

Liat Norris – Society and Citizenship Report

During the 23rd and 24th October I attended, alongside Emma Harris and Katy Mitchell, the NUS Society and Citizenship Zone Conference.

During the opening of conference there were a number of statistics given by Pete Mercer, NUS' VP Welfare, whose conference was taking place at the same time as Soc & Cit, which highlighted the reasons we as the student movement need to fight tooth and nail for improvements. One of these figures was that there is a £8,000 funding gap between what the average student receives in loans and grants, and what is needed to provide a decent standard of living. This forces students to either work alongside their study, or to get themselves into even higher levels of debt. It is for this reason that NUS Scotland is right to indicate that education isn't really free for their students – and why our organisation is right to have in policy our belief in the importance of living grants alongside free education.

We then listened to a keynote speech by women asylum seekers – again highlighting the important of why students and the organisations which represent us need to be campaigning on issues which affect us all as humans, rather than purely institution or education based campaigning. These are women suffering attacks from the government, are often living destitute and suffering malnutrition and starvation. These are issues which affect us all, and are issues which a multi-million strong organisation like the NUS needs to be campaigning on.

This was similarly the idea given at the “Making Palestine uncontroversial” workshop – that the major problem with the occupation of Palestine isn't antiquated notions of religious or historic claims over land, but merely the simple human rights which are being denied to those currently living in Palestine, and those who have been forced to flee.

The next workshop I attended on the first day was a Further Education discussion hosted by Toni Peirce. NUS' VP FE, on the massive cuts to Enrichment. Funding FE institutions receive for Enrichment goes towards welfare support for FEs, tutorials, UCAS support, general development of soft skills, as well as the block grants FE unions receive. As such it represents a huge attack on citizenship and students' unions at an FE level – and as well an attack on Higher Education unions as we will not have well politically developed students coming to HE.

Some of the things suggested for HE unions to do to support FE unions, is contacting them to see how we can support them – be that a case of us joining them in campaigning against the cuts, or us providing volunteers to FE unions to help them improve and shape their citizenship education. Essentially we should be doing as much as possible to make sure we can limit the impact the cuts will have on FE unions.

Another interesting point made by a speaker at the workshop was commenting on the use of “It’ll look good on your CV” as a recruiting tool for officers and volunteers at both an FE and HE level. Whilst volunteering does look good on CVs, the speaker made the point that we should be focusing on trying to get candidates who stand to improve the union, rather than candidates who stand just to improve their employment prospects.

The next workshop was one on the potential criminalisation of squatting – which potentially has disastrous consequences for occupations of workplaces and universities – which are both traditionally a very popular and successful tactic for winning change for workers and students.

It also has the potential for criminalising homelessness. 6% of homeless people at any one time are squatting, and 70% of those who are homeless have directly contacted their local authority about housing – they are not intentionally homeless. In addition to the homeless we know of, there are also estimated to be half a million “hidden homeless” who slip under the radar.

Whilst this homeless crisis is occurring the Empty Homes Agency estimated there are 725,000 unoccupied houses – houses which could easily be used for proper homes for the homeless, rather than forcing them to squat in them.

Suggestions from the group as to ways to combat this included basic things like awareness as to the already existing laws on squatting which protect homeowners; raising the problem of the criminalisation of occupations, which directly affect students more than homelessness; making attempts to find how many students squat; as well as, my personal favourite, a “Sleep Out”, in which we organise for a group to sleep rough for a night to highlight the reasons people squat.

After Dinner we listened to an excellent after-dinner speech from Joe Baden, discussing the work he has done through “Goldsmiths Open Book” to improve

access to FE and HE education for ex-prisoners seeking to improve their lives through education not crime. He also attacked the nature of most universities in pushing a sense of middle class “cultural imperialism” over underprivileged youth through Widening Participation – and that whilst WP is important it should be done in conjunction with the disadvantaged, as Open Book does, rather than from above as universities traditionally do.

The next morning I took part in Soc & Cit Committee Hustings: standing on a platform of a campaigning NUS, and particularly a NUS that repeats “Vote for Students” by asking local council candidates if they will represent students and youth by taking the Liverpool and Poplar road by voting against cuts – or if they will attack us and our services by voting for them. Whilst I wasn’t successful in election, there was a good committee elected who will continue to improve on the good work Soc & Cit do.

I found the conference extremely useful, and I’m hoping to build on some of the campaigns, especially squatting and enrichment cuts, over the next few months locally.