

“One Member” One Vote Group

At National Conference 2011 a motion to alter the voting system for the National President and vice-presidents fell. However, Liam Burns the National President asked the Chief Returning Officer (CRO) to investigate the reasons for the calling of the motions, the feasibility of election by one student member (OMOV) for each vote rather than by delegations from students’ unions. As such the CRO set up a ‘task and finish’ group to look at the issue.

Who sat on the group?

Chair: Joe Oliver, (NEC) (3/3)
NEC members : Mark Bergfeld (0/3), Michael Chessum (2/3)
Members from SUs: Josh Clare (3/3), Reni Eddo-Lodge (3/3), Jez Harvey (2/3), Jack Matthews (3/3), Gareth Oughton (1/3), Tony Payne (2/3)
CRO appointee: Colina Wright (2/3)

When did the group met?

The group met on the 21st September, 12th October and 16th November as well as running a consultation with students’ unions at Union Development Zone Conference on Friday 28th October.

Remit

- Consult with students’ union Officers, staff, and students on their views on this issue
- Consider the polling system that would be required to implement OMOV and consider its security, fairness, accessibility, legal implications and cost
- Research the possibilities of carrying out ballots, consultations or policy debates online
- Consider the legitimacy issues of using union Delegates as voters in NUS Elections
- Consider the appropriateness of alternative systems from both a principled and practical point of view

Findings

Consult with students’ union Officers, staff, and students on their views on this issue

As well as selecting a committee made up of these groups, the group ran a consultation workshop at the Union Development Zone Conference that explored the issue of OMOV and explored the ways unions and NUS can support the National election process.

Consider the polling system that would be required to implement OMOV and consider its security, fairness, accessibility, legal implications and cost

Research the possibilities of carrying out ballots, consultations or policy debates online

Across the student movement there remains a chronic lack of access to comprehensive membership details. NUS estimate that only about a third of all students’ unions have access to university of colleges database of students’ details. This access is even rarer within the small and specialist and FE unions where suspicion often exists on the part of the parent institution that the union does not have the systems or capacity to handle the data confidentially.

NUS commissioned Bates Wells & Braithwaite (BWB) to research the potential legal barriers students’ unions face trying to persuade their parent institution to share their database of student details with them. The law states that the first time a union uses the institutional data they must offer an opt-out button so that unless the voting registration system is the first mailing the union does it would not be able to be confident that a significant proportion of its members have not already chosen to opt-out from the database.

Students are a highly mobile group that frequently change both their home and email addresses maintaining any database to a degree of accuracy that would be satisfactory for a vote registration is difficult and time consuming. The accuracy of many university and colleges email database are not necessary good enough to be used for a voting system.

Universities and colleges use different criteria to build their own databases than a student union would if building their own membership databases. An institution may list the same student against multiple courses, short courses and summer courses for example. This would present a range of democratic challenges ensuring that student didn't receive multiple vote options.

Concerns were also raised that One Member One Vote might alienate students at smaller institutions, as election candidates might focus on HE and FE institutions with large numbers of students, rather than having to appeal to delegates from across the country. Some candidates could also benefit from large numbers of voters from their 'home' institutions rather than have to appeal to students nationally

For these operational reasons the group found that the option of OMOV was not feasible in the format proposed. The group were not ideologically opposed to the idea and believed if the infrastructure was in place the suggestion should be reconsidered as well as the importance of ensuring cross campus ballots occur to confer legitimacy.

Consider the legitimacy issues of using union Delegates as voters in NUS Elections **Consider the appropriateness of alternative systems from both a principled and practical point of view**

The panel talked at length about the legitimacy of delegate elections. Information on turnout in elections at a student union level is not nationally collated but the group have asked for this to occur. The group identified the importance of proper training being carried out by unions for their delegates as well as the importance of cross campus elections to increase legitimacy.

It was noted that it was the property of the students' union itself, not the democratic procedures committee, to ensure that any delegates who were mandated to vote in a certain fashion carried out their union's wishes.

A number of proposals from the group were suggested as outlined below

NUS should

- Student media should be given the ability to question presidential and vice-presidential candidates at the point of candidature. This proposal has been accepted by the Chief Returning Officer and will take place at the same point as the president and vice-president candidate podcasts next year
- Encourage the monitoring of delegate elections by local students' unions and national sharing of this information with NUS
- Monitor how many students' unions are denied access to their student data by institutions and support sharing of this information from universities and colleges
- Support the use of student media in promoting NUS elections and discussing the candidates for president and vice president
- Increase scrutiny of the 'Block of Fifteen' councillors by asking for responses to questions to be placed on the NUS website.
- Look into producing IT resources based around National elections, such as widgets which students' unions could use on their websites to help make students aware of the candidates and process
- Work to ensure information on elections is readily accessible and promoted to anyone interested rather than just to Presidents or delegate leaders

Students' unions could

- Developed unions could hold a proper consultation with their electorate to inform their delegates votes, at least first preferences, for candidates at National Conference
- Students' union websites could include opinion polls on a number of issues and possibly details of candidates themselves
- Students' unions could ensure they are properly debating the issues discussed in candidate manifestos to give a steer to their conference delegates votes
- Students' unions could encourage officer elects to attend conference as observers

Democratic Procedures Committee (DPC) could

- Investigate timings at National Conference for vice president and 'Block of Fifteen' councillor scrutiny