

SUSTAINABILITY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES, BREXIT AND BEN & JERRY'S ICE CREAM: **HOW THE NUS WASTES YOUR MONEY**

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March 2018



Introduction

The National Union of Students (NUS) has in recent years received particularly negative media coverage, with its current president recently being forced to deny allegations of bullying and harassment in the workplace. The UK and devolved governments' long-standing dirigiste approach to higher education has resulted in poor outcomes for some students, with the higher cost of tuition fees often not correlating with the expected professions that students desire.

In part, students' disillusion with higher education has been driven by the NUS. It has long functioned as a narrow, self-interested talking shop for aspiring parliamentarians, and is increasingly detached from the students that it purports to represent. Rather than a judicious discussion of the matters affecting students, like tuition fees and housing, the annual NUS conference has in recent years dwelt on passing motions relating to 'Gendered Islamophobia' and for the abolition of the monarchy.¹

The NUS also labours under the delusion that they are both professional fund managers and foreign policy professionals, with an anti-wealth creation Divest-Invest campaign,² and offering specious commentary on the Brexit negotiations.³ Champion of students interests the NUS is not.

Though a private limited company, the NUS received a substantial proportion of its income from taxpayers, through both student unions' affiliation fees, as well as a plethora of payments that universities, governments and funding councils make to it. It has also degenerated into a quasi-corporation. One of its subsidiaries, Epona, makes Fairtrade clothing. NUS Media provides media advertising services and has made a substantial loss every year in its current form.⁴

In 2015-16, UK universities received over 80 per cent of their income from tuition fees, and grants from research councils and funding bodies.⁵ Since these three income streams derive almost all of their funding from taxpayers, the NUS has a worryingly symbiotic relationship with the state.

Key findings

- The NUS and its subsidiaries received **£34,117,364.50** in funding from UK universities, government departments and devolved parliaments between July 2012 and January 2018. This would be the equivalent of almost **3,700 students' tuition fees**.
- In addition, they received **£16,027,915** as membership income (affiliation fees) between 2012 and 2016, which includes both higher and further education institutions across the UK.
- The university that paid the most to the NUS over this period was the **University of Bath**, with **£9,241,116.34** given to NUS Services Ltd and NUS Students' Union Charitable Services.
- The devolved assembly that paid the most to the NUS over this period was the Scottish government, with **£550,947.54** given to Epona Ltd and NUS Scotland.

¹ *NUS National Conference Motions 2017*, National Union of Students, 28 March 2017, https://nusdigital.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/document/documents/33210/All_Proposals_3.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAJKEA56ZWKFU6MHNO&Expires=1520272728&Signature=5PTNEy%2FIffaO7KcEbCMmZf0okj0%3D, (accessed 1 March 2018)

² *Divest-Invest*, National Union of Students, 2018, <https://www.nus.org.uk/en/take-action/environmental/divest-invest/> (accessed 28 February 2018)

³ *Brexit*, National Union of Students, 2018, <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/brexit> (accessed 1 March 2018)

⁴ *NUS Media Limited, Full Accounts*, Companies House, 03 April 2017, <https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/company/07858162/filing-history> (accessed 23 February 2018)

⁵ Bolton, P., *Higher Education Finance Statistics*, House of Commons Library, 2017, <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SNO5440/SNO5440.pdf>

Table 1: turnover and membership income of the NUS, July 2012-June 2016

Financial year	Turnover (£)	Membership income (£)
2012-13	17,623,219	3,947,632
2013-14	19,231,978	4,093,385
2014-15	19,980,480	3,984,991
2015-16	24,336,724	4,001,907
Total	81,172,401	16,027,915

Though many institutions do not go into particular details about specific payments within their invoices, several examples of highly dubious spending can be highlighted:

- The **Scottish government** gave NUS Scotland almost **£91,000** in 2014 and 2015 for the Investing In Scotland’s Global Future programme. The purpose was for “embedding the practice of a cross-sector responsibility for student mobility.”
- Numerous universities made payments to NUS Charitable Services for Student Switch Off, a “not-for-profit international encouraging student action on climate change.”⁶ In part, this entailed purchasing Ben & Jerry’s ice cream as part of the campaign.
- The **Higher Education Funding Council for England** gave the NUS almost **£7 million** over this period, with £5,325,033 going to the NUS Students Green Fund. This was for a variety of “sustainability engagement initiatives.”⁷
- The **Welsh government** gave NUS Media money for “publicity/communications to raise awareness of the Human Transplantation (Wales) Act 2013”. This legislation introduced presumed consent in Wales.

[Click here for the full dataset](#)

Methodology

- A freedom of information (Fol) request was sent out to 156 higher education institutions across the UK, along with the 7 research councils, 2 higher education regulators, 4 Whitehall departments, the Scottish and Welsh governments and the Northern Ireland executive. The Fol asked about payments made to the National Union of Students (United Kingdom) and its subsidiaries. An overview for each of these has been taken from their accounts:
 - NUS Holdings Ltd – “ownership of property and provision of property management services...it is also the principal employer for the NUS group.”
 - NUS Services Ltd – “exists to develop and maximise income opportunities for the student movement, and deliver a strong national infrastructure.”
 - NUS Media Ltd – “increase impact and income for member students’ unions...through provision of an online platform for the student movement and associated digital & media sales operations.”
 - Epona Ltd – “the wholesale of Fairtrade clothing.”
 - NUS Students’ Union Charitable Services – providing training and conferences relevant to the efficiency of student unions; establishing projects to address students’ needs; providing legal, accountancy and management advice to student unions; providing advice on fundraising techniques.

⁶ NUS Student Switch Off, National Union of Students, 2018, <http://studentswitchoff.org/> (accessed 1 March 2018)

⁷ NUS Students’ Green Fund, National Union of Students, 2018, <https://studentsgreenfund.unioncloud.org/about>

- NUS Scotland Charitable Services – including, inter alia, advancing citizenship, advancing environmental protection, providing training and addressing issues of intolerance.
- NUS Scotland
- NUS Wales
- NUS – USI (National Union of Students Northern Ireland)
- The FoI asked for payments made between July 2012 and January 2018. The NUS’s accounting year runs from July to June. All payment figures are in cash terms.
- 145 universities, research councils, regulators and government departments responded by 8th March 2018. Of these, 87 made payments to the NUS and its subsidiaries.
- Almost all of those who responded did so by breaking down their payments to each subsidiary. Where this was not the case in the response, or where it was not clear, a single figure in the total column has been included within the spreadsheet.

Sources

Bolton, P., *Higher Education Finance Statistics*, House of Commons Library, 2017

Companies House, *NUS Media Limited, Full Accounts*, 2017

National Union of Students, *Brexit*, 2018

National Union of Students, *Divest-Invest*, 2018

National Union of Students, *NUS National Conference Motions 2017*, 2017

National Union of Students, *NUS Students’ Green Fund*, 2018

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