UK National Union of Students (NUS)

The Israeli assault on Gaza precipitated the largest wave of student solidarity with Palestine seen in years on British university campuses, with occupations in thirty universities across the country. This movement, challenging the Israeli government's brutality towards the Palestinian people, is reminiscent of the UK 1968 student movement that protested against South African apartheid. In 1968, the National Union of Students (NUS) mobilised a strong movement to challenge apartheid in South Africa and in 1987 student pressure forced Barclays Bank to withdraw from the country.

Today, the NUS remains highly influential. It is a voluntary membership organisation, with 600 constituent members (almost every college and university in the country) and represents over 7 million students. However, NUS Student leaders are frequently out of step with students’ views by refusing to issue any criticism of Israel’s actions. During the assault on Gaza, NUS National Executive Committee (NEC) members refused to oppose Israel’s overwhelming acts of military aggression or to support any of the protests in opposition to the war in Gaza.

It is vital that student activists seek not only to alter the positions of individual students and student groups, but also those of the NUS by working on a strategy to make the NUS more representative of those calling for a just solution and to encourage it to twin with the Right to Education campaign. A key element of engaging with the NUS must be to ensure that Palestine is on the agenda, despite the efforts of other groups to stifle all discussion of subject.

Structure of the NUS

The NUS comprises of a series of Committees and Regions. Remits are divided into Zones which form the majority of the campaigning that the NUS undertakes. The NUS is also split into regions - England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The National Executive Committee (NEC) is elected by the membership to be its representatives. The NEC is responsible for managing the affairs of the NUS and co-ordinates its campaigns, services and training.

The NEC meets six or seven times a year. It consists of nine full-time officers, 12 part-time executive members, two part-time LGBT officers, and a part-time International Students’ officer. The presidents of NUS Scotland and UCMC (NUS Wales) and the convenor of NUS-USI (Northern Ireland) are also members of the National Executive.

The NEC zone committees are responsible for planning and delivering the majority of the NUS’s work. Zone committees implement the decisions of National Conference and their management teams are responsible for day-to-day finance and management issues.
The zones are:

- Society and Citizenship
- Welfare and Student Rights
- Higher Education
- Further Education
- Strong and Active Unions

The majority of student unions in the UK are affiliated to the National Union of Students. The National Conference is held every year in May/April (this academic year from the 13-15 April, 2010 at The Sage Gateshead, NewcastleGateshead). The conference is the NUS’s sovereign decision making body. It lasts for three days and has the power to approve the NUS’s budget, elect and hold the leadership to account and set policy for the year ahead.

**The National Conference:**

- Discusses, amends and approves policy reports from the Zones
- Democratically debates motions from students’ unions
- Ratifies decisions made by Nations, Liberation and Social Policy campaigns so they become policy of the national NUS
- Elects and appoints people to committees, boards and student leadership positions (“officers”), including the National Executive Committee (NEC), which leads the NUS throughout the year
- Acts as the NUS’ Annual General Meeting (AGM), receiving the annual report and accounts and approving the outline budget for the year ahead.

**Delegates to the Conference**

- Delegates come from individual student unions
- They are either directly elected by the student body at individual student unions or are sabbaticals (e.g. Student Union President) that attend as delegates
- The restructuring of the NUS in the last academic year has reduced the number of delegates from most Student Unions and now most delegates are sabbaticals at student unions.

**Current policy on Palestine**

The most recent NUS motion relating to Palestine was passed during the NEC meeting, resolving to support the “Let Palestinians Study” campaign ([www.letpalstudy.org.uk](http://www.letpalstudy.org.uk)). The motion “encourages” and “supports” greater links between UK student unions and universities with students and educational facilities in Palestine.

Whilst it is a positive motion focusing on the right to education, the wording of resolutions is vague and it is not clear what steps are going to be taken to encourage or support Palestinian education. The full text of the motion entitled “Defend Palestinians’ Right to Education” can be found on the Birzeit Right to Education website ([http://right2edu.birzeit.edu/news/printer840](http://right2edu.birzeit.edu/news/printer840)).
Other recent policy dates from the Israeli attack on Gaza in January 2009. During the NEC meeting two motions were discussed on Palestine:

- “Supporting our members in international conflict” (which was adopted)
- “End the humanitarian crisis in Gaza: for an immediate ceasefire and end to the siege” (which was rejected).

The adopted motion focuses mainly on condemning alleged incidents of anti-Semitism, which occurred on campuses during the assault on Gaza. In addition to this, the motion restates NUS support for the right to education as “stated in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights”, and asserts that “both sides should do all they can to ensure the right to education”. While these are potentially positive commitments to the campaign for the right to education for Palestinians, the motion nevertheless fails to recognise the disproportionate attack on Gaza and suggests that the NUS should not “pretend to speak with one voice on the complexities of this conflict”.

The motion that was rejected is much more critical of the attack on Gaza and calls for support for the national demonstrations protesting against the assault. The text of both motions can be found on the blog of Bellavia Ribeiro-Addy, the NUS Black Students’ Officer, who supported the motion that did not pass (http://www.officeronline.co.uk/blogs/bellaviaribeiro-addy/276070.aspx).

**How UK students can help change this policy**

The NUS’s failure to take a firm position on Gaza did not stop student groups across the country from showing their solidarity with Palestinians. This solidarity movement requires a genuinely supportive body to redress what is currently an uneven playing field.

- Delegates are powerful as they elect the NEC and vote on policy; they should be the primary target for campaigners to raise awareness of the Palestinian right to education.
- Campaign to pass a motion at the Union General Meeting (UGM) or Annual General Meeting focusing on the right to education that mandates NUS delegates to raise or support motions at the NUS National Conference. The University College London Students’ Union have passed such a motion http://www.uclunion.org/student-union/union-policy/up0814.pdf.
- If there are NUS delegate positions at your university you should run. These positions are rarely contested and it is one of the more rewarding roles that will enable you to help shape NUS policy.
- The issue of Palestine and the right to education should be raised at election hustings for sabbaticals and NUS delegates to elicit a firm commitment from candidates to support the campaign if they are elected. In several student unions, such as the London School of Economics, Palestine solidarity groups hold their own hustings. This is beneficial as candidates will be interested in obtaining a block endorsement from the society may be encouraged to support the right to education campaign.
- The NEC has the most power over policy throughout the year and should be made aware of the widespread student support for human rights in Palestine through coordinated email campaigns.