

Key Theme Report

Students and Community

Policy Development Convention, 5-6 December 2013

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Background

Why Students and Community?

The run up to 2015 is a period charged with political significance, encompassing the independence referendum in Scotland, local elections across England and Northern Ireland and a UK wide general election. With a total number of 7 million students in the UK, **our membership represents more than one in ten UK citizens** and so it is only right that student voices are amongst the loudest and most respected in the months and years to come.

The Students and Community theme is an exploration of two key ways in which this amplification of student voice in political life can be achieved;

- Students **working collaboratively alongside non-students to campaign on shared issues** in their local communities.
- Boosting **student engagement and influence in democratic processes**, locally and nationally.

In the most basic sense, the theme is about the recognition that **students are people too**. Not all citizens are students, but all students are citizens and are inspired, motivated and concerned about many issues beyond only their educational experiences. Indeed, the student movement has *always* been on the forefront of campaigning for social justice, from students fighting against NHS reform at their local hospitals in 2013 to helping lead the fight against apartheid decades ago.

Such efforts are definitive of the broader goals of the student movement in which **helping citizens find a way to express their political beliefs is crucial to a functioning democracy and to create social justice**. To quote Margaret Mead, "*never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*" The Students and Community theme is a continuation of this trend, with a particular focus on students helping to bring about local change.

However significant challenges lie ahead, most critically a feeling amongst many students that they are not as able to influence issues as well as they would like. For example, **only 15% students believe they feel they are able to influence the decisions of those in power**.

Students as local citizens

Why the focus on local campaigning?

While in no way denying the influence of national politics, the theme is motivated by the view that the wider student movement has in the past too often failed to equally prioritise local and national campaigning, and that **we have not yet developing a coherent strategy for local influencing as a movement.** In today's context, amidst the deepest recession for generations and the significant challenges of austerity, there are two key reasons for focusing on local campaigning;

- The understanding that **people's day to day lives are strongly influenced by decisions made at local levels.**
- The impact of **changes that have occurred as a result of the government's localism agenda,** with particular regard to changes in public services and local decision making.

We also know that **students feel more able to influence matters locally rather than nationally.** Half of students feel that they are more able to change local community issues rather than national issues, with students aged 21+ feeling more positive than those younger. And that some students are particularly concerned about local rather than national issues, such as FE, international and part-time students.

The theme therefore strives to **break the false division of 'student' and 'local'** in which students are othered by locals, and locals are othered by students. Breaking this 'othering cycle' is important in challenging inaccurate media stereotypes of students as transient 20 year old undergraduates who are ill behaved, hundreds of miles from home and disengaged in local civic and democratic life. **This portrayal**

is not at all representative of our 7 million members. The extent of student volunteering activities and abundance of students' union led community initiatives alone is proof that students are not locally disengaged, and it is a major oversight to forget the high proportion of HE and FE students who live and study in their home areas.

The shift to community organising

In doing so, the theme is also a strict **departure away from outdated campaigning models in which students campaign for people, and is a movement towards students campaigning side by side with people instead.** This shift is heavily influenced by the increasing popularity of community organising in the UK as a mode of social change.

Community organising gained popular acclaim through its use in Barack Obama's election victory in 2008 and has since gained momentum in the UK, increasingly being adopted as a method by community groups, trade unions, campaigning organisations and political parties. It is a notable step beyond our current, and many other campaigning organisations, approach to achieving social change. Our belief is that taking **a community organising approach will give vitality to the student movement and help us reach out not only to a wider audience of students, but also out beyond our campuses to non-students also.**

There are numerous definitions of community organising that revolve around some common themes;

- It is based on the principal that **when people work together they have the power to change their neighbourhoods, cities, and**

ultimately the country for the better¹.

- **People must define and act on the issues that *they* care about**, not be told what issues they should care about by others.
- **Strengthening the relationships people have with one another** is critical to building power amongst them.
- Lasting social change cannot be achieved without **empowered people at grassroots level challenging the power of traditional decision makers**.
- That influence at higher levels can be achieved through building power and winning at grassroots level.

They are;

- Bristol
- Lincoln
- Norwich
- Sheffield
- Newcastle
- Brighton
- Birmingham
- Liverpool
- Belfast
- Edinburgh
- Swansea

This year **NUS has embarked on eleven community organising pilots based in students' unions** to gain a practical understanding of how community organising can work in our particular context. Key to our community organising approach is for students and students' unions to work in collaboration with other local groups and organisations on shared issues, encouraging voter registration activities in the process. There are many issues that students and non-students alike are concerned about, such as crime, unemployment and money troubles.

We have **hired eleven part-time community organiser for November 2013 – May 2014**, one for each pilot, to be based in a students' union or NUS office in each area. The pilots were chosen to reflect a cross section of the UK in terms of geographical location, area demographics and the level of potential partnership between students' unions in those areas.

Students in democracy

In the build up to 2015 the need to engage students in the political process, mobilise them to register and enable them to make their voices heard must be a significant priority for NUS and the student movement.

In fact, regardless of the particular elections held in a given year, **the student movement has a critical role to play in enabling political engagement at all levels.** Students have a diverse range of political interests, and if there is less allegiance to political parties and ideologies this should not be mistaken for a decline in the interest students take in political issues.

This is not to say the task of engaging students in politics and the voting process is an easy one. Many of those students who voted in the general election in 2010 will have felt especially betrayed by broken promises, and their successors in 2015 will surely remember that betrayal. The cynical abandonment of solemn pledges by politicians corrodes public trust in politics as a whole, and society in general trusts politicians less: **just 18 per cent said they trusted politicians** in a 2013 poll for NatCen Social Research, compared to 38 per cent in 1987².

We know this has its impact on students too. Researchers from the Institute of Education have found that young FE students in England are less likely to say they will vote in the future than their equivalents in Singapore – a virtual one-party state that the researchers describe as having a ‘more authoritarian’ political climate³. Yet **if young people in particular do not vote the decisions made by politicians will not adequately reflect their concerns**, whether in a local council, a devolved parliament or in Westminster.

A challenge also arises in ensuring students see themselves as part of the community around

them, and thus has incentives to engage in activities which will affect that community. In an NUS poll of FE and HE students across the UK just 47 per cent said they felt a part of the community in which they studied; 27 per cent did not. However, **more students felt they had the power to change issues in their local community than on a national level.**

There has been a long tradition of the student movement working to drive up voter registration near elections and NUS has been working with Bite the Ballot this year. There is however a need to scale up this work.

Unlocking the potential of students to create change requires a number of separate, if inter-related, policy interventions and actions on the part of NUS and of the student movement. Some of the principal issues are as follows:

Votes at 16

It is less than 50 years since the vote was extended to 18 from 21, and the arguments made then are the arguments still made today in respect of 16 and 17 year olds: they are too immature, too likely to be influenced by others, too lacking in experience to make an informed choice. Those reasons are as specious now as they were then but the case is not yet made in the minds of many politicians.

The decision of the Scottish Government to extend the franchise to 16 for the independence referendum presents a real opportunity to demonstrate the interest young people take in politics and so it is critical this is seen to be a success, in order that it can be used as a springboard for a change to voting rules more generally. However there remain challenges, not least in ensuring those eligible under the rule change appear on the electoral register in the first place and then of course exercise their right to vote.

Individual Electoral Registration (IER)

The changes made to electoral registration rules have ended the previous means by which entire halls of residence could be block registered by university or college authorities. From April 2015 residents of halls must now individually register to vote and there is a strong concern that many will fail to do so. Whilst there are government schemes to help voters move onto the new individual registration process students may lose out given their more transient nature⁴.

The Cabinet Office, responsible for this area, has recognised the dangers of this new approach and is keen to ensure students do not become disenfranchised but it is clear that this policy change presents a threat to student interests. The shift to online voting however presents an opportunity to get more students registered to vote.

Where now?

There are a number of approaches that can support the implementation and success of the above. This includes but is not restricted to;

- How can collaboration between nations and regions be fostered?
- What scope for co-working is there between students' unions, universities, colleges and other education providers?
- What opportunities for partnership are there with other organisations?
- What challenges may there be in adopting this approach?
- Are there key policy reforms we should push for in this area?

Endnotes

¹ <http://www.citizensuk.org/about/>

² <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/snapshot-of-british-society-in-2013-more-tolerance-less-trust-for-politicians-and-royals-are-getting-more-popular-8805841.html>

³ <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03057925.2013.780874>

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/oct/23/government-individual-voter-register-2015-election>

Macadam House
275 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8QB
t 0845 5210 262
e nusuk@nus.org.uk
www.nus.org.uk