

## Staff Protocol Guidance

### 1. Purpose:

The aim of this document is to remind staff, officers and key participants in National Conference of the key points within the Staff / Officer Protocol and to provide some positive guidance that helps colleagues in terms of interpretation and application.

### 2. Definitions

Participants at National Conference are defined as follows:

- 2.1 A 'member' of NUS shall be defined as an officer, trustee, volunteer or staff member belonging to an affiliated students' union.
- 2.2 Staff members of NUS shall be defined for the purposes of this policy as all employees including temporary and fixed-term staff and contractors under contractual obligation to NUS.
- 2.3 Representatives of NUS shall be defined as all full and part-time Officers, volunteers, NEC members, board members or elected committee members throughout the organisation.

N.B Officers are also employees of NUS but are defined separately to staff members for the purposes of this Protocol, in order to clarify the separate nature of their accountability at conference.

### 3. Principles:

The following are the principles as set out by the Staff Protocol:

- 3.1 In common within many political and membership governed organisations, it is important to clarify expectations surrounding the working relationship between staff, officers, representatives (including volunteers) and members.
- 3.2 We are striving to create and promote healthy political spaces and healthy working relationships which is vital to the success and wellbeing of NUS. The Staff Protocol Policy explains the standards expected in order to uphold the principles of appropriate accountability within a culture of mutual support and respect.
- 3.3 It is recognised that in a democratic environment members, officers, other representatives and/or staff should feel able to critically appraise the work and performance of NUS and each other, but this should be through appropriate procedures / in the appropriate manner, as set out within this protocol.
- 3.4 NUS is mindful of how an individual's wellbeing may be adversely impacted when criticism is not handled sensitively or constructively. It is therefore important that all parties follow the procedures outlined in the staff protocol policy when they wish to raise concerns.
- 3.5 Any criticism not raised through the appropriate channels, (including criticism raised at NUS events and conferences), may be considered as bullying and harassment.

### 4. The Protocol at National Conference (and other conferences)

There are a number of sections of the Staff Protocol policy that are particularly relevant to democratic conferences. These include:

- 4.1 Officers, representatives and members should never name individual staff or groups of staff when criticising the work of NUS in public. Examples include (but not limited to), when speaking on a motion or making an election speech.
- 4.2 Officers, Representatives and members should take due care to identify the political responsibility for the area of work identified for criticism and to frame criticism, (positively and/or constructively), in such a way as avoid staff or groups of staff being identified.
- 4.3 Officers, Representatives and members of NUS share a collective and individual responsibility to ensure that under no circumstances will discussion take place on matters relating to the responsibilities, conditions of employment, performance or conduct of members of staff other than in appropriate forums, such as Board (or appropriate sub-committee) meetings or in-confidence with a member of the Executive Team (i.e. Senior Leadership) or National President. This includes making reference to staff members or groups of staff through either written or any other form of media including blogs, event speeches and social media.
- 4.4 Officers and representatives will ensure the absolute confidentiality of any information or matter related to staffing or employment conditions that they have access to through their role or involvement in relevant committees.
- 4.5 Staff should not publicly criticise any officer or elected/appointed Representative or member of NUS, unless such criticism has been established as NUS policy through the NEC or National Conference, or unless a member of staff has been commissioned to do so as an agreed part of their role.
- 4.6 It is expected that staff will respect and maintain the integrity of the democratic governance of NUS. If a decision is made or policy set by the Board of Directors, NEC, Conferences (including National Conference) it would be unacceptable for an employee to publicly criticise, challenge or undermine that decision or policy, through any form of media, including social media. This is explained further in the NUS Social Media Policy.

## 5. Interpretation and Application

Sections 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 above all refer in some way to avoiding criticism of staff. The principle that underpins this is to try and avoid direct criticism of people in an environment whereby they have no right to reply. However, in a democratic environment it is also important that delegates, (including candidates for leadership roles in the organisation), have the opportunity to challenge and criticise 'the work' of the organisation, so to provide some examples:

### Breaches

- It is clearly in breach of the Protocol to say on Conference floor (or in a blog etc) "[named member of staff] is underperforming", "the work of [named member of staff] is unacceptable" or "I was let down by [named member of staff]". This kind of breach would result in action by the Chair / DPC (democratic procedures committee) and could include cutting of speeches, removal of delegate credentials for the session or all conferences. Depending upon the forum in which it is stated may lead to Code of Conduct action and relevant staff impacted may be given permission to leave conference floor.
- It may also be a breach to state "The [specific named team or department] let me down, doesn't respond to emails etc". This kind of breach may again lead to a warning and possibly further action.

### Non Breaches

- The following would not be classed as breaches of the staff protocol "I wasn't well supported at this event/by NUS". It is also acceptable to name specific pieces of work for criticism as long as staff are not named i.e. "this meeting was badly organised". N.B Any criticism should be framed through the officer accountability for the work or campaign e.g. the accountability would be with the officer who signed it off.
- It is not acceptable to discuss specific aspects of terms and conditions of employment i.e. "[member of staff] should be paid more / less", but it may be acceptable to discuss the principles that underpin terms and conditions for example. For example, if someone was running for the Board it is acceptable to say "I will work to ensure fair terms and conditions for staff".

It will never be possible to write a definitive list of all potential breaches and non-breaches of the protocol but the response should always be proportionate depending upon the seriousness, the language used and intent underpinning any breach.

Consequences of possible breaches of the Protocol by a Member or Representative may include the following sanctions in order of seriousness. *N.B Any staff member found to be in breach of this protocol may be subject to disciplinary action under the staff Disciplinary Policy.*

- Informal Warning (in private)
- Public reminder of code and application
- Action by the Chair / DPC (democratic procedures committee) e.g. cutting of speeches, removal of delegate credentials for the session or all conferences.
- The individual(s) in breach of the protocol may be removed from the event and/or staff will be given permission to leave conference floor.
- Formal code of conduct action

The questions to be asked when determining what action to take:

- Was this really a breach of the Protocol –have staff been praised or criticized (breach), or has the general work of the organisation been praised or criticized (not a breach)?
- How serious and detrimental was the breach – what is the impact?
- What was the intent underpinning the breach – was it malicious or accidental?
- How can the breach best be rectified?

If an individual wishes to raise concerns or make a complaint about a delegate or staff member following the conference, they should refer to the Staff Protocol Policy / Code of Conduct as relevant. If they have immediate concerns at the conference, they should approach a member of NUS staff in the first instance.

## **6. Process**

When considering how best to respond to any possible breach(es) of the Protocol the following will be key considerations:

- Chairs, DPC and Elections Committee will all be briefed on this guidance. It is clear that we are trying to achieve a positive, inclusive National Conference - and it is important that this is underpinned by a positive tone and handled proportionately from the floor.
- Any suspected breaches on social media, blogs etc should be reported to one of the Conference Directors, who will together consider and raise the issue with DPC and

the Trade Union to consider potential courses of action as appropriate. The Conference Directors will make the final decision on next steps.

- NUS will issue a series of warnings at an event if a staff protocol breach arises. If there is a serious breach or a succession of breaches, the individual(s) in breach of the protocol may be removed from the event and/or staff affected will be given permission to leave conference floor. It is also possible that NUS would stop the event. The Conference Directors will be responsible for deciding on the best course of action and will inform the Chair and National President so that a statement can be issued.

## **7. Summary**

The staff protocol is an important tool to ensure that both the democratic processes and the staff that facilitate and support them are protected. The Protocol is at its best when it's being applied consistently, proportionately and with common sense underpinning its use.

Thank you for your support with this and we look forward to working together to achieve an outstanding National Conference.

## **8. Contact**

To raise any concerns about the behavior of members, representatives or staff as part of this policy please contact:

[democracy@nus.org.uk](mailto:democracy@nus.org.uk)

Or speak to a member of NUS Staff (wearing blue NUS t shirts)