



TheyWorkForStudents

Unlocking the National Union of Students

Dear Raechel Matthey,

During the National Executive Council meeting of August 4th, you commented on Twitter that ways were being explored to increase openness within NEC meetings, and that anyone with ideas should contact you. I am therefore writing to pass on my views.

Since starting TheyWorkForStudents, I have attended many meetings of NEC, reporting on the proceedings via the @tw4students twitter account. 6 months later @NUSNEC was created, but there have been two issues with this account;

1. It has not reported on anything since 27th November 2012
2. On occasions the tweets were not as balanced as one would expect from an account that should simply report the facts

Recommendation 1: @NUSNEC resumes commentary on NEC meetings. This could be as simple as a factual report on what stage the meeting is at, and the outcome of votes. This account should not be used to comment on the merits or demerits of policies or officeholders. Updates of significance should be reported on @nusuk also.

Over recent years there has been much discussion of how the Block-of-15 are to engage with the membership; both Student Union Officers and the wider student population. There is always room for more improvement in how these Officers reach out to students, but we should also consider mechanisms by which members can feed-up opinions, independently of being asked. Firstly this requires the agenda for NEC to be made available online, and in an easily accessible place. Secondly members need to be able to know who their contact on NEC is.

Recommendation 2: As was previously agreed between TheyWorkForStudents and the then NUS President, Liam Burns, NEC agendas should be published online at least 2 weeks before the meeting. If possible they should go online as soon as they are emailed to NEC members. They should also be more easily discoverable online – it is often noted that it is easier to find documents on the TheyWorkForStudents website than on the NUS website itself. As previously agreed, minutes should be published promptly, marked 'Draft' where appropriate.

Recommendation 3: As soon as Block members are assigned their regions, this data should be published online in an easily discoverable fashion. It should include the email addresses of Block members, and instructions for what those members outside of England should do if they wish to lobby on an NEC matter.

In an ideal world we would not need to rely so heavily on NUS for these matters as there would be an effective and engaged student media who would report and comment on all NUS proceedings; providing students with the information they require in a number of different formats suitable for the social media age. Attendance rights for those wishing to report on proceedings are allowable under Rule 112.

Recommendation 4: NUS should actively reach out to student media, enquiring if they would be interested in reporting on NEC proceedings. Noting that very few students will have read the entire Constitution of NUS, Rule 112 should be explained elsewhere as well. This could be easily accomplished with a message on various webpages where NEC proceedings are mentioned, stating that any person may attend NEC meetings, as long as they have sought the permission of the NUS President in advance.

It should be noted just how poorly-known this essential democratic right is. On first attending an NEC meeting as an observer in early 2011, NEC were shocked to see someone in attendance from outside their number, and I was informed by the Democratic Services Co-ordinator that I would not be allowed to report events on Twitter. It is this kind of reaction that can only be countered by informing people of their rights, and by opening up the processes to outsiders.

One of the biggest problems with trying to make the NUS more open is exactly the same as what is experienced in Student Unions – that is once you're in 'the bubble' it's relatively easy to find all the information you need. But when designing ways of presenting vital democratic information, we should always consider those outside of 'the bubble' – e.g. that student who isn't involved in their Student Union, but who has passion for an issue, and wants to get involved. Therefore the question should be asked, does the NUS publish information in places that align with where members are going to find the information they seek?

Recommendation 5: There should be more links from nus.org.uk to nusconnect.org.uk, especially surrounding areas of democracy. While the 2 websites serve different purposes, there is some crossover. Most students will automatically go to nus.org.uk to find the information they need on the organisation, and in this circumstance they should be signposted to nusconnect.org.uk where appropriate.

It has been disappointing how slow the process of opening up the democracy of NUS has been over the past few years. I hope that with the few, simple recommendations I present above, some greater progress can be made.

With all good wishes,

Jack J. Matthews

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