
Democratic Procedures Committee Report

Introduction from Naa Acquah, Democratic Procedures Committee Chair

It has been a privilege for me and the rest of the volunteers on the committee to serve as elected Democratic Procedures Committee (DPC) members for NUS. We have worked very hard over the past year to bring the policies approved by last year's conference on the reform motion to life.

I think it is fair to say that this is an extraordinary time for NUS and DPC as we will have the first National Conference online. One thing I am glad to say is that the work we have done over the year- putting elections online and using an online voting policy system- has enabled us to be able to deliver an online conference. I don't think an online conference would have been possible last year.



DPC acts as the referee for National Conference. Our role is not to see that one side of the debate is successful over another, but instead to support the process and make judgements that we hope are fair and balanced. We seek to create a Conference that can be an accessible event that everyone can take part in and feel that their contribution is valid and respected.

Like all referees we do not expect everyone to agree with every decision that we make but we do ask that you recognise our role in keeping the policy process moving.

Safe discussion, debate and even disagreement is important for outlining the will of the membership and setting a policy mandate for officers, but we ask you to consider all others at NUS Conference while you do so.

I want to thank the committee and NUS team for their hard work, optimism and dedication for transforming NUS's democracy!

Best Wishes

Naa Acquah
Chair
Democratic Procedures Committee





Delivering Reform to our Democracy

At NUS we believe that the interactions between our staff, officers, and volunteers, are key to creating a culture of collaboration and enjoyment and establishing how we'll all work together.

We know from feedback that too often our democratic spaces can spill from spirited debate into unpleasant disagreement, personal animosity, and at its worst into public disputes and even bullying. In times of change, it's easy to forget what things were like and we can look back with rose tinted glasses at some things we complained about bitterly at the time, even when we were right to do so. So, we must hold on to an objective memory of what NUS has been like in the past to help us change it for the future.

Evolving our democracy has an impact on not only those who are involved in these spaces but on everyone who works in the student movement. In fact, it weakens the very fabric that holds our movement together if we don't seek to continually improve it or allow negative culture to permeate.


But it doesn't have to be the way it's been anymore. Last year National Conference passed a wide ranging set of reforms which have given us the green light to do things differently.

This year has been about experimentation and making crucial steps to change our democratic model. We'll outline below what we have done as a DPC. It's important to note that this year has been about taking the first steps in delivering reform and about trying things out. Some of the changes we've made may not have worked out how we wanted them to, or not gone far enough in delivering reform. We really do want your feedback to make sure we are continuously improving our processes.

There are some clear takeaways from National Conference 2019 with regards to the reform of democracy. These are:

- Democracy needs simplifying
- Elections should be separate from policy making
- Pre and post conference ballots should be used to clarify where there is consensus
- Voting should be open to members through digital technology
- Technical detail should be introduced to discussions
- Cross campus ballots and gender balanced delegations should be retained
- A clear role for the Democratic Procedures Committee in setting and steering procedures.

We have therefore been looking at how we can deliver these takeaways in line with the principles that underpin an efficient democratic system and the considerations NUS also is seeking to provide. You can read about the principles and considerations in the Appendix. Below we will outline the steps we have taken under each of these reform takeaways.

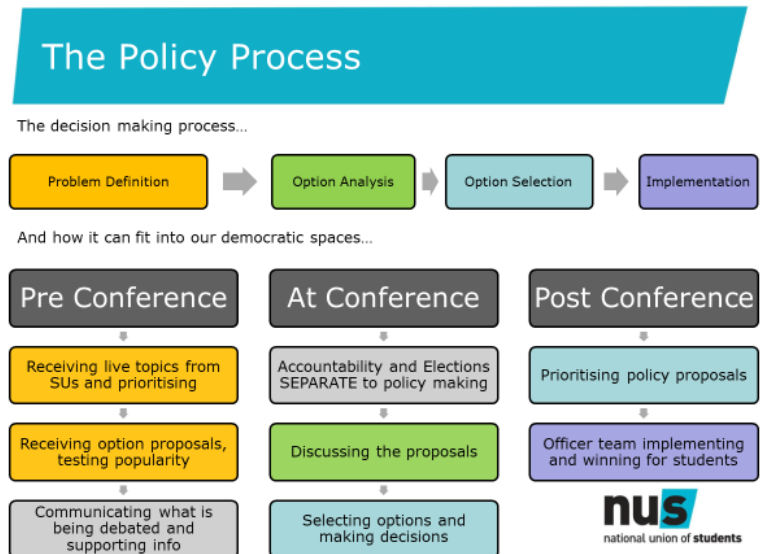


Democracy Needs Simplifying

The biggest step we have taken is to reduce the volume of policies to be discussed in our democratic spaces, focussing the debates to make it easier for delegates at conferences to follow exactly what is being discussed and debated. We've reduced the word counts on policy proposals and made the format more flexible to focus on problems and solutions.

We've trialled running workshops in across our democratic spaces. The purpose of these are to deformalise our democratic spaces, allowing for discussion, debate and understanding without a need to know about procedural motions!

We've also tried to simplify the policy submission and formation process as much as possible through the use of online tools. The process for submitting policy can be seen in the diagram and we have worked to make as simple as possible. We've added more points where students can influence the process (such as allowing for submission of amendments to National Conference policy proposals)



There is still lots of work to do in this regard and we want to hear from delegates through conference feedback, questions to this report and conversations at Conference.

Elections should be separate from policy making

This was a clear ask from members last year and a really positive piece of feedback from National Conference 2019. We've worked with the Deputy Returning Officer to set a timetable that means elections happen before we move into policy making. Through our positions on steering committees we've ensured agendas in the Nations and at Liberation Conference reflect this.

Pre and post conference ballots should be used to clarify where there is consensus


We've rolled out a pre-conference ballot to the Nations conferences and used this in same methodology in the National Conference ballot. There is still work to be done to increase participation in these ballots. We'll be running a post conference ballot of policies for National Conference.

Voting should be open to members through digital technology

This is an area where we have taken steps, but there is clearly lots more work we can do on this. As it stands, we have been able to utilise digital technology for policy submission, ranking and amendment via an app on Unioncloud. This has allowed delegates at conference to comment and discuss policies as well as vote. We can also use this to run ballots after conference. We need to further review web accessibility and usability of our platforms.

Voting on the policies themselves is still taking place at conferences themselves. We did consider digital voting on policies, but this is something that needs further work to review how we could facilitate this. Whilst a vote online is relatively straightforward, the biggest consideration would be how to facilitate a debate online and deal with amendments/procedural motions.

One of the key challenges we've faced when discussing opening up to more digital technology is reconciling more digital voting with our desire to deepen understanding and engagement with policies



through participatory democracy. Our current democratic structures and digital platforms need careful review before we can get to a place where we reconcile these needs.

At the time of writing, DPC is making contingency plans for a limited online discussion of proposals and vote for National Conference based on guidance around Covid-19. However, we know that these are by necessity emergency contingency plans for exceptional circumstances rather than a full plan for online democratic participation. It's worth noting though that it's as a result of reform that we can roll out these plans and ensure that the democracy of conference can go ahead in some form.

Technical detail should be introduced to discussions

The reduction in the number of policies has allowed us to structure conferences to discuss a smaller number of topics in much greater depth. We've been able to introduce workshops to democratic spaces, allowing delegates to engage with the detail of policies before voting.

A key proposal to do this was to include 'expert witnesses' to these workshops. People who could take part in workshops to share their technical expertise and/or lived experience of an issue. We've faced some challenges recruiting these expert witnesses due to the timing of the policy process. This year we've only known final policies with a few weeks to go before conference. In future years we'd like to look at the policy process again to see if we can make the recruitment of expert witnesses easier.

Likewise, we would like to look in future about the information that goes out in proposals. We still think there is more supporting information that could go to delegates to help deepen understanding of the issues and would like to work with proposers more to generate this. Again, timing makes this a challenge so next year DPC needs to carefully review the policy process.

Cross campus ballots and gender balanced delegations should be retained


These were retained in the current rules and as a DPC we have instructed staff to check that delegations meet these requirements.

A clear role for the Democratic Procedures Committee in setting and steering procedures.

We're aware that as a DPC we have been granted a number of powers to set procedures and change fundamentally how conference work. We've taken this very seriously and in doing so have attempted to consult as many stakeholders as possible, including members, full time officers, volunteers and steering committees.

From this we have created debate procedures, processes for policy submission, agendas and outline plans of democratic spaces. Again, we'd like to stress that all of these have been based on our best endeavours to ensure fairness, delivering on the principles of reform and feedback from stakeholders. We would really like to hear back from delegates in each of the democratic spaces about your views on our democracy.

As we stated above this year we've aimed to start the evolution of our democracy. The way our democracy has run this year is not the finished product. As a DPC we want to see this work continue so we can build a culture that's the envy not just of our movement but movements everywhere.





Reviewing and Accepting policy submissions

In total 43 policy proposals were received from 43 different Students' Unions. Although this is a lower number of proposals than previous years, this reflects our guidance that members should only submit one proposal to conference. The number of Students' Unions submitting proposals has increased. Last year there were 80 policy proposals from 30 Students' Unions.


Of these 43 proposals:

- 19 policy proposals were taken forward to the prioritisation stage. This incorporated 28 submissions, some of which were merged into 'composite' policy proposals
- 11 proposals were converted to amendments of proposals
- 1 proposal was ruled out of order as it was unclear. The proposer was invited to resubmit
- 3 proposals addressed NUS' delivery of work within the Articles and Rules and were therefore diverted to other bodies (e.g. the board, proposal on delegate entitlement addressed below)

When DPC met they set a series of principles on reviewing and amending proposals, based on the published guidance:

- Students lead the work of NUS UK and through participation in democracy set our priorities
- Text should not be removed from proposals unless absolutely necessary and in making amendments the core asks and spirit of the proposal should be maintained
- Conference can't debate the same issue twice
- Proposals which cover the same area/topic that have a similar series of issues and solutions should be merged into one policy
- Proposals which cover a similar area but have slightly different approaches should be brought together into a main proposal and an amendment.
- Once delegates have conference have voted on and set policies our elected student officers use this to create a Plan for Action. The Plan for Action is what details what NUS UK *does* and *how* we win for students.
- Therefore, proposals should not dictate how a proposal should be taken forward
- In some cases this is just a matter of framing – so DPC may remove areas with statements such as 'We mandate NUS to...' or 'NUS should lobby for...' – this does not take away the core ask, because in setting policy NUS has the mandate to carry out certain pieces of work
- Where a proposal asks for specific pieces of action (e.g. to write a report), this will be kept in the text but DPC will add a note to make clear that implementation is decided by officers.
- NUS Charity and external organisations (e.g. Students' Unions, SOS UK which is the sustainability charity setup by NUS) cannot be mandated by National Conference, again DPC will note this is – but not remove the proposals
- ALL of these actions WILL be passed to the incoming officer team to form the basis of the Plan for Action

A prioritisation exercise took place and 222 delegates took part in this. From that exercise the seven most popular policies plus the priority policy have been selected to go to Conference:

- PRIORITY POLICY 2020: BUILDING A MOVEMENT TO TRANSFORM EDUCATION
 - Let's end this mental health crisis together, once and for all.
 - Declaring a Climate Emergency - Green New Deal for FE and HE
 - International Students Support and Experience
 - Fire safety, late buildings, accessibility and affordability the need for a national student housing
 - Parity in Healthcare for Students!
 - Ending exploitation while studying
 - Ending Securitisation, Surveillance and Prevent
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Setting Delegate Entitlement

One of the roles of DPC is to set the Delegate Entitlement for approval by the Conference, thus creating the entitlement for the following year. DPC must propose a delegate entitlement that is within the finance allocated to it by conference and as wide as possible to allow unions to send a range of delegates. The rules state that the minimum amount of potential delegates i.e. the entitlement for all members must be no lower than 1,400. In reality we usually have around 800 registered delegates. Given the estimates document does not allocate additional resources for National Conference we have agreed not to set a potential entitlement higher than this.

As a DPC we must therefore set a metric to calculate the delegate entitlement, based on dividing student numbers (overall) by a certain number to reach 1400 delegates.

$$\frac{\text{Student numbers}}{\text{Metric set by DPC}} = \text{Delegate entitlement}$$

This year's student numbers were 254,8819 full time students and 1794434 part time students

As we have moved to a new set of Articles and Rules, these delegate entitlements will change from currently. The major difference in the new rules is that part time students have a higher weighting than previously. We previously counted a part time student as 0.6 of a full time student. The new rules count a part time student as 0.75. As a DPC we must therefore use this calculation to reach a full time equivalent (FTE) of part time students, which in this case is 134,5825.5

So, this leaves us with a Full Time Equivalent student number of $254,8819 + 134,5825.5 = 389,4644.5$

Now we have this, we must choose a number to divide this by so that total delegate entitlement reaches no less than 1400. We need to consider when we do this, variances in rounding, because we need to apply the metric to each union. Put simply we can't ask a Union to send half a person to conference! The new rules have changed how we round delegate entitlement. Previously we always rounded up. So if your entitlement worked out as 2.1 we'd round this up to 2. The new rules ask us to round up or down (i.e. the way you were taught at school). Another thing to consider is that there are over 150 small and specialist member unions that have lower student numbers. If rounded would give them an entitlement of 0. We of course make the minimum number of delegates a Union can send 1, so this changes our calculation.

Having reviewed, if we divide student numbers by 3,000 this brings the total delegate entitlement to 1298. When we account for rounding this takes it to 1431.

Therefore, for the next year, DPC proposes a delegate entitlement of 1 per 3,000 full time students and 0.75 per 3,000 part time students.


Overall this would lead to an overall delegate entitlement as set below

$$\frac{389,4664.5}{3000} = 1431$$

This would then be applied to each Students' Union based on their student numbers. It is worth noting that the difference in part time weighting has changed this metric (last year student numbers were divided by 3500). This means delegate entitlements for individual students' unions are likely to change more significantly than in previous years.

We hope this makes sense and thanks for reading the maths exam section of the report!





Appendix A: The principles of our democratic approach

Four principles have been used to build our democratic model to this point. These are based on principles voted for by NUS National Conference. At every stage of this development process they should be referred to and are essentially the success measures for any effective democratic system:

- 1. Inclusiveness:** ensuring we reach political equality by realising two elements of participation in the democratic process:
 - a. Presence – put simply this is about ensuring a representative mix of students are included in decision making.
 - b. Voice – ensuring that of those students, there is opportunity for all students to speak. In our spaces we need to ensure not only the representation of liberation groups, but their ability to have their voices heard in these spaces.
- 2. Considered judgment:** This is where technical information is vital. In building any model we need to provide students with the right tools to make meaningful decisions.
- 3. Popular control:** Ensuring that any decisions made and acted on reflect the genuine will of students. It's important that there is a real opportunity to shape and inform decisions at all stages.
- 4. Transparency:** The need for both transparency in how leaders act and implement decisions (through accountability), but also transparency in the process of making decisions.

Alongside these principles are a further four key considerations as far as NUS is concerned. These are:

- **Efficiency:** we need to ensure that systems we design are efficient for those who access it. A key complaint of NUS democracy is the time burden on those who participate in it. Also important is the resource burden for member students' unions and the ability for staff and volunteers to administer our democracy. A key principle and test is how much time do we spend administering and discussing the process? compared to how much time we spend talking about campaign content and making a difference?
 - **Transferability and Context:** This relates to how you can scale a democratic system and transfer it between spaces. This means ensuring the systems and language used are simple and effective, so they can be transferred from one space to another. However, another vital and allied concept here is context. Our democratic spaces within Liberation campaigns and the nations are different from our national environment. Whilst we want transferability and a feeling that a democratic model feels similar across the UK, we should be careful of trying to design a 'one size fits all' model, as we know it just won't work.
 - **Accessibility by design:** When building a democratic system, we must build in accessibility from the outset. One of the key issues we need to address is learners with Special Educational Needs (SEND) and building in simple language and systems which they can access easily. When looking at digital democracy we need to look at web accessibility. Ensuring our democratic spaces are healthy and don't overload participants is another must. The key point here is whatever we do needs to be built in to our new model now and not retrofitted afterwards.
 - **Race Equity:** When designing any new democratic system, it's important to recognise the systems of racism in which we operate and the existing power dynamics that come into our spaces. The NUS Race Equity Plan is really clear that *"the 'cultural norm', within NUS' political spaces, needs to change to ensure that people feel safe and that all forms of racism are challenged"*. Again, this needs to be built in by design.
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