2020, <https://capx.co/can-starmer-stop-labours-spiral-into-the-identity-politics-abyss/>

<sup>34</sup> “Student union bans ‘racist’ sombreros” The Guardian, September 29, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/29/uea-student-union-bans-racist-sombreros>

<sup>35</sup> “Sheffield Student Union bans white students from attending meeting on campus racism as it plans to change ‘from being simply non-racist to actively anti-racist” Mail Online, October 11, 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7559049/Sheffield-Student-Union-bans-white-students-attending-meeting-campus-racism.html>

<sup>36</sup> “Kent student union bans cowboy costumes and sombreros in fancy dress guidelines” Kent Online, October 11, 2018, <https://www.kentonline.co.uk/canterbury/news/students-union-bans-cowboy-outfits-and-chav-costumes-191326/>

<sup>37</sup> “EUSA bans students from dressing as Pocahontas and Caitlyn Jenner in strict costume policy” The Independent, January 21, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/eusa-bans-students-dressing-pocahontas-and-caitlyn-jenner-strict-costume-policy-a6824796.html>

<sup>38</sup> “University bans ‘vicars and tarts’ parties to better protect non-binary students” Pink News, February 3, 2020, <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/02/03/oxford-university-student-union-ban-vicars-tarts-parties-non-binary/>

<sup>39</sup> “Students banned from holding ‘drag’ themes parties amid concerns over mocking transgender

The University of Manchester Student Union's liberation and access officer demanded in October 2019 that the city council reverse its plans to put up a statue of Mahatma Gandhi on the grounds that "would not promote peace but instead promote Gandhi's racist and anti-black ideology, and promote continued violence in Kashmir."<sup>40</sup>

Zamzam Ibrahim, president of Salford University's student union in 2017, stated that every student should read: "The Quraan, we would have an Islamic takeover!" She went on to say that, regarding friendship between a man and a woman, "Islamically it's incorrect for a girl to be friends with a guy."<sup>41</sup> Ibrahim had stated in the past that she would "oppress white people just to give them a taste of what they put us through."<sup>42</sup> Regarding the Prevent extremism strategy, Ibrahim stated that the Government's "work has been used to create an expansive surveillance architecture to spy on the public and to police dissent, systematically targeting Black people and Muslims."<sup>43</sup> Ibrahim subsequently became the President of the NUS.

Goldsmiths' SU replaced the words "woman" and "women" with "womxn" in order to "demonstrate our commitment to inclusiveness", as a spokeswoman said.<sup>44</sup> The term is an evolution of the word "womyn," adopted by feminists in the 1970s in order to reject an association with "man". That word has since been discredited due to its nature as representative of "white, cisgender feminism", while "womxn" is more inclusive for transgender women. Goldsmiths' SU Welfare and Liberation Officer also stated in 2019 that students and staff had been "experiencing racism for a number of years" in the form of "micro-aggressions, insensitive lecturers and seminar leaders."<sup>45</sup>

Inclusiveness of student unions more often shows itself to be an oppressive and obstructive force. Imogen Wilson, a student at Edinburgh University, was threatened with removal from a student union council meeting after she violated the SU's safe space policy by making a gesture with her arm that "denoted disagreement."<sup>46</sup> Her

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people" The Telegraph, September 4, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/09/04/students-banned-holding-drag-themed-parties-amid-concerns-mocking/>.

**40** "Students want Gandhi statue scrapped in Manchester 'because he's racist'" Metro, October 16, 2019, <https://metro.co.uk/2019/10/16/students-want-gandhi-statue-scrapped-in-manchester-because-hes-racist-10930985/>

**41** "Student union president sparks controversy by saying she would like to 'oppress white people', everyone should read the Koran and that men and women must not be friends" Mail Online, July 6, 2017, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4656926/Student-union-president-calls-Islamic-takeover.html>

**42** "New NUS president has said that she wanted to 'oppress white people' and have an 'Islamic takeover'" The Telegraph, April 10, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2019/04/10/new-nus-president-has-said-thatshe-wanted-oppress-white-people/>

**43** "Student union president sparks controversy by saying she would like to 'oppress white people', everyone should read the Koran and that men and women must not be friends" Mail Online, July 6, 2017, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4656926/Student-union-president-calls-Islamic-takeover.html>

**44** "Snowflake students replace the word 'women' with 'womxn' because the traditional spelling contains the offensive term 'men' (but no-one quite seems to know how to pronounce it)" Mail Online, November 27, 2018, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6428225/Snowflake-students-replace-word-women-WOMXN-traditional-spelling-contains-man.html>

**45** "What's going on at Goldsmiths?" Evening Standard, September 6, 2019, <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/esmagazine/whats-going-on-at-goldsmiths-a4227246.html>

**46** "Edinburgh University Student Threatened With Removal From Council Meeting After Violating

ability to stay at the meeting was put to a vote of those present. She was threatened with removal once again when she later shook her head at a comment.

Student unions also take advantage of social developments to demand unreasonable changes outside the remit of university functions. One example of this is the recent list of demands published by the University of Manchester's student union with regard to "Black Lives Matter."<sup>47</sup> The union declared that their demands were "agreed upon through extensive consultation and collective discussion" with the University and College Union (UCU), "Decolonise UoM", and Diversity & Inclusion Ambassadors. The demands from the SU executive team, which were not decided through any democratic systems, specify that the university should incorporate "the history of British colonialism and its relevance to the development of modern British economic, political, social and cultural institutions – including our Universities and all disciplines studied within them" into the curricula. In addition to this, SU demands that the university "radically reform its hate crime reporting procedure" to "take a restorative justice framework" to be "built by students and staff of colour", as well as donating £50,000 to the Free Black University Fund, which aims to "create a free, accessible, anti-colonial education." These demands raise serious questions about the academic freedom of professors to decide what content they teach.

Newcastle University's student union suggested that the University's Armstrong building should be renamed due to the fact that Lord William Armstrong sold arms to the slave-holding Confederacy in the American Civil War.<sup>48</sup> Armstrong in fact sold weapons to both sides. The student union put the renaming to a vote of students, stating: "The Black Lives Matter Movement has stimulated and promulgated action towards equality, and here at Newcastle University we must do more." The students themselves chose to keep the name of the building with an overwhelming vote of 78%.<sup>49</sup>

The executive team of sabbatical officers at Edinburgh University Student Association (EUSA) released a statement in July 2020 supporting the renaming of Edinburgh's David Hume Tower on the grounds that the renowned Scottish philosopher was a racist. The statement outlines the view of EUSA that the university's "historic complicity in racial injustice" "continues today through the naming of its buildings after the likes of David Hume, and thus their honouring of these figures." Not content with denigrating Scotland's most eminent philosopher, EUSA went on to demand that the university "return artwork that have historical links to the

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Safe Space Policy" Huffington Post, April 4, 2016, [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2016/04/01/safe-space-gesture\\_n\\_9592090.html?guccounter=1](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2016/04/01/safe-space-gesture_n_9592090.html?guccounter=1)

**47** "UoM SU calls on Uni to do more in support of Black Lives Matter" The Manchester Tab, June 12, 2020, <https://thetab.com/uk/manchester/2020/06/12/uom-su-calls-on-uni-to-do-more-in-support-of-black-lives-matter-47920>

**48** "Newcastle Students will vote on renaming the Armstrong Building" The Newcastle Tab, June 18, 2020, <https://thetab.com/uk/newcastle/2020/06/18/newcastle-students-will-vote-on-renaming-the-armstrong-building-50789>

**49** "78% of students voted to retain 'Armstrong' name" Newcastle University Students' Union, June 16, 2020, <https://www.nusu.co.uk/news/article/6013/renaming-newcastle-universitys-armstrong-building/>

transatlantic slave trade and reassess the way it honours alumni.” The university renamed the building in September 2020.<sup>50</sup>

Student union leaders are prepared to ignore history in order to satisfy their notion of identity politics. In 2018 Emily Dawes, president of the University of Southampton’s SU tweeted “Mark my words – we’re taking down the mural of white men in the uni Senate room, even if I have to paint it over myself.”<sup>51</sup> The mural to which she referred is known as the Rothenstein memorial, painted in 1916, which shows a student receiving a degree from the Chancellor of Cambridge University, representing the young men who died in the First World War before completing their degrees. Dawes went on to tweet: “ONE OF THE WOMEN JUST SAID ‘it’s nearly armistice day so are we covering up this tapestry??’ AND HOLY S---. F--- YES. GRL PWR.”

Student Unions claim to have a democratic mandate for some of the political activity that they undertake. One example is the University of Southampton Students’ Union, which began to campaign for a People’s Vote on Brexit after a majority of students voted in a poll of just 17.9% of students.<sup>52</sup>

Democratic mandates are sometimes ignored by the student unions, however, when they do not suit them. 58% of student voted in the 2020 officer election for Durham Students’ Union to Re-Open Nominations (RON).<sup>53</sup> These votes were ignored by the student union. While the union operates a single transferrable voting system, RON second preference votes were not processed and instead completely eliminated from the election.

Student unions consistently cause obstructions to academic freedom and student choice. The Oxford University Student Union passed a motion in May 2020 that mandates the condemnation of “hateful material” in teaching material, an attempt to override university policy, which is to allow all academic speech that is within the law. The student union’s “Academic Hate Speech Motion” expanded the definition of hate speech to include “incitement of hatred on the grounds of gender identity, disability, and socio economic status, including to trans, non-binary, disabled, working-class, and women,” until it was blocked by the university.<sup>54</sup>

In 2018, the Manchester University Students’ Union decided that students shouldn’t be allowed to read verses from Rudyard Kipling’s poem ‘If’, frequently

<sup>50</sup> BBC News, “Edinburgh University renames David Hume Tower over ‘racist’ views,” 13 September, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-54138247>

<sup>51</sup> “Student union president causes outrage after vowing to take down war memorial mural because it contains only white men” The Telegraph, October 25, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/10/25/student-union-president-causes-outrage-vowing-take-war-memorial/>

<sup>52</sup> “All Student Vote: The Results” Southampton University Students’ Union, March 22, 2020, <https://blogs.susu.org/blog/2019/03/22/all-student-vote-the-results/>

<sup>53</sup> “58% of votes for RON as DSU releases election results” Palatinate, March 24, 2020, <https://www.palatinate.org.uk/58-of-votes-for-ron-as-dsu-releases-election-results/>

<sup>54</sup> “Remove ‘Hateful Material’ From Mandatory Teaching, Says SU Council” The Oxford Student, May 1, 2020, <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2020/05/01/remove-hateful-material-from-mandatory-teaching-says-su-council/>

voted the nation's favourite poem, which the University had painted on a wall. Fatima Abid, the general secretary of Manchester's student union, said that after seeing the Kipling poem on the wall, student leaders immediately decided that it must be taken down.<sup>55</sup> They proceeded to vandalise it.

Another aspect of unnecessary and detrimental activity from sabbatical officers is the politically motivated banning of products, entertainment, and actions. In 2011, Warwick Student Union Council banned the sale of Bacardi rum in student union buildings, driven by claims that the company was "actively harming the Cuban economy and causing great suffering for the Cuban people," and supporting "oppressive governments."<sup>56</sup> Around 20 student unions have banned Robin Thicke's *Blurred Lines* from being played on their premises due to complaints about its lyrics.<sup>57</sup> In 2018, The University of Manchester Students' Union banned clapping, whooping, and cheering, mandating instead that the British Sign Language equivalent, "Jazz Hands" be used instead, on the grounds of encouraging an "environment of respect."<sup>58</sup> In October of 2019 the University of Oxford's student union adopted the same approach, replacing clapping with jazz hands because, in the words of the SU's welfare and equalities officer, the move will make democratic events "more accessible and inclusive for all, including people who suffer from anxiety. Inclusivity is one of Oxford Students' Union's founding principles."<sup>59</sup>

In 2018, Bath University academics were instructed by the student union race equality group that phrases such as "as you know" were harmful and should no longer be used, due to the fact that they "make students feel at fault for not knowing and make it difficult to engage with the course content."<sup>60</sup> A spokesman for Bath University stated regarding the matter that "Our students are bright, curious and frequently challenge received wisdom – and we wouldn't want it any other way."

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**55** "Rudyard Kipling's 'If' poem scrubbed off wall by students who claim he was a 'racist,'" 18 July, 2018, [telegraph.co.uk/education/2018/07/18/rudyard-kiplings-poem-scrubbed-wall-students-claim-hewas-racist/](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2018/07/18/rudyard-kiplings-poem-scrubbed-wall-students-claim-hewas-racist/)

**56** "Bacardi banned by Union" *The Boar*, November 23, 2011, <https://theboar.org/2011/11/bacardi-banned-union/>

**57** "More universities ban *Blurred Lines* over fears it promotes rape" *The Telegraph*, November 6, 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/10427870/More-universities-ban-Blurred-Lines-over-fears-it-promotes-rape.html>

**58** "University of Manchester Students' Union bans clapping" *BBC News*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-45717841>

**59** "'Snowflake' Oxford University students ban clapping and replace it with 'jazz hands' to stop 'anxiety'" *The Sun*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/10202049/oxford-uni-students-ban-clapping/>

**60** "Academics at Bath University are told to stop saying 'as you know' to 'snowflake' students 'it case it makes them feel inadequate'" *Mail Online*, July 14, 2018, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5954595/Bath-University-academics-urged-stop-saying-know-case-students-feel-inadequate.html>

In 2018, Halimo Hussein, co-president of Equality and Liberation at London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) student union led an occupation of a café that the SU claimed “exercises a concerted historical amnesia of British colonialism” for celebrating Winston Churchill.<sup>61</sup> A student union statement stated that “The protest was targeted at the owner - calling for them to change the decorations and imagery of the cafes - and to the customer - to boycott until the owner takes these actions. The Soas Students' Union continues to fight against colonialism and all manifestations of it. Our educational priorities this year included ‘Close the Attainment Gap’ and ‘Decolonise the Education and the Institution’.”

The London School of Economics' student union voted in February 2020 to ban the sale of beef in all union spaces, after 243 students voted in favour of the ban at a general meeting.<sup>62</sup> The vote was initiated by a campus representative for vegan charity PETA. She said, “More students than ever are looking to limit their environmental footprint – and cutting out meat, eggs, and dairy is the best and easiest way to do that.” As a result of the support of 4% of the university's population, the choice to purchase beef was removed from students within the union building. The same decision was taken at Goldsmiths, University of London, in 2019.<sup>63</sup> A similar move was attempted by the student union at the University of East Anglia, before a widespread student backlash caused the decision to be overturned in December 2019.<sup>64</sup>

Student unions have powers over student societies which some use for political ends. York University's student union has refused to ratify “Turning Point UK York” as a society on three separate occasions to date, on the grounds that the national organisation “Turning Point UK” would be a cause of “reputational damage.”<sup>65</sup> In 2014, UCL Students' Union banned the Nietzsche Society after it put up posters stating “Equality is a False God.”<sup>66</sup>

In November 2017, Glasgow University Protection of Unborn People Society was denied affiliation to the Students' Representative Council (SRC). The SRC told them “We do not feel that the aims of your society aligns with the ethos of the SRC and its values and therefore we cannot affiliate your society.”<sup>67</sup> There was no

<sup>61</sup> “Snowflake student union defends anti-Churchill café protest and call legendary leader a ‘war criminal’” *The Sun*, January 30, 2018, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/5456234/soas-student-union-defends-churchill-blighty-snowflake-protest/>

<sup>62</sup> “LSE students vote to ban beef from campus” *I News*, February 24, 2020, <https://inews.co.uk/news/environment/lse-students-vote-to-ban-beef-from-campus-401378>

<sup>63</sup> “Goldsmiths University bans beef to tackle climate change” *The Independent*, August 12, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/food-and-drink/goldsmiths-university-beef-ban-burgers-climate-change-emergency-a9054461.html>

<sup>64</sup> “Students at UEA vote to ban beef” *ITV News*, November 13, 2019, <https://www.itv.com/news/anglia/2019-11-13/students-at-uea-vote-to-ban-beef>

<sup>65</sup> “Turning Point york fails to gain YUSU affiliate status for the third time in a row” *The York Tab*, October 28, 2019, <https://thetab.com/uk/york/2019/10/28/turning-point-york-fails-to-gain-yusu-affiliate-status-22189>

<sup>66</sup> “Thus spake the student union censors: UCL BANS Nietzsche society they know nothing about” *The Tab*, June 3rd, 2014, <https://thetab.com/2014/06/03/thus-spake-the-su-14611>

<sup>67</sup> “Written Evidence from the Alliance of Pro-Life Students (FSU0063)” *Parliament UK*, December 19, 2017, <http://data.parliament.uk/WrittenEvidence/CommitteeEvidence.svc/EvidenceDocument/>



reference to any policy outlining the ethos of the union, or where precisely their aims violated that ethos. At the end of 2016, a group called ‘Strathclyde Life Action’ were barred from forming a pro-life society, on the grounds that this would violate the Student Union’s ‘safe space policy.’<sup>68</sup> In November 2017, KCL Life Ethics Society were denied a room booking by the student union for an event in which charities would ask for volunteers.<sup>69</sup>

Student unions seek to control the conduct of student societies. For example in February 2020 Cambridge University Student Union (CUSU) banned the student Officer Training Corps from displaying firearms at freshers fairs.<sup>70</sup> (This anti-military push was also in evidence when CUSU earlier blocked a motion promoting Remembrance Sunday instead noting the efforts of various organisations to “re-shape remembrance away from glorification and valorisation of war” and to campaign “against militarism.”<sup>71</sup> At Leeds University the Hockey Club was punished by the student union for organising a ‘Chav party’ at which participants wore fake tattoos and drank Lambrini.<sup>72</sup> They were banned from sports competitions and had their social media accounts shut down.

Student unions also use their control of funds designated for student societies to promote particular political agendas. Student societies that are registered with the student union can often gain access to so-called core and development funding from the student union to supplement membership fees. These student union funds are placed in a pot at the start of the year and then distributed by the sabbaticals. Some student unions have what is known as an “Equity and Inclusion Pot”. Leicester’s student union states that the aim of this is “empowering and amplifying all students, in particular, those from liberation groups.”<sup>73</sup> The funds from this pot go towards supporting campaigns associated with “liberation”, tackling “engagement barriers faced by marginalised groups” and increasing the inclusivity of societies.

Similarly, Manchester University Student Union provides “liberation grants” of up to £300 each.<sup>74</sup> This is “grant funding to deliver liberation-themed events, projects, or campaigns. ‘Liberation-themed’ means that the project must focus on the experiences of BME, Disabled, LGBTQ+, Trans, and/or Women students”.

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Human%20Rights%20Joint%20Committee/Freedom%20of%20Speech%20in%20Universities/written/75933.html

**68** “Pro-life students continue to be censored in UK universities” Right To Life, September 21, 2019, <https://righttolife.org.uk/news/pro-life-students-continue-to-be-censored-in-uk-universities/>

**69** Ibid.

**70** “Military personnel at freshers’ fair could hurt people’s mental health, warns Cambridge student union” The Telegraph, February 4, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/02/04/military-personnel-freshers-fair-could-hurt-peoples-mental-health/>

**71** “Cambridge University students vote against Remembrance Sunday motion over fears it ‘glorifies’ war” The Telegraph, October 10, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2018/10/10/fears-glorification-war-sees-cambridge-university-students-reject/>

**72** “Leeds University ‘chav party’ hockey club punished” BBC News, February 28, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-43227761>

**73** “Student Group Finance” Leicester Students’ Union, <https://www.leicesterunion.com/opportunities/societies/committeehub/studentgroupfinance/>

**74** “Liberation, democracy & campaigning” Manchester Students’ Union, <https://manchesterstudentsunion.com/top-navigation/student-voice/diversity-and-liberation/liberation-grant>

Kingston University has a ‘campaigns fund’ and has run campaigns on such issues as Black History Month LGBT+ history month and against the PREVENT anti-extremism programme.<sup>75</sup> King’s College London awards each approved campaign £150 per year. An example of a current campaign is that to ‘demilitarise Kings’, which aims to “Ensure that narrative on campus doesn’t glorify war.” Another is to persuade students to boycott the National Student Survey.<sup>76</sup> Sussex University student union lobbies for a boycott of Israel.<sup>77</sup>

Birmingham University Guild of Students gives away up to £1,000 to run political campaigns.<sup>78</sup> For example, it is currently running a ‘fossil free’ campaign against investment in the hydrocarbon sector. One of Exeter University student union’s current campaigns is “Exeter Students for Europe” which campaigns to “challenge Brexit and discuss the implications of leaving the EU.”<sup>79</sup> Leeds Beckett University provides £200 per campaign.<sup>80</sup> A current aim is to “encourage the university to not form any relationships with, or promote any companies that facilitate the fossil fuel, arms or tobacco industries.” Many other student unions also run campaigns against fossil fuels. Several, e.g. UEASU, run campaigns on “decolonisation.”<sup>81</sup>

**These campaigns — against fossil fuels, against Brexit, or for demilitarisation — have arguable cases in favour and arguable cases against. The key question is why taxpayers’ money, and all students’ money whether they agree with the campaigns or not, should be spent advancing political goals chosen by student unions? Individual students campaigning on political issues is a normal part of the university experience for those that are interested. However, it is not clear why taxpayers’ and other students’ money should finance those campaigns.**

Student interest politics, philosophy and ideas in general will be broadly seen as a positive development. It is thus unfortunate that most student unions impose a particular ideology and direct student interests towards a very narrow set of political goals. Instead, we should be examining how debate can be opened up on campus and students are encouraged to look at a wide range of ideas from different perspectives. The expansion of student debating, already popular at some universities, could be one means of doing this.

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<sup>75</sup> “Campaigns Fund” Union of Kingston Students, <https://www.kingstonstudents.net/representation/campaigns/campaigns-fund>

<sup>76</sup> “Boycott the NSS” King’s College London Students’ Union, <https://www.kclsu.org/change/campaigns/past/boycottnss/>

<sup>77</sup> “International Policies” Sussex University Students’ Union, <https://sussexstudent.com/about-us/policies/international>

<sup>78</sup> “Campaigns & Democracy Resources” Birmingham Guild of Students, <https://www.guildofstudents.com/representation/campaigns/useful-documents/>

<sup>79</sup> “Active Campaigns” University of Exeter Students’ Guild, <https://www.exeterguild.org/campaigns/active/>

<sup>80</sup> “Student Campaign Grants” Leeds Beckett Students’ Union, <https://www.leedsbecketsu.co.uk/makechange/activismcampaigns/grants>

<sup>81</sup> “Decolonise UEA” University of East Anglia Students’ Union, <https://www.uea.su/education/decoloniseuea/>

1. *You cannot wear sombreros (UEA)*
2. *You cannot dress up as a cowboy (Kent)*
3. *You cannot listen to 'Terf' speakers (Bristol)*
4. *You cannot have a party with a drag theme (Aberystwyth)*
5. *You cannot attend anti-racism meetings if you are white (Sheffield)*
6. *You cannot run a student society dedicated to studying Nietzsche (UCL)*
7. *You cannot buy certain newspapers (City)*
8. *You cannot eat beef (Goldsmiths)*
9. *You cannot clap (Manchester)*
10. *You cannot speak out against abortion (Strathclyde)*

## THE NATIONAL UNION OF STUDENTS (NUS) AND ITS EXTREME AGENDA

The National Union of Students (NUS) was founded in 1922. From the 1960s onward it adopted a radical leftist political position, which has varied in intensity over the years. The NUS holds an annual national conference. The National Conference is the sovereign body of NUS, and is where NUS policy is decided and officers are elected. Not all student unions are affiliated to NUS. Several have decided to opt out through referenda. About 5% of student unions are outside NUS, including Glasgow, St. Andrews, Dundee, Imperial, Southampton, Newcastle, Hull, Loughborough, Sussex, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Essex and Cardiff Metropolitan.

The NUS has been controlled in recent years by a faction known as ‘Liberation Left’, formerly Student Broad Left. Its primary concerns are ‘liberation’ campaigns relating to minority groups, Palestinian rights, and free tuition. Several key figures of the faction have been accused of antisemitism, including Ayo Olatunji, Ali Milani, and former NUS President Malia Bouattia, who was condemned by the Home Affairs Select Committee for what was described as “outright racism.”<sup>82</sup> At the 2019 national conference, Liberation Left had success in three out of the four national elections, maintaining their hold on the NUS.

The NUS is a standard route for student politicians to join adult left-wing politics. For example, of the 26 new Labour MPs elected in 2019, two served on the full-time NUS Executive - Zarah Sultana and Bell Ribeiro-Addy. Both are members of the Corbynite wing of the Labour Party.

The NUS receives a high proportion of its funding from student unions that are affiliated with it across the UK. It spends large amounts of this funding on political and party-political campaigning. It employs some 19 full-time officers all of whom are engaged in political work.<sup>83</sup> In 2015, the NUS spent £40,000 on a campaign that placed anti-Liberal Democrat billboards at UK train stations.<sup>84</sup> In light of the killing of George Floyd, the NUS’s current vice-president Sara Khan displayed her public name as “ABOLISH THE POLICE” on social media sites. NUS’ Black Students Officer Fope Olaleye condemned all police sitcoms as “propaganda” on May 30<sup>th</sup>. In the same month the NUS’ vice-president for Liberation boycotted a march against sexual harassment on the grounds that the demonstrators were “cis-normative” and that they “erased trans-women” by mentioning vaginas on their signs.

<sup>82</sup> “New NUS President is self-confessed former drug dealer who did not go to university” The Telegraph, April 26, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/04/26/zionist-row-president-ousted-top-national-union-students/>

<sup>83</sup> “Become and NUS Officer” NUS Connect, <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/nus-uk/get-involved/become-an-nus-officer>

<sup>84</sup> “The NUS is broken – we need a moderate candidate to fix it” The Telegraph, April 4, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/04/04/nus-broken-need-moderate-candidate-fix/>

The NUS links to resources as part of its “Political Education”, which include videos on “A Global Green New Deal”, “Prison Abolition”, “Decolonising Contraception.” At the NUS’ Annual Conference in 2016, the delegates voted to put heavy restrictions on anonymous messaging apps such as YikYak, which was banned on the grounds of ensuring that social media was “safe” during campus elections.<sup>85</sup>

In May, the NUS delegates proposed a motion condemning “Polyamory Discrimination,” which argued that polyamory is not designated as a sexual orientation and is therefore unprotected by the Equality Act 2010.<sup>86</sup>

The NUS’s sister organisation, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), bilaterally runs the NUS in Northern Ireland. In March 2020, its deputy president, Michelle Byrne, resigned due to the revelation that she handed the names of right-wing activists to an “anti-fascist” group that wanted to “slap them around.”<sup>87</sup>

The NUS manifesto for the 2019 General Election contained a list of five top priorities, which included a demand to “Abolish the Prevent Duty in further and higher education.” The prioritisation of the abolition of a counter-extremism programme is indicative of the NUS’s mind-set as a narrow political campaigner. The organisation protested against the introduction of voter ID with a digital campaign that adopted the slogan “#ID will silence me.” The NUS LGBT+ Campaign ran a “Justice for Trans Prisoners” bloc at Brighton Trans Pride in 2019. In response to a tweet from Boris Johnson in June 2019 in support of London’s Pride March, the NUS LGBT+ Campaign replied, “shut up.”

In December 2015, the NUS passed a resolution against British airstrikes in Syria.<sup>88</sup> The NUS called an emergency meeting to debate the issue. While the NUS prides itself on being concerned with global politics and issues that have nothing to do with students, its delegates refused to pass a motion condemning the terrorist organisation ISIS in 2014 on the grounds that such a motion would be “Islamophobic.”<sup>89</sup> The proposal was opposed by future NUS President Malia Bouattia because the motion would be, implicitly, pro-American military intervention.

In 2019, the NUS criticised the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) for including anti-white prejudice as a category of racial harassment in an inquiry

<sup>85</sup> “NUS National Conference: Yik Yak to be ‘Banned’ Under Safe Social Elections Policy” Huffington Post, April 4, 2016, [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/nus-national-conference-yik-yak-to-be-banned-under-safe-social-elections-policy\\_uk\\_5716b302e4b0dc55ceeb345a?guccounter=1](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/nus-national-conference-yik-yak-to-be-banned-under-safe-social-elections-policy_uk_5716b302e4b0dc55ceeb345a?guccounter=1)

<sup>86</sup> “Policy Proposal – Polyamory Discrimination” NUS Connect, May 12, 2020, <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/policy-proposal-polyamory-discrimination>

<sup>87</sup> “USI Deputy President Resigns After Burkean Controversy” University Times, March 11, 2020, <https://www.universitytimes.ie/2020/03/usi-deputy-president-resigns-after-burkean-controversy/?fbclid=IwAR2cdig-bkEwdMORFgFGFQVf5I25kaHNaoZ3EESiYQypxCDkQWE5rPdbx4>

<sup>88</sup> “the NUS’ ‘Don’t Bomb Syria’ Motion Resoundingly Mocked On Social Media” Huffington Post, December 4, 2015, [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/12/03/nus-dont-bomb-syria-motion-resoundingly-mocked-on-social-media\\_n\\_8712198.html?1449178451&guccounter=1](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/12/03/nus-dont-bomb-syria-motion-resoundingly-mocked-on-social-media_n_8712198.html?1449178451&guccounter=1)

<sup>89</sup> “NUS Votes Against Condemning Islamic State – Because It Would Be ‘Islamophobic’” Huffington Post, October 15, 2014, [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/10/15/the-nus-votes-to-reject-c\\_n\\_5987930.html?guccounter=1](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/10/15/the-nus-votes-to-reject-c_n_5987930.html?guccounter=1)

into the prevalence of racism at UK universities.<sup>90</sup> The NUS's black students' officer tweeted "I remember sitting at one of the round tables and a bunch of students and myself had to explain in excruciatingly [*sic.*] detail that 'anti-white prejudice' should have no place in a report on racial harassment but I see we were not listened to."<sup>91</sup>

The NUS Trans Campaign passed policy in May 2019 condemning the use of the "label of 'trans' or 'transgender'" because they are "rooted in Western and colonialist understandings of gender variance."<sup>92</sup> There are people with roots in the global south and in colonised countries who are gender variant, non-binary etc. who do not identify as transgender."

The NUS Woman's conference banned drag queens, the motion stating "Conference resolves to encourage unions to ban clubs and societies from holding events which permit or encourage (cisgender) members to use 'cross-dressing' as a mode of fancy dress."<sup>93</sup>

The NUS has also taken to issuing guidelines on what can and cannot be worn at Halloween. In 2019, NUS Scotland stated that "This Halloween we want everyone to check and double-check their costume to avoid the exploitation and degradation of others."<sup>94</sup> It went on to say, "Don't let Racism, Sexism, Homophobia, Transphobia and Ableism be the real horror this Halloween."

NUS officers often make political statements on social media. The "NUS Trans Caucus" account tweeted in 2019 that "Landlordism is a form of social parasitism that needs to end. Rent Strike are one of the organisations taking us to a place where profit can no longer be extracted from the fundamental right to shelter."<sup>95</sup>

The NUS's LGBT Campaign passed a motion in 2016 that urged for an end to committee representation for gay men, because they are not as oppressed as other LGBT individuals.<sup>96</sup> The campaign stated that "Misogyny, transphobia, racism

<sup>90</sup> "University racism study criticised for including anti-white harassment" The Guardian, October 23, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/23/university-racism-study-criticised-including-anti-white-harassment>

<sup>91</sup> [artfulhussey]. October 23, 2019, "also i remember sitting at one of the round tables and a bunch of students and myself had to explain in excruciating detail that "anti white prejudice" should have no place on a report on racial harassment but i see we were not listened to"

<sup>92</sup> "NUS Trans Students' Conference 2019 Resolutions for Publication" NUS, 2019, [https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/nusdigital/document/documents/47542/905b9efcf300c45270150dbf6d4e98f6/Trans\\_Conference\\_Resolutions\\_2019.pdf](https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/nusdigital/document/documents/47542/905b9efcf300c45270150dbf6d4e98f6/Trans_Conference_Resolutions_2019.pdf)

<sup>93</sup> "11 Times the NUS and Students' Unions Caused Controversy" Huffington Post, April 22, 2016, [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/nus-student-unions-controversial-decisions\\_uk\\_571a1fa8e4b018a884dcc703?guccounter=1](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/nus-student-unions-controversial-decisions_uk_571a1fa8e4b018a884dcc703?guccounter=1)

<sup>94</sup> "Check your Costume this Halloween" NUS Connect, <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/nus-scotland/campaigns/check-your-costume-this-halloween>

<sup>95</sup> NUS Trans Students Campaigners Network [@nus\_trans]. July 13, 2019, "Hope everyone at @rentstrikenow #rentstrikeweekender has a fantastic time! Landlordism is a form of social parasitism that needs to end. Rent Strike are one of the organisations taking us to a place where profit can no longer be extracted from the fundamental right to shelter"

<sup>96</sup> "LGBT Student Activist Group Says Gay Men Not Oppressed Enough to Deserve Representation" Reason, March 22, 2016, <https://reason.com/2016/03/22/lgbt-student-activist-group-says-gay-men/>

and biphobia are often present in LGBT+ societies. This is unfortunately more likely to occur when the society is dominated by white cis gay men.”

NUS President 2019-20, Zamzam Ibrahim, stated regarding mental health: “Your local SU wants to talk about mental health? Great let’s do it: did you know over 50% of people in Gaza are under 18 with sky high rates of PTSD?” Zamzam, as noted above, is a political activist who had already spent three years as a sabbatical officer at the taxpayer’s expense before acceding to a forth as NUS President. She was succeeded in July 2020 by Larissa Kennedy. Among Larissa’s priorities are to:

“connect our struggles for decolonisation, demilitarisation and divestment and co-producing research and resources to resist the dilution of these campaigns, and make the case amongst other students and with the university and to ...support and connect students and unions exposing universities’ complicity in issues like the slave trade and redressing these wrongs through curricula and financial reparations.”<sup>97</sup>

Larissa Kennedy tweeted on 17 July 2020, “DEFUND THE POLICE !! INVEST IN COMMUNITY !!”<sup>98</sup> Two days later she tweeted, “Abolish. Prevent.”<sup>99</sup> She also retweeted a post that states: “people be saying ‘planet over profit’ but then telling us we shouldn’t be anticapitalist”.

Kennedy’s manifesto as National President of the NUS includes introducing “regional bootcamps for student organisers – for the first time including activists and officer together,” fighting for “free education and to democratise our colleges, universities and unions,” to “resist securitisation and the Prevent Duty,” as well as to fight “to stop deportations, close detention centres, and demand justice over Windrush.”<sup>100</sup> Kennedy also promises to provide frameworks “for robust responses to all forms of sexual and gender-based, racist, homophobic, ableist violence,” as well as making “international solidarity a reality” on “climate justice”, “free education”, and “global social justice issues.”

The current executive team puts substantial effort into national politics. NUS vice-president for liberation Sara Khan stated in an official NUS press release on 17 July, 2020 regarding the appointment of noted education specialist Tony Sewell CBE to the Race Commission that the:

“NUS calls on the Government not only to remove Tony Sewell from this position, but to scrap their proposed race commission entirely, as it has clearly been developed in bad faith as a tokenistic

<sup>97</sup> “Larissa Kennedy” NUS Connect, <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/nus-uk-democratic-conferences/national-conference/elections-at-conference/candidates-for-national-president/larissa-kennedy>

<sup>98</sup> Larissa Kennedy [@Larissa\_Ken]. July 17, 2020, “DEFUND THE POLICE !! INVEST IN COMMUNITY !!”

<sup>99</sup> Larissa Kennedy [@Larissa\_Ken]. July 19, 2020, “Abolish. Prevent.”

<sup>100</sup> “Larissa Kennedy” NUS Connect, <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/nus-uk-democratic-conferences/national-conference/elections-at-conference/candidates-for-national-president/larissa-kennedy>

response, rather than a genuine effort to address racism. Instead, the Government should listen to and implement what the Black Lives Matter movement is actually demanding.

If the UK Government sincerely cares about addressing the racism endemic in our society, we ask for the funding intended for this commission to be reallocated to a new commission that looks at actively de-funding the police and investing in our communities. For example by allocate funding towards abolishing tuition fees and making our education free and accessible to Black students and allocating funding towards our NHS, instead of continuing to cut and privatise it.”<sup>101</sup>

The official NUS Twitter account reflects the priorities of its executive team. One post on July 18, 2020 states that “There is no climate justice without racial & social justice,” and highlights the importance of “educating us on Environmental Racism.”<sup>102</sup> Another recent post promotes a minor marxist group, “Race Today, the journal of the revolutionary Race Today Collective at the centre of the struggle for racial justice in Britain,”<sup>103</sup> and another one on August 27 invites people to join NUS “to discuss how we use abolition [of police funding] as a politic, practice and framework to move us toward liberation and self-determination.”<sup>104</sup>

Student unions often follow the ideological lead of the NUS. It is no coincidence that most student unions campaign for ‘liberation’ of various categories of students, and have appointed officers to do so. Or that so many student unions are concerned about ‘decolonising the curriculum’ and divestment from fossil fuel companies. These are all positions developed and promoted by NUS at conferences attended by large numbers of student union officers who then bring back the policies and campaigns for roll-out in their individual student unions. NUS is thus relatively successful in imposing a type of ideological conformity across a large number of British student unions.

As revealed in this report, just 3% of students vote in NUS elections. This means just a tiny fraction are responsible for representing the supposed political positions of millions of students.

## THE FREE SPEECH CRISIS

**101** “NUS comments on appointment of Tony Sewell to Race Commission” NUS, July 17, 2020, <https://www.nus.org.uk/en/news/press-releases/nus-comments-on-appointment-of-tony-sewell-to-race-commission/?load=5&top=400>

**102** NUS UK [nusuk]. July 18, 2020, “There is no climate justice without racial & social justice / Check out this incredible thread by @blackgeogorg educating us on Environmental Racism”

**103** NUS UK [nusuk]. July 23, 2020, “From 1973 to 1988, Race Today, the journal of the revolutionary Race Today Collective was at the centre of the struggle for racial justice in Britain. ‘Here to Stay, Here to Fight’ explores these archives / Support independent publishers like @PlutoPress ! / <https://bit.ly/2CKZenq>

**104** NUS UK [nusuk]. August 27, 2020, “Join @haymarketbooks for this conversation to to discuss how we use abolition as a politic, practice and framework to move us toward liberation and self-determination / <https://bit.ly/2QryJaA>”



Student unions are also contributing to the free speech crisis. Dr Noah Carl, who was subsequently sacked by Cambridge University for holding contrarian views, established how British academia are extremely unrepresentative in a previous Adam Smith Institute report.<sup>105</sup> There is also evidence that academics who do not subscribe to the left of centre consensus often being afraid to voice their views.<sup>106</sup>

The Office for Students (OFS) defines freedom of speech as: “anything within the law.”<sup>107</sup> Therefore, all speech should be free apart from that which is harassment or incitement to hatred. Further, the OFS states that “censoring or marginalising some groups to protect others is not appropriate.” English and Welsh universities are mandated to protect freedom of speech within the law under section 43 (No. 2) of the 1986 Education Act. The OFS states that “They must also protect freedom of speech across the campus. This includes on student union premises, even if these are off-campus and/or owned by the student union.”

The Office for Students (OFS) states that free speech at university matters because it:

- exposes students to new and challenging ideas;
- encourages robust but civil debate which respects and understands different viewpoints;
- underpins the diversity of England’s higher education sector; and
- is a key part of giving students a high-quality education.

There is a cross-party consensus that action needs to be taken. A parliamentary report by the Joint Committee on Human Rights on freedom of speech at universities points out that factors limiting free speech include “intolerant attitudes, often incorrectly using the banner of ‘no platforming’ and ‘safe-space’ policies,” “incidents of unacceptable intimidating behaviour by protestors intent on preventing free speech and debate,” and “unnecessary bureaucracy imposed on those organising events.”<sup>108</sup>

Harriet Harman, a Labour MP who chaired the committee, explained:

“I think it is true to say that when the Joint Committee went into this inquiry, having heard the Minister say that there was a problem, we went in with open minds. We were not sure whether it was just a case of a flurry of stories from the Daily Mail saying, “All students have become snowflakes and are shutting down other stu-

**105** Noah Carl, “Lackademia: Why Do Academics Lean Left?”, March 2, 2017, Adam Smith Institute, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56edde762cd9413e151ac92/t/58b5a7cd03596ec6631d8b8a/1488299985267/Left+Wing+Bias+Paper.pdf>

**106** “Academic freedom in the UK” Policy Exchange, August 3, 2020, <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/academic-freedom-in-the-uk-2/>

**107** “What do we mean by free speech?” Office For Students, <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/freedom-of-speech/>

**108** “Serious barriers limit free speech in universities” Parliament UK, March 27, 2018, <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/joint-select/human-rights-committee/news-parliament-2017/freedom-of-speech-universities-report-17-19/>

dents’ right to debate,” so we went in with an open mind. Indeed, I was quite sceptical about whether there really was a problem. But it is also true to say that at the end of all the evidence—we heard evidence from university administrators, student unions, student societies, particularly Jewish societies and Islamic societies, campaigners such as Peter Tatchell, trans rights protagonists and, indeed, Members of the House of Commons—we were all convinced that there was a problem and that the Minister was right to raise it”.<sup>109</sup>

The Free Speech University Ranking, published annually by Spiked Magazine from 2015 to 2018, undertook analyses of the state of freedom of speech at universities, including details on individual student unions across the country.<sup>110</sup> The reports use a “traffic light” system to readily designate the free speech policies of 115 student unions.

RED is defined as:

- A student union, university or institution that is hostile to free speech and free expression, mandating explicit restrictions on speech, including, but not limited to, bans on specific ideologies, political affiliations, beliefs, books, speakers or words.

AMBER is defined as:

- A student union, university or institution that chills free speech and free expression through restricting vague and subjective types of speech, such as ‘offensive’ or ‘insulting’ speech, or burdensome vetting procedures for events, speakers, posters or publications. Many policies in this category might not explicitly limit speech, but have the potential to be used to that end, due to vague or careless wording.

GREEN is defined as:

- A student union, university or institution that, as far as we are aware, places no significant restrictions on free speech and expression – other than where such speech or expression is unlawful.

In 2018, only 24% of student unions were designated as GREEN, 29% were AMBER, and 47% of student unions were designated as RED, pursuing highly restrictive policies on speech.

The report identified further worrying trends:

<sup>109</sup> “17 May 2018: Volume 641” Hansard, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2018-05-17/debates/973CF837-FFDF-47AF-89AB-D044A17826F9/FreedomOfSpeechUniversities>

<sup>110</sup> “Free Speech University Rankings 2018 Results Summary” Spiked Online, <https://media.spiked-online.com/website/images/2019/02/21153835/FSUR-PACK-2018.pdf>

- 48% of institutions had censorious religion policies, often guarding against ‘offending faith groups’
- 46% of institutions had censorious transgender policies, many outright banning ‘transphobic’ speech
- 37% of institutions had No Platform policies, banning, in the main, far-right and Islamist groups. (These were held almost entirely by SUs, with a few exceptions.)
- 23% of institutions had Safe Space policies, which restrict offensive, hurtful, judgemental or ‘unsafe’ speech. (These were exclusively held by SUs.)

Further to this, the report highlighted specific bans that took place across the 115 institutions. 81 specific bans were enacted in 2018. The most prevalent kinds of ban or punishment were seen placed on students and student societies over offensive speech or dress (17), on controversial speakers or events (12), and on publications (10). 61 of the 81 bans were enacted by student unions.

St. Georges University London’s no platforming policy, for example, states that the student union executive will “*reserve the right to deny any external group or speaker, invited by a club, society or group of SGSU, a platform if they contravene the beliefs of the Students’ Union*”.<sup>111</sup> The policy states that “bigotry of any kind will not be tolerated by the Students’ Union,” and goes on to define bigotry as “*Bigotry: A bigot is a person who discriminates against opinions, lifestyles or identities differing from his or her own, and bigotry is the corresponding attitude or mindset.*”

There are many examples of infringements of free speech and expression at universities which are the responsibility of student unions. At the freshers’ fair of London South Bank University in 2014, the Atheism Society had posters of a “flying spaghetti monster” taken down by union officials on the grounds that they were a distortion of a religious painting.<sup>112</sup> The president of the society said: “I never expected to face such blatant censorship and fragile sensibilities at university, I thought this would be an institution where I could challenge beliefs and in turn be challenged. All I have seen is religious sensibilities trumping all other rights with no space for argument, challenge or reasoned debate. It is not what I expected when I came to university.”

Liverpool Hope Students’ Union’s “No Platform Policy” states the union will “safeguard our members from being subjected to the lies, bigotry and hatred of racists and fascists.”<sup>113</sup> As such the Union reserves the power, “Not to allow individuals known to hold racist or fascist views to attend or speak at Union events or of any affiliated Sports Team, Club or Society of the Union.” If there is a dispute over whether an individual is a racist or a fascist, “the Executive Council shall have final

<sup>111</sup> “Our Policies” St George’s Students’ Union, <https://www.sgsu.org.uk/about-sgsu/governance/policies/>

<sup>112</sup> “Flying Spaghetti Monster Poster Removed from London South Bank University Atheist Society Stall” Huffington Post, February 10, 2014, [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/02/10/atheist-poster-removed-london-university\\_n\\_4759711.html?guccounter=1](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/02/10/atheist-poster-removed-london-university_n_4759711.html?guccounter=1)

<sup>113</sup> “No Platform Policy” Liverpool Hope SU, <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/nusdigital/document/documents/3563/9a1f27bd76bda3e18c5a47826b34c3f9/No%20Platform%20Policy.pdf>

authority.” Policies like this, which curtail freedom of speech and give significant restrictive powers to sabbatical officers, are widespread across student unions.

Banning particular publications is another censorship policy attempted by various student newspapers. Index on Censorship reported that they had “found that the student union of City University has attempted to ban tabloid newspapers on campus, and some universities have commercial bans on selling tabloid newspapers.”<sup>114</sup> The Student Union at Aberystwyth sought to ban bibles from students’ rooms.<sup>115</sup>

Particularly worrying for freedom of speech on campus are student union bans of speakers and events. This includes University of Manchester’s student union banning radical feminist Julie Bindel and then-Breitbart associate editor Milo Yiannopoulos on the grounds that their views were “dangerous” and undermined “the principles of liberation enshrined in the Students’ Union.”<sup>116</sup> Portsmouth University Student Union cancelled an event by newspaper columnist Peter Hitchens in 2019 on the grounds that “the published views of Peter Hitchens are not necessarily aligned with the Students’ Union’s vibrant celebration of the LGBT+ community this month.”<sup>117</sup>

Another reason used to ban events is that the speaker is likely to attract protest and is thus considered a risk to security. For example, Emma Fox of the Henry Jackson Society was banned on security grounds from speaking to the Bristol University Free Speech Society in March 2019.

Universities and student unions have tried to require inviting societies to pay for private security costs, which they are unable to afford.<sup>118</sup> This has resulted in the cancellation of events. For example the Jewish Society at Lancaster University was asked to pay £1,500 to cover security costs for a meeting involving the Israeli Ambassador.<sup>119</sup> Security costs become another form of censorship. As Jacob Rees-Mogg MP commented when Bristol University charged its Conservative Association £500 for security costs at a meeting which he addressed in 2018:

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**114** “Written Evidence From the Index on Censorship (FSU0043)” Parliament, December 15, 2017, <http://data.parliament.uk/WrittenEvidence/CommitteeEvidence.svc/EvidenceDocument/Human%20Rights%20Joint%20Committee/Freedom%20of%20Speech%20in%20Universities/written/75726.html>

**115** “Welsh University bans Bibles from rooms” Evangelical Focus, May 26, 2015, <https://evangelicalfocus.com/print/649/Aberystwyth-University-bans-Bibles-from-rooms>

**116** “Manchester SU bans second guest Milo Yiannopoulos from free speech event following Julie Bindel outcry” International Business Times, October 7, 2015, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/manchester-su-bans-second-guest-milo-yiannopoulos-free-speech-event-following-julie-bindel-outcry-1522939>

**117** “Peter Hitchens’ Portsmouth University speech cancelled” BBC News, February 7, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-hampshire-47156907>

**118** “Jewish student societies should not have to pay thousands of pounds for security at campus events amid antisemitism concerns, minister says” The Independent, May 17, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/antisemitism-jewish-students-universities-societies-campus-chris-skidmore-free-speech-a8917096.html>

**119** “Universities could be required to fund security for controversial speakers to protect free speech, warns minister” The Telegraph, July 15, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/07/15/universities-could-required-fund-security-controversial-speakers/>

“It means you can have Corbynite speakers but not Conservative ones. You cannot have any speaker from the right because they are more likely to attract protests. This is really hostile to freedom of speech. If the university does not provide basic security for visiting speakers, what are students paying their fees for?”<sup>120</sup>

If universities and student unions cannot prevent extremist students from threatening violence and trying to break up meetings, then they are failing in their basic responsibilities. Suspending or expelling the students responsible would soon put a stop to violent behaviour.

Harman cited an example of such violence in her speech to the House of Commons on the free speech crisis. She said:

“The King’s College London libertarian society invited speakers in. The debate had been under way for about 30 minutes when a group of between 16 and 20 hooded and masked protesters stormed the front entrance of the Strand campus building, jumped over the security barriers, ignited smoke bombs and forced their way into the Safra lecture theatre. In the process, they knocked a security guard unconscious, and he was taken to hospital. A number of other staff and students were injured during the violent protest. Actually, we should not dignify that with the name “protest”. We are totally against it. We cannot have the disruption of meetings.”

It was not only the university that failed in this case. The student union sought to disrupt the event by preventing the attendance of 200 non-students who had bought online tickets for the event while doing nothing to discourage violent “an-tifa” protesters from outside the university.<sup>121</sup>

Student union interference with free speech is not primarily caused by outright bans and violent assaults, but rather by the imposition of detailed bureaucratic processes which make it difficult for people student unions do not like to hold events. A good example can be taken from King’s College London, where the student union demands over a month’s notice for any event, making last minute changes in speakers next to impossible.

The Venezuela Campaign, an organization which seeks to draw attention to the humanitarian crisis in that country, has provided an example of that policy in action. An event was planned at King’s College London in January 2019. Details of speakers were submitted a month in advance, but one speaker, Enrique Altimari, was added to the speaker list a week or so after the others, but still over a month in

<sup>120</sup> “Jacob Rees-Mogg slams Bristol University for ‘bankrupting’ student Tories with security bill” Bristol Live, October 22, 2018, <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/jacon-rees-mogg-slams-university-2132505>

<sup>121</sup> “Far left masked anarchists violently shut down libertarian event at King’s College London” Human Rights on Campus, March 6, 2018, <http://studentrights.org.uk/2018/03/far-left-masked-anarchists-violently-shut-down-libertarian-event-at-kings-college-london/>

advance. KCL SU rejected his application for permission to speak, on the grounds that he had not been submitted with the others.

The Venezuela Campaign reported:

“To further obstruct our freedom of speech, KCL SU only confirmed the event eight days before it was due to be held. In another absurd twist, KCL SU bans societies from promoting events until they have been approved. This left us with seven days to promote an event that had originally been submitted for approval over six weeks in advance. This was entirely unreasonable and is yet further evidence of malicious intent to suppress free speech.”

This is not an isolated case. It is common practice for student unions to exert control over affiliated societies through bureaucratic form-filling requirements and associated onerous processes. Many Conservative societies have reported that their student union forces them to engage in extensive form-filling and paperwork, while one society was forced to wait a full month for their student union to approve a single political guest.<sup>122</sup> Birmingham University Conservatives, for example, have described their student union as a ‘hindrance and a barrier to doing bigger things.... they completely ignore how difficult they make life for political societies like us who want to serve our members.’

In February 2020, University of Sheffield students attempted to set up a free speech society. Their application for registration with the student union was initially turned down, but then later granted after public outcry. The society has been classified as a “red risk” and they must as a consequence attend “risk assessment” training and are prevented from inviting any speakers onto campus unless they submit a list of speakers three weeks in advance for “full and final approval.”<sup>123</sup> The student union also reserves the right to impose an “impartial chairman” on any meeting.

The Sussex University Free Speech Society was banned from holding a meeting with an MEP unless the speech was submitted to the student union for prior approval.<sup>124</sup>

Student societies holding events concerned with religion have experienced particular problems. Ben Ryan, from Theos, a religion and society think tank which ran a project looking at faith on campus that involved speaking to many faith societies on campus, commented as follows to the parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights:

<sup>122</sup> Personal correspondence

<sup>123</sup> “University free speech society told it is a ‘red risk’ and needs to have all external speakers vetted” The Telegraph, March 9, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/03/09/university-free-speech-society-told-red-risk-needs-have-external/>

<sup>124</sup> “UKIP MEP Bill Etheridge stands firm amid Sussex university ‘free speech’ row” BBC News, October 31, 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-sussex-41820450>

“Quite a pervasive culture of fear and self-censorship has built up in lots of societies that feel that the burdens placed upon them to book speakers, comply with the rules or work with student unions exceed what they should be, and that this has caused a chilling effect on their ability to operate as healthy societies within a university.”<sup>125</sup>

The organisation Lawyers for Israel referred in evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights to:

“An increasingly hostile atmosphere towards Jewish and other Israel-supporting students at a number of British universities. Once a university has acquired a reputation as a hostile campus, Jewish students may avoid going there. For example, the University of Manchester had well over a thousand Jewish students a number of years ago, but now has less than 200, in part due to its reputation as a hostile campus for them.”<sup>126</sup>

Christian student societies have been subject to hostile treatment from a variety of student unions. For example, the Christian Union was banned from Balliol College Oxford’s freshers’ fair.<sup>127</sup> A “safe space marshal” was required to be in attendance at a meeting held by the Catholic society of a London University and an event on Abortion in Ireland was disrupted by the Woman’s Campaign of the Oxford University Students Union, with the formal support of that student union.<sup>128</sup>

Student unions target those with whom they politically disagree. This includes Jewish students, Christians, conservatives, and traditional feminists. This has made universities less pleasant and less welcoming places to study for these students.

There is no justification for student unions, controlled by small groups of activists and selected by a tiny minority of students, to control the right to free speech on campus. Universities may seek to delegate control over visiting speakers to student unions to avoid responsibility. This must change.

Ministers have warned of the threat posed to free speech in universities posed by the use of identity politics to shut down the free exchange of ideas. In 2018 the then universities minister Sam Gyimah spoke of his fears that a “monoculture” was

**125** “Oral Evidence: Freedom of Speech in Universities, HC 589” Parliament, November 29, 2017, <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/human-rights-committee/freedom-of-speech-in-universities/oral/74974.html>

**126** “Written evidence from the UK Lawyers for Israel (FSU0033) Parliament, December 15, 2017, <http://data.parliament.uk/WrittenEvidence/CommitteeEvidence.svc/EvidenceDocument/Human%20Rights%20Joint%20Committee/Freedom%20of%20Speech%20in%20Universities/written/75686.html>

**127** “Jon Gaunt Show interviews Tim Dieppe about Oxford banning CU from Freshers’ Fair” Christian Concern, October 10, 2017, <https://archive.christianconcern.com/media/jon-gaunt-show-interviews-tim-dieppe-about-balliol-college-oxford>

**128** “Written evidence from Mr Michael Wee (FSU0042)” Parliament, December 15, 2017, <http://data.parliament.uk/WrittenEvidence/CommitteeEvidence.svc/EvidenceDocument/Human%20Rights%20Joint%20Committee/Freedom%20of%20Speech%20in%20Universities/written/75725.html>

developing within student bodies, which he said was leading to a “lack of diversity of thought” in the sector.<sup>129</sup>

“This is a really, really big problem and there is a danger of a culture of denial,” he said. “What surprised me was the correspondence I got from members of the public – parents etc. – saying thanks for raising this. So this is not some right-wing conspiracy that someone has cooked up. This is a real problem and we’ve got to deal with it.” He demanded university leaders stamp out the “institutional hostility” towards free speech that has taken root on their campuses.

Although the Conservative manifesto at the 2019 General Election stated that “we will also strengthen academic freedom and free speech in universities and continue to focus on raising standards,” little has so far been done to address the problem.

As the next section will discuss, universities may now have to be compelled to protect free expression. Human rights campaigner Trevor Phillips, a former NUS President and former chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, said it is universities who are ultimately responsible for the erosion of free speech on campus.

“It is weakness of faculties and university authorities who in many cases just cannot seem to bring themselves to stand up for higher education values,” he said. “Vice-Chancellors must stand up for their basic charters. At the moment university [leaders] pretty much uniformly across the UK are behaving like frightened children who are not standing up for their own values.”<sup>130</sup>

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**129** “Students using identity politics to shut down free speech, university minister warns” iNews, June 14, 2018, <https://inews.co.uk/news/education/university-free-speech-threat-identity-politics-165240>

**130** “Universities are allowing free speech to be curtailed in favour of ‘rule of the mob’, former equalities chief warns” The Telegraph, February 2, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2019/02/02/universities-allowing-free-speech-curtailed-favour-rule-mob/>



### THE HISTORY OF STUDENT UNION REFORM IN BRITAIN

This paper has demonstrated that students are uninterested in student unions and even less interested in the NUS. Only around 11% of students vote in elections for officers of student unions and less than 3% in elections to choose delegates to go to NUS conferences, where its offers are chosen.

Yet £165 million per annum is spent on student unions, half coming from the taxpayers and half from students themselves. These funds support an army of some 600 full-time sabbatical student union officers and a large amount of political activity, much of it centred around harmful identity politics. The cost per student is on average around £75, sometimes significantly higher. Reform is urgently required, but what form should it take?

The question of how to tackle the problem of student unions has perplexed policy-makers for some years. A Consultation Document issued by the Department for Education in 1971 considered a number of options including appointing a registrar of student unions and that of paying union subscriptions direct to the student as part of the grant and making student union membership entirely voluntary.<sup>131</sup> The Labour Government issued a discussion paper in 1978 which suggested there should be an upper limit on the amount of money paid to student unions, then in 1981-82, the Conservative Government changed the system to one of block grants from universities, as discussed above.<sup>132</sup>

In 1988, a Conservative MP introduced a bill to make membership of student unions and the NUS voluntary and in 1990, Alan Howarth, Minister for Higher Education, began consultations about making membership of student unions and the NUS voluntary and in 1992 Education Secretary John Patten committed in a speech to the Conservative Party Conference to make student union membership voluntary.<sup>133</sup>

On the 1<sup>st</sup> July 1993 the Education Secretary announced a three part reform of student unions:

- To limit the purposes for which universities and colleges can pass money to their campus unions to a core of essential campus – catering sport, welfare and representation of student interests – with all other campus union activities being placed on an opt-in voluntary basis.
- To prevent public funds being used for affiliations to the NUS and other campaigning organisations.

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**131** “Research Briefing: Reform of student unions: the Education Bill (HL) 1993/94” House of Commons Library, April 20, 1994, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/rp94-57/>

**132** Ibid.

**133** “Orders of the Day — Student Unions (Funding) – in the House of Commons at 11:41 pm on 10th March 1988.” TheyWorkForYou, March 10, 1988, <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/debates/?id=1988-03-10a.645.0>

- To provide for codes of practice to ensure that student unions become more accountable and fully representative.<sup>134</sup>

However, after lobbying from universities and student unions, the Government later backtracked on some of these proposals, removing the limitations on funding for student union activities but allowing students to be able to opt out of student union membership. The introduction of the ability to opt out was not a meaningful reform as no funds would revert to the student to spend on alternative services. Affiliations to national bodies such as NUS would need to be published, including their cost, and these could be challenged annually on the basis of a petition of students. Student sabbatical officers were not allowed to serve more than 2 terms and a duty was placed on universities and colleges to take such steps that are “reasonably practical” ensure that student unions operate in a fair and democratic manner and are accountable for their finances.

### INTERNATIONAL REFORM EXAMPLES

In 2005, the Australian Government took a more radical approach by introducing Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU). Previously, each student was required to pay a substantial compulsory fee, rather than through a general block grant, and be a member of their student union. VSU returned all funding to the individual student, making membership and activities currently carried out by student unions entirely voluntary. Freedom of association was at the heart of the change, as then Senator Fifield said, speaking favour of the bill:

“At the heart of this bill is a commitment to uphold the right to self-determination, to uphold the right to freedom of association. To guarantee that no student can be compelled to join any organisation against their will. To ensure that no student can be compelled to pay a fee for services they may not want.

This bill is necessary because, to date, campus organisations, universities and state parliaments have denied these rights to students or at best viewed freedom of association as a technicality to be satisfied rather than a principle to be embraced.... This bill is in no way anti-student, anti-union, or anti-campus life. To the contrary, this bill respects students. This bill trusts students. This bill empowers students. This bill recognises that university students are clever adults able to exercise their own judgement in their own interests.”<sup>135</sup>

The results of this reform differed across institutions. The Labour Government, elected in 2007, conducted a survey as a precursor to introducing changes to the

<sup>134</sup> “Student Unions: Column 1121 July 1 1993” Hansard, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199293/cmhansrd/1993-07-01/Debate-2.html>

<sup>135</sup> “Senator Fifield: HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPORT AMENDMENT (ABOLITION OF COMPULSORY UP-FRONT STUDENT UNION FEES) BILL 2005” Parliament of Australia, December 9, 2005, <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansards%2F2005-12-09%2F0086%22>

legislation. At some universities the unpopularity of the prior arrangements were laid bare. Charles Darwin University reported that:

“Charles Darwin University does not have a functioning student association. Following the introduction of VSU, no students at the University chose to join the existing Students’ Union via payment of a voluntary fee...When the Students’ Union called for elections, there were no nominees for any post.”<sup>136</sup>

At other universities less costly institutions were created. For example, Adelaide University union reported that:

“A Student Representative Council (SRC) has been established which reports more directly to the Board of the Adelaide University Union. The SRC is a relatively new body and an assessment of its effectiveness is not possible at this stage. However it is clear that its capacity, measured in resource allocation, is markedly smaller than the (former) Student’s Association of the University of Adelaide. It is envisaged that the SRC is able to effectively identify and address issues of major relevance to significant numbers of students (such as HECS levels, youth allowance, rent assistance) but may not be sufficiently resourced to take up issues which impact only upon smaller numbers of students.”<sup>137</sup>

Because some sport was financed through the student fee, there were reports of a drop in sporting activities by students. The Australian University Sport/Australian Campus Union Managers Association claimed that:

“Direct funding for inter-university sport has been cut by 50 per cent – note also that participation by women at the Australian University Games was down to 40 per cent in 2007 compared to its historic (pre-VSU) level of 48 per cent; direct funding for university sporting clubs has been cut by 40 per cent with a 17 per cent reduction in the number of university students in sporting clubs – down from an estimated 72,000 to 60,000 students between 2005 and 2007.”<sup>138</sup>

In 2011, the Australian Labour Government passed legislation largely rolling back voluntary student unionism, permitting universities and other higher education providers to charge students a compulsory fee for services and amenities, but only for certain limited functions. These were as follows:

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**136** “The Impact of Voluntary Student Unionism on Services, Amenities and Representation for Australian University Students SUMMARY REPORT” Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, April, 2008, <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2008-04/apo-nid4022.pdf>

**137** Ibid.

**138** Ibid.

- providing food or drink to students on a campus of the higher education provider;
- supporting a sporting or other recreational activity by students;
- supporting the administration of a club most of whose members are students;
- caring for children of students;
- providing legal services to students;
- promoting the health or welfare of students;
- helping students secure accommodation;
- helping students obtain employment or advice on careers;
- helping students with their financial affairs;
- helping students obtain insurance against personal accidents;
- supporting debating by students;
- providing libraries and reading rooms (other than those provided for academic purposes) for students;
- supporting an artistic activity by students;
- supporting the production and dissemination to students of media whose content is provided by students;
- helping students develop skills for study, by means other than undertaking courses of study in which they are enrolled;
- advising on matters arising under the higher education provider's rules (however described);
- advocating students' interests in matters arising under the higher education provider's rules (however described);
- giving students information to help them in their orientation; and
- helping meet the specific needs of overseas students relating to their welfare, accommodation and employment.<sup>139</sup>

Higher education providers can choose to deliver the services and amenities themselves or contract a third party (such as a student union) to deliver the services and amenities on the providers' behalf. In essence the approach of limiting activities subject to compulsory funding was similar to that originally proposed by the Conservative Government in Britain in 1993. Unfortunately in Australia the student unions were allowed to use their other sources of funds for political purposes. As money is fungible, this has meant student unions can use funds they received for the approved activities to cross-subsidise political activities.

In New Zealand, a different path was taken towards student union reform, but again with a heavy emphasis on the voluntary principle. The first set of reforms involved the introduction of referenda, through which students could decide whether membership of their student union was to be voluntary or compulsory.

The New Zealand Education Act 1989 set out a method for individual universities to hold referendums on the issue of whether student association membership should be compulsory or voluntary and stated:

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**139** "The Impact of Voluntary Student Unionism on Services, Amenities and Representation for Australian University Students SUMMARY REPORT" Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, April, 2008, <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2008-04/apo-nid4022.pdf>

(1) The students of an institution at which membership of a students association is compulsory may request the Council to conduct a vote of all students at the institution on whether membership of the students association should continue to be compulsory.

(2) The students of an institution at which membership of a students' association is not compulsory may request the Council to conduct a vote of all students at the institution on whether membership of a specified students association at the institution should become compulsory.

(3) A request under subsection (1) or subsection (2) is not effective unless it is accompanied by a petition requesting the vote, signed by at least 10% (as calculated according to figures provided by the Ministry) of all students currently enrolled at the institution.<sup>140</sup>

This reform proved relatively ineffective, for several reasons. Ten percent of students was a very high threshold. Typically lower numbers voted in student elections. Students had little incentive to run such campaigns and when they did succeed in getting the requisite number of signatures, they faced opposing campaigns run by student associations with millions of dollars of compulsorily acquired membership fees and well-paid staff.

Nevertheless, students at several universities voted for voluntary membership, although student associations often managed to run referenda in future years that reinstated compulsory membership. The approach failed in the basic aim of permitting freedom of association. Holding a referendum merely allowed the majority to impose their will on the minority.

In 2011, the Education (Freedom of Association) Amendment Act was passed, its central provision being that: “No person is required to pay a membership fee to a students' association, or to pay money to any other person as an alternative to paying such a membership fee, unless that person chooses to become or remain a member of that association.”<sup>141</sup>

However, the Act does not prevent a students' association from:

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**140** “162: Establishment of Institutions” Education Act 1989, New Zealand Legislation, <http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1989/0080/latest/whole.html#DLM183668>

**141** “Education (Freedom of Association) Amendment Bill” New Zealand Legislation, September 24, 2010, <http://www.legislation.govt.nz/bill/member/2009/0075/10.0/versions.aspx>

“(a) charging a person who is not a member of the association for the provision of a specific service to that person, at that person’s request; or

(b) being contracted by an institution or any other person to provide services to students of an institution.”

As a consequence, most universities entered into contracts with the student unions to provide certain services. The services included in the contract vary by university, and can vary over time, depending on what the union and the university agree on or believe is important. While that means that students are still “paying” for the services, it is being done in a more market-friendly way, where the unions must provide services in order to have their contracts renewed. It is easier to hold unions accountable for fraud or mismanagement, and if the demand isn’t there for certain services, those can be dropped over time.

The current Labour Government in New Zealand has confirmed that it will not seek to reverse the voluntary student union policy.<sup>142</sup>

### **ALTERNATIVE MODELS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM**

There are also different models within the UK itself that it is useful to examine. We do not, in fact, have a unified system that is applied everywhere. For example, at Queens University Belfast there is no independent student union but merely a number of activities that are funded directly by the university. In a similar approach to the original policy in Australia, London Business School charges students a compulsory £120 student association fee. In Scotland there are current and past systems that are particularly worth close examination. These are derived from a system of student representation that was part of arrangements for governance of the ancient universities established by the Universities (Scotland) Act 1889 in the then existing Universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, and St. Andrews.

Functions were separated, so that there was a Student Representative Council, a Student Union providing the social activities and an Athletics Union dealing with sports. Most of these have now been combined into Student Associations. For example, at Aberdeen University the separate bodies called respectively the Students Representative Council, the Union Management Committee, and the Athletics Association were merged into one organisation, the Aberdeen University Students Association in the year 2000.

At Glasgow University, however, the main institutions remain separate. In fact there are two student unions, the Glasgow University Union (GUU) and the Queen Margaret Union (QMU), (dating from the 1800s when there were separate institutions for men and women although now of course both admit all sexes), as well as a separate Sports Association. The Glasgow University Union is a social

<sup>142</sup> “National attacks proposed student voice centre as ‘taxpayer-funded training for Labour activists’” Stuff, October 29, 2019, [https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/116987555/national-attacks-proposed-student-voice-centre-as-taxpayer-funded-training-for-labour-activists?fbclid=IwAR0UL5xXE4mnNN2pJ1BBhOsVLm\\_yUYZQWaBeWExGIT7wwyRUNn8COFrCtY4](https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/116987555/national-attacks-proposed-student-voice-centre-as-taxpayer-funded-training-for-labour-activists?fbclid=IwAR0UL5xXE4mnNN2pJ1BBhOsVLm_yUYZQWaBeWExGIT7wwyRUNn8COFrCtY4)

hub for University students, with nine bars, eating facilities, shop, live entertainment, billiard hall, and two libraries for study. The GUU also plays an important role in organising student debating. It is one of the most successful student debating institutions in the world and has won the World Universities Debating Championships a record five times. The Queen Margaret Union has an impressive range of recreational facilities.

These unions are actually popular with students. When in 2011 the University considered demolishing the GUU's extension building and replacing it with sports facilities, a major campaign by students and alumni forced it to change its mind. Former SNP MP Duncan Hamilton commented "This is a total failure to appreciate that for many alumni the GUU was the most influential and important part of their university life." The GUU does not have sabbatical offices but is run by a management committee that includes 17 elected student positions, seven alumni positions and two ex officio positions for the current and past Presidents of the Sports Association. The QMU is run by a similar board of management but has one sabbatical position. The Glasgow University Sports Association (GUSA) is the oldest study body on campus.<sup>143</sup> It is managed by the GUSA Council, comprising 12 members elected in the spring of each year. The position of President is a sabbatical one.

Glasgow University also has a separate Students Representative Council, which carries out the more political activities as well as handling academic representation. All four institutions receive grants from the University of Glasgow.

### **APPLYING LESSONS FROM OTHER MODELS**

To devise a successful reform plan, one needs to consider which activities carried out by student unions are useful and how their delivery could be better structured and supported to prevent waste of funds and deliver improved services to students. The following activities can be considered as useful and deserving of compulsory funding:

- The recreational activities of student bars, cafes and entertainment. These add to the enjoyment of student life.
- Student sports activities also enrich the university experience.
- Academic representation of students, at a class, course and faculty level as well as at a central level, provides the student view and student input on the academic services being delivered.
- Student societies, from chess to ballroom dancing, also add to the university experience. However, student unions do not need to be concerned with these societies.

It is less clear that the other activities of student unions provide much value to students. As noted earlier the 'student welfare' function is often interpreted as a need to run various political campaigns, as described in an earlier section of this report.

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**143** "Glasgow University Sports Association" University of Glasgow, <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/sport/gusa/>

At its most benign, the welfare function doesn't actually provide welfare services, it just signposts those being provided by the university.

Other models of student organisation, both within the UK and abroad, can be drawn upon in order to devise a means of reforming the current dysfunctional system.

Aspects of the current model at Glasgow University could be adapted for application across the rest of the UK. There could be a separate student union, providing the recreational facilities and a place for student societies to meet, as well as a separate sports association.

But what of the important academic representation function? This is a crucial function of a student union but sadly most neglect it for more exciting political activity such as campaigning about micro-aggressions. In each university there are student academic representatives for each major academic subject, chosen by the respective students in that subject. To take the example of Glasgow University, there are student academic representatives for engineering, veterinary medicine, social science, critical studies etc. and above them faculty representatives for Arts, Science and Engineering, Social Sciences and MVLS.

The Glasgow SRC also has a sabbatical Vice-President Education, elected by all the students, or more accurately the circa 5% who could be bothered to vote in SRC elections. Other student unions also have similar full-time positions. It is sensible to have someone who can represent all students on academic matters and there is likely enough for them to do, such as sitting on various university committees, for the position to be a full-time sabbatical one, funded by the university. But it would make more sense if this central academic student representative was chosen through an indirect election method, by the various academic subject representatives who are interested in and familiar with the issues.

Moreover, the current system is not addressing the poor performance of the bulk of student unions in their core academic representation function. It doesn't make sense that the student unions who do worst in academic representation both get more money on average from universities and rely on that block grant to a greater extent than others. Failure is being rewarded. Within the current system it would be preferable for universities to reduce block grants to poor performers as a tool to indirectly influence how these student unions organise their affairs and, consequently, how they perform on NSS Q26. Many of these unions appear to perform consistently below benchmark, which is indicative of structural issues and a misalignment of student union priorities with the priorities that would result in better NSS Q26 performance and a better outcome for students.

Within the system proposed by this report, where a separate student body would be responsible for academic representation, universities would have much more influence over how funds were allocated and could encourage better performance from student academic representation bodies by funding some aspects more extensively or withholding funding from other aspects until performance improved.



Under the reforms proposed in this report one would thus have direct university funding of:

- Student recreational and entertainment facilities, in the form of a student union solely devoted to providing these services.
- Student sports activities, in the form of a Sports Association.
- Student academic representation, though a system of subject representatives.

This will cost a certain amount, but much less than what is currently being spent on integrated student unions. The remainder of the circa £75 per student should be returned to the students themselves to spend as they see fit. If some students want to fund one or more full-time ‘liberation officers’ to help liberate themselves from assorted injustices, then they will be free to do so. The LGBTQ+ students and those very concerned about these issues will be able to fund an LGBTQ+ society. The international students will be able to fund full or part-time representatives. Students could fund a student housing advisory service, if they felt it was needed and provided value for money.

Similarly, if students wished to join the National Union of Students, or other bodies representing students on a national or regional basis, then they would be free to do so. Currently NUS membership costs each student about £1.50 to £2. Students could choose to contribute such a sum or not from their own resources. Based on the number of students who decided that financing such a body was worthwhile, one could determine the actual level of support for the NUS and other such bodies among students.

Student societies should not be controlled by any superior student body, but should be free to establish themselves, set up bank accounts and adopt a constitution without supervision by other students. As noted earlier in this report, Student Unions cannot be trusted not to intervene in society matters for political reasons. Student societies are typically advertised to new students at freshers’ fairs. These fresher’s fairs could be organised either by the student union responsible for recreational facilities or by the university itself. There is an issue of whether student societies should receive any funding from university grants. In general student societies should be funded by students themselves, as is currently the case for the vast majority of society resources.

There is, however, an argument that a fund should exist for cases of special or extraordinary expenditure, such as, for example, travel costs of the chess club to participate in an international tournament or new equipment for the musical society. Such funding could be dispensed by a committee of the recreational student union, as occurs in Glasgow for example, or by the University itself.

It is also clear that some students should not be controlling the rights of other students to exercise free speech. No student body should have the right to control any other body when it seeks to organise a talk or lecture or otherwise exercise its rights to free expression. There are some duties placed on universities by law which must be observed by the universities themselves and should not be subcon-

tracted to student unions. For example, the Counter Terrorism and Security Act (CTSA) 2015, places a duty on universities to have “due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism”. Encouragement of terrorism and inviting support for a proscribed terrorist organisation are both criminal offences and Universities need to ensure that speakers at events held on their premises do not commit these offences.

Similarly, if a university suspects that a prospective speaker is likely to break the law in other ways, such as inciting violence or a breach of the peace, then it is within its rights to prevent the meeting from taking place. Otherwise all meetings should go ahead, without bureaucratic restrictions being placed on the 99.9% of student meetings that are unlikely to break the law in any way.

The excuse currently used by some student unions and universities to ban meetings because they fear violence from protestors should not be permitted. To quote the University of Sussex as an example “where there is serious concern that the safety of the speaker and/or others in this assembly cannot be reasonably guaranteed.”<sup>144</sup> In effect this is giving in to mob rule. University security and the police should be deployed to ensure that meetings should be able to take place without the threat of violence. If it is necessary for the University to hire private security in order to ensure a meeting can take place then it should be obliged to do, at the University’s expense, rather than that of the student society hosting the event. Those behaving violently should be arrested and charged. At the very least any students seeking to break up meetings should be suspended or expelled by their University.

The obligation on universities to enforce free speech that is set out in the Education (No. 2) Act of 1986 is not currently being properly enforced.<sup>145</sup> The Office for Students has no role set out in legislation to ensure that it is enforced. (Nor for that matter does it have any powers to prevent excesses by student unions). Further legislation is required to ensure freedom of speech is fully enforced and bureaucratic restrictions cannot be used to frustrate it. While responsibility for ensuring freedom of speech should rest with the university, student unions should also be brought into the ambit of the legislation so they too have a requirement to uphold freedom of speech.

Because student unions are independent of their universities this limits the degree of influence universities have over them beyond grant allocations and sending a member of university staff to student union board of trustees meetings.

At present, universities have a legal duty to ensure their student union is financially viable. Universities should have a legal duty to ensure their student unions uphold freedom of speech, within the legal limits enforced by the Office for Students (OfS). Universities could be required to make a submission to the OfS that all relevant student union policy and practice complies with law and regulations.

<sup>144</sup> “Freedom of Speech – Code of Practice” University of Sussex, <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=freedom-of-speech-code-of-practice-2016.pdf&site=76>

<sup>145</sup> “Education (No. 2) Act 1986” Legislation.gov, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1986/61/section/43>

There remains the issue of student representation on student-specific matters other than academic, sports and recreation services. An example might be the timing of buses that travel between campuses or whether there is sufficient lighting on campus. Do students need representation on such matters? They should decide themselves. Students should be able to form a Students Representative Council (SRC) but should pay for it themselves and join it voluntarily. Membership fees should not need to be very high as student representative functions require very little financing. One needs a room to meet and someone to take minutes. The gamut of issues outside the academic, sports and recreational is not so wide that a full-time sabbatical officer would be required.

Freedom of association would thus be restored to individual students. No longer would students be forced against their will to be members of unrepresentative political organisations that pursued extremist agendas.

An SRC that did not attract student voter turnout of at least 50% should lose any automatic right to representation on university committees or formal dialogue with the university. The primary means for the university to engage students should be through the student academic representatives but universities could also engage students more broadly in other ways, thus fulfilling the student engagement requirements of the Office for Students.

## **LIST OF POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### ***1. Limit the purposes of university grant funding of student services***

As originally proposed by the Government in 1993, and currently the case in Australia, limitations should be placed on the purposes of university grant funding of student services.

University grant funding should be restricted to:

- Student recreational facilities, in the form of a student union solely devoted to providing these services
- Student sports activities, in the form of a Sports Association
- Student academic representation, through a system of subject representatives.
- Support to student societies

### ***2. Ensure that these student activities are organised separately by different bodies***

As has been the case in Scotland in the past and still is the case at Glasgow University, student recreational, sports and academic activities should be the responsibility of different bodies. Each body that is funded by a university grant should be precluded from expanding its activities into different areas. For example, a recreational student union subsidised by the university should not be permitted to use funds raised from the sale of food and drink to finance political activity. When individual bodies are responsible for specific activities then they can focus clearly

on carrying out their functions effectively and their management can be held to account. An additional advantage of separating the functions is that the failure of one function does not involve the failure of them all.

### ***3. Institute a new method of indirect election for central student academic representatives***

Student academic representation should continue to be organised, as it is now, through a system of class and faculty representatives. However, instead of a central student academic representative being chosen by a tiny proportion of students in a campus-wide student union ballot, this academic student representative should be chosen through an indirect election method, by the various academic class and faculty representatives who are interested in and familiar with the issues.

### ***4. Free student societies from the control of student unions***

Student societies should not be controlled by any superior student body, but should be free to establish themselves, set up bank accounts and adopt a constitution without supervision by other students. Support services to student societies, for example, the organisation of freshers' fairs could be organised by the recreational union or by the university.

As is currently the case, student societies should be funded largely by students themselves through membership fees. Additional funding could be provided to cover special or extraordinary expenditure, for example, travel costs of a club or new equipment for the musical society. Such funding could be dispensed by a committee of the recreational student union, as occurs at Glasgow University, for example.

### ***5. Require voluntary membership and personal funding by students of any other student representative bodies***

If students wish to establish representative bodies to deal with matters other than recreational facilities, sports, academic representation and funding of student societies, then they should join such bodies voluntarily and finance them themselves. No student should be required to join such an essentially political body or have finance provided to such a body on his or her behalf without his or her agreement.

For such a Student Representative Council to gain any official recognition by the university then over 50% of students should join it and vote in its elections. If an SRC fails to gain the support of more than 50% of students, then it should not be permissible for the university to include representatives from it on university committees, or give it official status in other ways. In any case the primary need for student representation on university committees relates to academic matters and student academic representatives would be selected through the separate student academic representation system described above.

The operation of the opt-in process is critical. If students were merely asked to tick a box prior to coming to university then it would not be effective. The question would need to be posed after students had arrived at the university and had actually been able to experience the performance of the student representative council for at least two months. Universities should not be permitted to solicit support for such bodies or get involved in the process of enquiring whether students did or did not wish to become members of such bodies.

**6. *Ensure that universities carry out their welfare functions, and that these are not passed to student unions***

In respect of student union provision of welfare activities, this should not receive block grant funding from universities. Such services are not well-suited to provision by elected student politicians without necessary specialist skills. Universities are required under the 1994 Education Act to ensure the provision of welfare services on an equal access basis, including support to vulnerable students, such as mental health services. Universities should be directly responsible for this function.

**7. *Preclude university grant funding of national or regional student political bodies***

Student representative organisations and recreation facility-providing student unions in receipt of university grant funding should not be permitted to pass on any funds to national bodies such as the National Union of Students. If such national bodies wish to attract student members then they should do so on a voluntary, individual basis. (Sports Associations should not be subject to this restriction in respect of sports associations nor should ordinary student societies. Such bodies will on occasion wish to affiliate to national sports bodies and other such organisations).

**8. *Encourage universities to return excess funds to students***

The funding of the sports, recreational academic and other student services should cost less than is currently being spent on integrated student unions. The remainder of the circa £75 per student should be returned by universities to the students themselves to spend as they see fit. For example, if students want to fund a full-time liberation officer to campaign on issues relating to a particular 'minority' then they would be free to do so. Universities could consult students as to whether they wished for additional funds to be spent on certain services, such as recreational or sports facilities.

However, the services that universities should be able to fund should be strictly limited, so as to avoid perpetuating unrepresentative student unions controlled by extremists. Again, only the functions listed above of academic representation, recreational services, sports and student societies should be able to be funded.

**9. *Ensure that student representative organisations adhere to high democratic standards***

All student representative bodies should be subject to stricter governance controls, to ensure that they are not manipulated by a minority.

It should not be permissible for student representative institutions to provide inducements for students to vote in the elections to such institutions. The practice of using university grant funds to bribe students to participate in elections — for example by the distribution of free pizza — should not be permitted.

The practice of allowing tiny numbers of students to take decisions on behalf of the entire student population at ‘general meetings’ or annual general meetings of students should also cease.

### **10. Require universities to take sole responsibility for legal requirements regarding free speech**

No student representative body of any type should have any involvement in regulating the rights to free speech on campus, for example, by approving whether other students or student societies can organise lectures or invite particular speakers. Responsibility for implementing the very limited legal obligations regarding such meetings, primarily under the Counter Terrorism and Security Act, should rest solely with universities, who should not be permitted to delegate their responsibilities, or any part of the process, to student unions or others.

### **11. Strengthen legal provisions regarding freedom of speech**

The provisions in law regarding free speech in universities should be strengthened to prevent universities or any other bodies using procedural mechanisms to frustrate the right to free speech. Universities should not be permitted to use the excuse of possible disorder resulting from protests as a reason to ban particular meetings. Universities that breach their freedom of speech obligations should be subject to fines by the Office for Students.

A specific s43 (1) of the Education (No 2) Act 1986 should be amended in the following way. As it now stands it reads:

“Every individual and body of persons concerned in the government of any establishment to which this section applies shall take such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured for members, students and employees of the establishment for visiting speakers.”

It should be amended to:

“Every individual and body of persons concerned in the government of any establishment to which this section applies, *and in the government of student unions and registered student societies, ...*”

Even though it is proposed that procedures relating to university meetings should be sole responsibility of universities, this change will ensure that both student unions and student societies are legally responsible for ensuring free speech at meetings that they are responsible for. Moreover, universities should be required to ensure that student bodies comply with freedom of speech requirements or face sanctions.

***12. Require universities to pay for any necessary security costs at meetings held on its premises***

The practice of passing security costs onto student societies who invite speakers should cease. Universities should be responsible for ensuring adequate security and paying for it if necessary. Universities should take firm disciplinary measures against students who seek to disrupt meetings.

***13. Empower the Office for Students to regulate free speech and the activities of student bodies***

The Charities Commission should continue to concern itself with issues relating to the charitable status of those student unions which are charities. However, the Office for Students should become the main regulator of student bodies, representative and otherwise, in respect both free speech and other matters.

***14. Task the Office for Students with overseeing the transition to the new arrangements***

Putting these new arrangements in place will require effective planning and a drive to achieve results. Rather than relying on each university to make these changes itself without outside help, an Office for Students taskforce should oversee and assist universities in their efforts to implement the required changes.

Statistical analysis has been conducted to examine various data and its significance.

Most of the data used are from Table 1. All variables are for the academic year 2018/19. Data relating to Spiked free speech rankings and National Student Survey question 26 performance (NSS Q26) have been added. Observations have been removed due to either: unavailable financial statements; no NSS Q26 data; no data relating to block grant income; and unavailable 2018/19 financial statements. The University of Falmouth and University of Exeter share a student union so their block grant is under ‘Falmouth’ in the sample. There are 31 such observations (see table below). The combined sample totals 108 observations of 16 variables.

**TABLE 6: OBSERVATIONS REMOVED**

<b>FINANCIAL STATEMENTS NOT AVAILABLE</b>	<b>2018/19 FINANCIAL STATEMENTS UNAVAILABLE</b>	<b>No NSS Q26 DATA</b>	<b>STUDENT NUMBERS NOT UP TO DATE</b>
Leeds Arts	Edinburgh Napier	Cambridge	Aston
Royal Academy of Music	Bishop Grosseteste	Cranfield	Gloucestershire
Norwich, Arts	SOAS	London Business School	West of England
Glasgow School of Art	Roehampton	Oxford	Arts, London
Queens Belfast	Bedfordshire	Trinity St David	Abertay Dundee
St Georges	Middlesex	Plymouth Marjon	Creative Arts
Leeds Trinity	Bournemouth	Royal Central School of Speech & Drama	
Royal Veterinary College	Sheffield	SRUC	
SRUC			

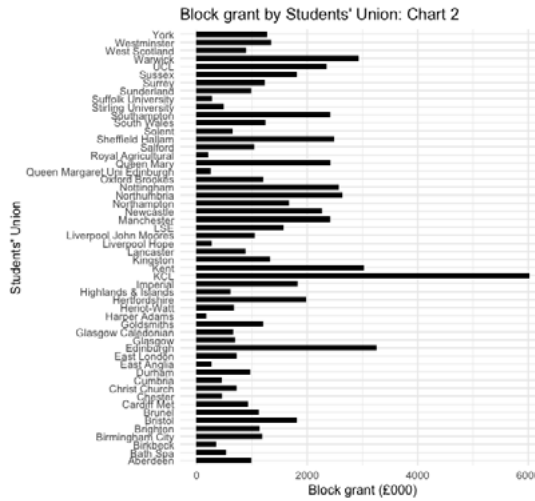
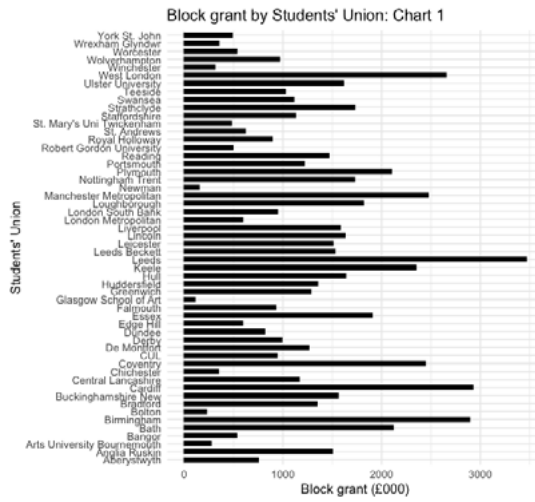
Block grant data excludes: one off grants for capital projects and other unspecified purposes; grants of serviced accommodation and university services; and grants for clubs and societies. To the extent that the components of the block grant have been itemised in the financial statements, the previously listed components are not accounted for in the data. This data contains some noise as not all financial statements itemise components of their block grant. These components have been removed so as to have a measure of block grant income that has alternative uses. This income is unrestricted and can be used to fund political activity (sabbatical officer salaries; campaigning; NUS costs). It is the part of the block grant that can be deployed for uses more effective than political campaigning.

**BLOCK GRANT INCOME**

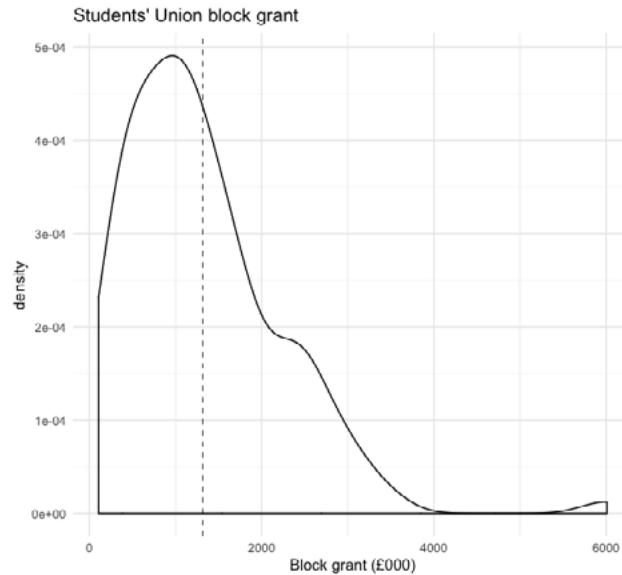
The charts below show the block grant income of all student unions in the sample. Glasgow Schools of Arts’ student union received £108,000 in block grant income in 2018/19 and is the lowest in the sample. The highest in the sample is King’s



College London's student union, which received £6m in block grant income the same year.

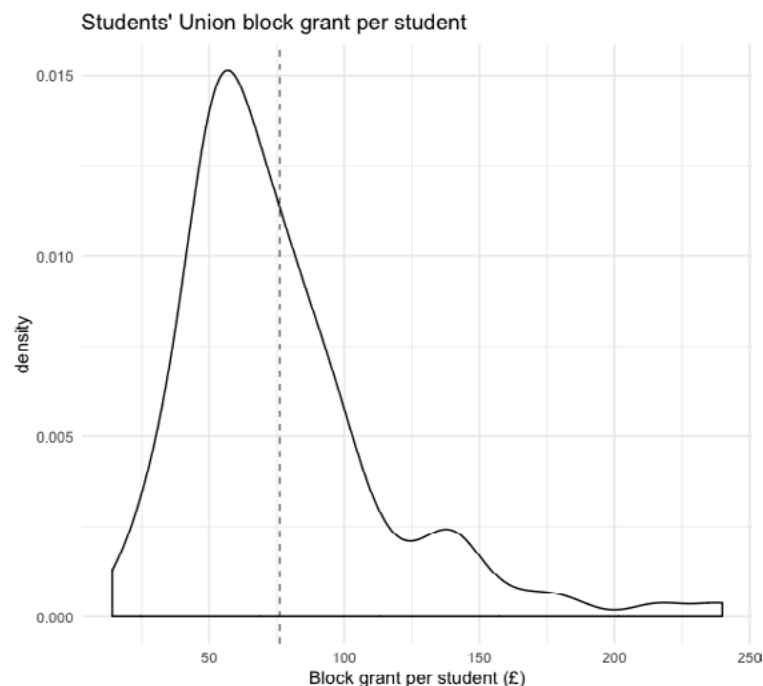


The density plot of block grant income shows that these data are positively skewed, and have a mean (dotted line in the chart below) of just over £1.3m (the true mean is estimated to lie within £0.175m of £1.3m). 50% of the student unions in the sample have a block grant income less than £1.14m. Student unions between the 50% and 90% percentiles have block grant incomes of between £1.14m and £2.47m. The block grant to King's College London's student union is an outlier in the sample, with the next largest block grant being £3.46m (Leeds).



### BLOCK GRANT PER STUDENT

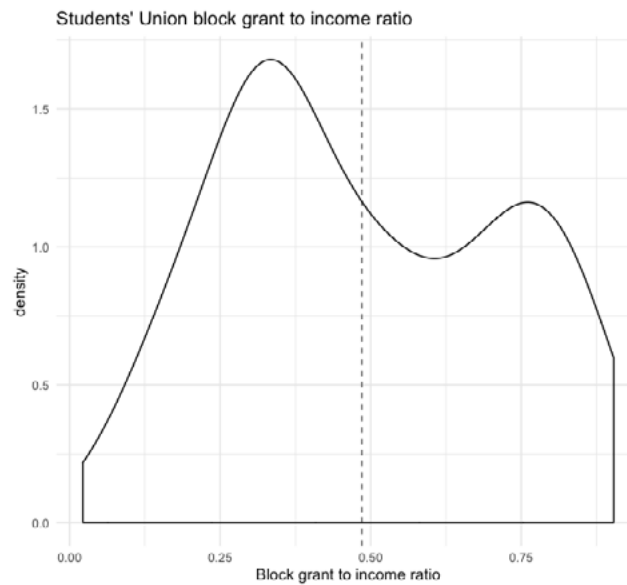
The density plot of block grant income per student (see below) shows that these data are positively skewed with a mean of £76 (the true mean is estimated to lie within £8 of £76). UEA's student union has the lowest block grant per student in the sample at £14 per student. The highest block grant per student in the sample is the University of West London's student union at £240 per student. 50% of student unions in the sample have block grant funding of below £66 per student. Student unions between the 50% and 90% percentiles have block grant income between £66 and £130 per student.



## BLOCK GRANT TO INCOME RATIO

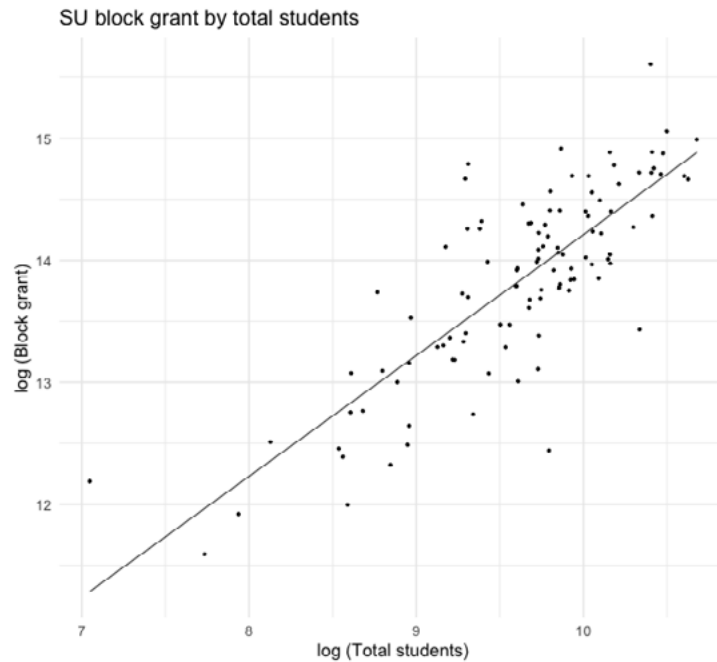
The block grant to income ratio is a measure of the proportion of student union income that comes from block grant funding. Students with a low block grant to income ratio will raise the rest of their income through other grants or income from trading. For example UEA's student union has the lowest block grant to income ratio in the sample at 0.04 (4%) because the vast majority of its income comes from trading activity. The student union had a total income of £10.7m in 2018/19, only £412,000 of which came from its block grant while income from trading operations generated £9.38m.

The mean block grant to income ratio is estimated at  $0.48 \pm 0.04$ . The University of the Highlands and Islands' student union has a block grant to income ratio of 0.9, the highest in the sample. 50% of student unions in the sample have a block grant to income ratio below 0.45. Student unions with a block grant to income ratio between the 50% and 90% percentile have block grant to income ratios between 0.45 and 0.81.



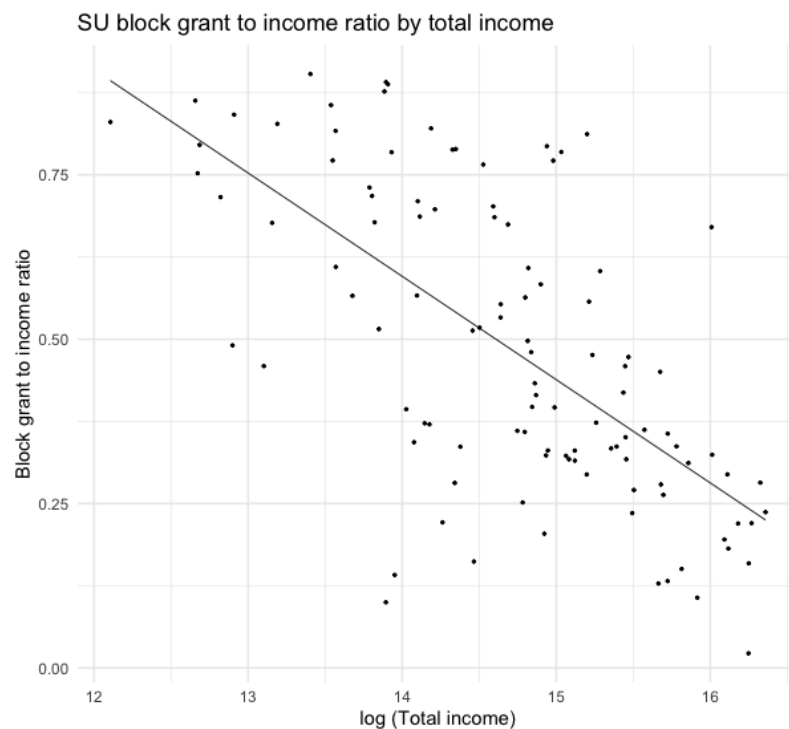
## EXPLAINING BLOCK GRANT INCOME

There is a statistically significant association between block grant income and total students (sum total of undergraduate and postgraduate students). Total students explain 65% of the variation in block grant income. As the two variables are strongly correlated it's possible to accurately predict block grant income if the total number of students enrolled in a university is known. Additionally, the analysis shows that for a proportionate increase in total students, the block grant increases by the same proportion. For example if there are two student unions, one with a membership that is 20% higher than the other, the model used to analyse this relationship predicts that the union with a larger membership will have a block grant that is 20% greater.



## EXPLAINING BLOCK GRANT TO INCOME RATIO

There is a statistically significant association between block grant to income ratio and total income. The relationship is such that higher incomes are associated with lower block grant to income ratios. This means that student unions with higher incomes are less dependent on the block grant for their income. The analysis carried out on the data indicates that the block grant to income ratio does not decrease proportionately as income increases. This is because student unions with the highest incomes tend to have very low block grant to income ratios and unions with low incomes have very high block grant to income ratios. For example, the model used predicts that if there are two student unions, one of which has 100% more income, the proportion of that union's income that comes from its block grant will be 15% less than the smaller union.

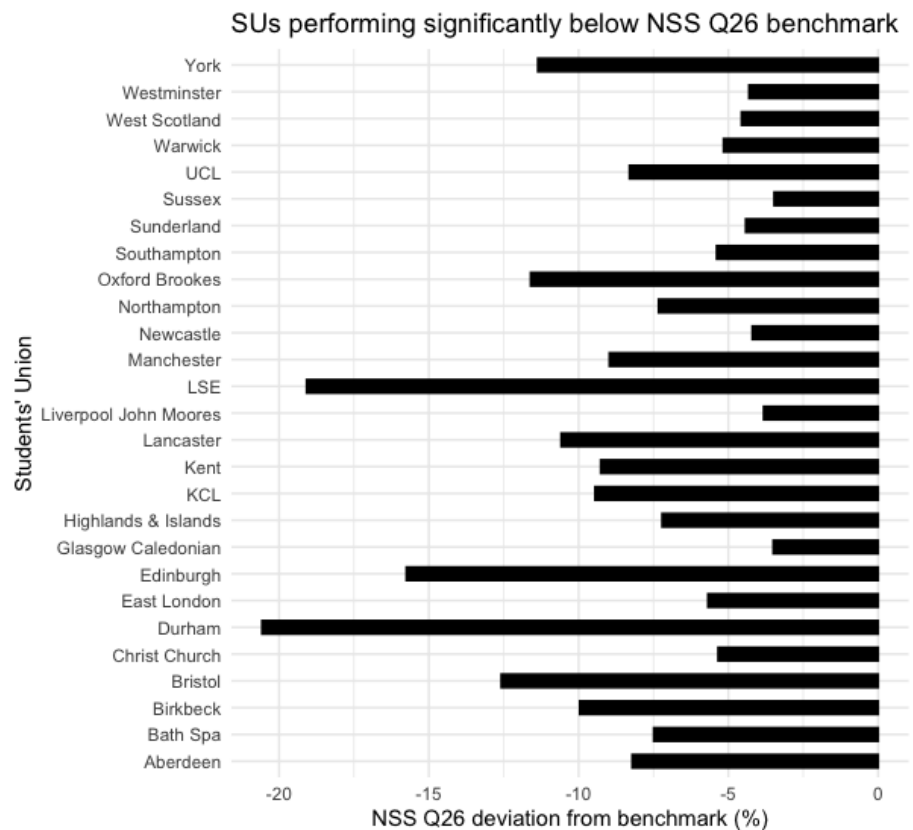


## NSS QUESTION 26

NSS Q26 is a measure of student satisfaction with their student union. It measures satisfaction with its core function – providing academic representation. The question correlates with the following statements (correlations in parentheses): my student union works to ensure the academic needs of students are met (0.496); I understand what the student union is achieving for me and my academic interests (0.484); my student union makes sure I get the best possible academic outcome from my course (0.463). These statements give an indication of how students interpret NSS Q26. The statements with the lowest correlations are: my student union offers a range of relevant opportunities, events and services (0.413); the student union Sabbatical/Student Officers/Executive team effectively represents me (0.408).<sup>146</sup>

The research cited does also show that NSS Q26 performance is associated with prior engagement with the student union. This means that the score could be used to predict how often students have engaged with student union services. Students that used 3-6 services resulted in an NSS Q26 score of 81%, 1-2 services scored 70%, awareness of 3-6 services but not using any scores 64%, awareness of 1-2 services and not used any scored 37%, and awareness of nothing scored 38%.

Benchmark scores are produced for each institution by adjusting for factors known to influence what is being measured. These scores have been adjusted for age, gender, ethnicity, disability, subject studied, and mode of study. The data also indicate if the difference between the score and the student union's benchmark is statistically significant (indicating that the score is unlikely to have arisen by chance). The sample has 27 student unions whose NSS Q26 performance is significantly lower than benchmark. These student unions have an average income of £4.2m against an estimated sector average of £3.6m and average block grant income of £1.6m against an estimated sector average of £1.3m.



### SPIKED RATINGS

25 of the 27 student unions performing significantly below their NSS Q26 benchmark have been rated red or amber. One observation, the University of the Highlands and Islands has not been rated by Spiked. The other, University of the West of Scotland is rated green.

54% of the universities rated amber have NSS Q26 performance that is below benchmark compared to 50% of all universities in the sample. Several of the universities rated amber that perform below benchmark have NSS Q26 scores that are not significantly below benchmark. 50% of the universities rated red have performance

below benchmark. This indicates that what the rating measures does not produce an effect that can be used to predict NSS Q26 performance.

### NSS AND BLOCK GRANT TO INCOME RATIOS

The mean block grant to income ratio increases as NSS Q26 performance decreases. Student unions above benchmark, below benchmark, and significantly below benchmark have mean block grant to income ratios of 0.47, 0.49, and 0.53 respectively. This indicates that student unions that perform well on NSS Q26 tend to have lower block grant to income ratios.

