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| Key Theme Report | |
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| Building Democratic Universities  Policy Development Convention, 5-6 December 2013 |

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| Rationale and Context |
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| Rationale and Context |

## Rationale

True partnership cannot happen in an institution where decisions are restricted to a small minority of senior managers. For our diverse student body to be able fully to participate and be engaged in shaping their learning environment and their institutions, those institutions need to commit to a more democratic ethos and governance. Our goal is to support our members to expose the cynicism of institutional managers who claim to support partnership – students as equal participants of an academic community - but instead retain a monopoly on power.

## Context

The way universities are run has changed dramatically over the past thirty years. In response to government pressure and subsequent marketisation and expansion, universities are adopting more corporate forms of governance. It is important that students’ unions understand these changes, so that they can challenge the democratic deficit in the current forms of higher education governance, in particular the wholly unrepresentative and surreptitious nature of decision-making, with power being concentrated in governing bodies and a small number of senior managers, and where the role of academics and students in decision-making is severely diminished and undervalued.

The concept of student engagement is at a tipping point; it is important that student engagement is articulated in a way which leads to more student participation in university decision-making. It was for this reason that we launched the *Manifesto for Partnership* in 2012. Our partnership agenda has focused on ‘investing students with the power to co-create, not just knowledge or learning, but the higher education institution itself’ (NUS 2012). This key theme of building democratic universities builds on this partnership agenda, as it has become clear from the feedback of our membership that our model of partnership cannot be achieved without making decision-making in many institutions more democratic, open and transparent, through which students and their unions are taken seriously.



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| Green Paper consultation |
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| Green Paper consultation |

## Democratic Universities Paper

It was clear from the feedback on the partnership agenda that unions were keen to put the concepts of student partnership into practice, but were often finding it difficult to articulate such a conversation with their institution, particularly where unions felt their voice was being undervalued and ignored on the key issues.

For this reason, we produced a report in the form of a consultative document or “green paper”. This paper was presented to delegates at the HE Zone Conference in November, during which they had the chance to discuss and provide feedback on the concepts and ideas we had developed.

The Green Paper set out the higher education governance landscape from the perspective of active students’ unions aiming to positively challenge the democratic deficit in the way universities make policy decisions. We began by explaining what governance in higher education institutions tended to look like, identifying four different types of governance: bureaucratic, academic, corporate, and stakeholder governance. From this, we began to unpack some of the changes to governance, revealing how traditional governance by academics had been challenged and replaced, in most cases, by more corporate forms of governance. This corporate form in universities poses a threat not only because it focuses on a neoliberal market agenda, but also because it concentrates power in the hands of a small group of senior managers at the expense of students and other staff.

The paper also examined some of the key contexts which affect the way universities make policy, which we called ‘governance realities’. Included in this was a look at some of the particular issues affecting governance in Scotland and Wales.

Drawing on this evidence, the paper proposed an alternative vision of higher education governance, which was built around the idea that universities have a democratic mission to engage in real-world problems and help to build a better society. Three key themes were identified to help narrow down the areas unions could work on to help democratise their institution. These were: gender equality, student participation, and public value.

Finally, the green paper looked at developing a toolkit to help students’ unions audit the governance of their institution and find ways in which they could engage productively with their institution to improve it. This included an auditing tool, to measure the level of democracy in decision-making, and a method of communicating governance issues to the institution in the form of an alternative strategic plan.



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| Response from membership |
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| Response from membership |

## Feedback from HE Zone

Delegates at HE Zone Conference were given the opportunity to discuss the green paper on democratic universities. The feedback from conference generally fell into the following three categories:

### Positive aspects to take forward

Delegates were highly responsive to the idea of students’ unions playing a central role in democratising governance. The centrality of the union as a facilitator of the wider movement’s voice was deemed a crucial principle to come out of the partnership agenda, as was the idea of the student as a co-creator. One group suggested that this was about ‘being serious about partnership’.

The response to the gender equality aspect of democratic governance was overwhelming. Removing masculine cultures, de-genderising the concept of leadership, and “speaking out” against sexism were thought of as crucial to the democratisation agenda, perhaps even more so than merely increasing the number of women in leadership roles.

Many delegates were excited about using their community-facing work to drive up the involvement of local communities and ensure public scrutiny and accountability of university decision-making.

There was also broad consensus over the need to challenge corporate governance, particularly where it related to marketisation and “value-for-money” assumptions and decisions. Part of this was considered to be about challenging ‘the cult of the power VC’ and building clear, transparent structures with better representation of students, staff and the wider community.

One group made the point of emphasising how they thought that students’ unions should benchmark themselves against the same key themes. There was perhaps some scepticism in some unions over the level of democracy in their own governance.

### Concerns and barriers

The majority of concerns and barriers were focused on the current relationships unions had with their institution. Many felt that their presence on governing bodies was nothing more than a ‘rubber stamp’ or a ‘box to tick’. One group referred to student representation as ‘window dressing’, claiming that membership of committees was an attempt to give students a ‘false sense of power’. Others were put off by the antagonistic relationship they had with their institution, saying it would be hard to break the us-and-them mentality.

The issue of transparency was highlighted by some groups. They were concerned with how students would be able to challenge decisions made in secret. There were also concerns that transparency was not enough, as this may have no effect on the actual decisions.

One group questioned whether students were even interested in getting involved in decision-making, or whether the policy process could actually be made accessible to them.

Another group made a point of criticising the QAA, saying that their impact on the idea of student engagement had been damaging and made it difficult for unions to turn ‘engagement for its own sake’ into active partnership.

Again, the question of whether unions were themselves democratic enough came up. Several groups suggested that their union needed to start practicing what it preached before it could make a positive impact.

### What NUS can do to help unions

Unions asked for short and sucking guidance and advice to help them campaign on democratic governance, and, indeed, to make their own governance more democratic.

They also asked for evidence to show that high-performing universities succeed through student representation and more democratic governance.

## Feedback from the Policy Portal

One contributor to the policy portal suggested that unions are in a perfect place to lead on democratising universities. They believed most institutions suffer a democratic deficit and that it is important to generate a form of ‘citizenship’ among the student body. The questions they raised were about how unions could help increase the interest of students in governance.

Another contributor was concerned that a number of delegates at Zone conference had misinterpreted the nature of democratising university governance. They stated that ‘some people thought that “building democratic institutions” meant abolishing all management structures and replacing them with an anarchic system’.

Another contributor suggested that unions may need to become exemplars of democratic governance in order to best influence their institutions on democratic deficit.

## Survey Results

NUS polled approximately 3400 students on issues relating to the governance of their institution or college. Students were asked their opinions on four statements. The results were as follows:

Only 45 per cent of students agreed that they knew who made key policy decisions at their institution. At least 30 per cent believed that they did not know who made the decisions. This supports our concerns over the transparency of decision-making in universities. Students in FE colleges were more confident that they knew who made decisions. Home students did not seem to be any more confident than international students in knowing who made decisions.

On accountability, 54 per cent of students agreed that there were clear ways in which decision-makers could be held to account. Only 14 per cent disagreed. There was no statistical difference between the responses of FE and HE students. However, postgraduate HE students were statistically more likely to disagree (around 21 per cent disagreed). This may be the result of their lack of knowledge of and engagement with students’ unions.

It’s promising to find that almost 70 per cent of students believed that the student body had a strong influence on decisions at their institution. There were, however significant differences in response between different student groups. FE students and postgraduates were around four times more likely to disagree that they had influence compared to 1st year HE students. Undergraduates in the 2nd year or above were three times more likely to disagree compared to 1st year undergraduates. International students were also statistically less likely to agree they had strong influence.

Again, a promising 74 per cent of students had confidence in those who represent them understand their role on decision-making bodies. They are referring primarily to students’ union officers here. As before, however, the results were skewed by the optimism of 1st year undergraduates. 78 per cent of 1st years agreed compared to 70 per cent of 2nd years and above, and 60 per cent of postgraduates. 71 per cent of FE students agreed. Disagreement was strongest among postgraduates, with 15 per cent not feeling that their representatives understood their roles. Part time students had the lowest level of agreement at 55 per cent, but this was mainly down to a higher number of part time students claiming they didn’t know whether or not their representatives were up to the task. Most probably this is the result of part time students spending less time on campus to make judgments over their representatives.

It is important to note how optimism of the students’ understanding of governance and their ability to influence decisions begins to fade the longer a student is studying in higher education. There is likely to be a combination of things working here. First year students are perhaps a little naïve. This may not be their fault, but instead the result of a glorified picture of university life painted by the marketing of institutions and in the media. Once reality sets in, students may become rather more sceptical of this image of university. It may also be too early in their first year to make an accurate judgement on such matters. They may also have attempted to challenge or change something in their second or third year and found it difficult or bureaucratic.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

## Points for Policy Development

We are very pleased with the response of the membership to this key theme. Unions are actively endorsing the partnership agenda and are keen to put the ideas into practice.

The membership appears to be broadly in agreement with the following points:

1. Unions should be at the vanguard of any campaign to democratise universities and build student partnerships.
2. There is no one structure or mechanism for achieving democratic governance.
3. Gender equality is a crucial aspect of democratisation and it involves breaking down masculine and sexist cultures as much as it involves increasing the representation of women.
4. To achieve democratic universities, neoliberal corporate forms of governance, and the logics of marketisation and competition, must be challenged.
5. Students can help improve the relationships between the institution and the local community.
6. The idea that students are ‘window dressing’ in governance structures must be dispelled, whether it is the result of student perceptions, or the result of institutional practice.
7. Unions must be ready to scrutinise the democratic deficit in their own governance.