

MEMORANDUM PRESENTED BY NATIONAL
UNION OF SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS
TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON CERTAIN
ORGANISATIONS - AUGUST, 1972.

(I) INTRODUCTION : THE STRUCTURE OF NUSAS

Nusas is a confederation of Student Representative Councils. These councils themselves attend or send representatives to an annual conference which then formulates the policy of the National Union for a period of one year. Policy taken by SRC's at an annual congress does not become policy of the individual SRC's unless and until specifically endorsed by that SRC.

At the annual congress an eight man executive is elected to supervise the implementation of Nusas policy and to carry out the mandates of the ~~the~~ ^{previous} annual congress. Neither the executive nor any member of it is empowered to make new policy on behalf of the national union.

The Nusas National Council, comprising the presidents of the affiliated Student Representative councils and the elected executive meet at least four times a year to ensure the implementation of Nusas policy and to deal with matters that may arise between congresses. In all its actions the National Council is responsible to the national student assembly which must ratify the decisions and actions of the National Council.

On each affiliated campus there is a NUSAS Local Committee which is a sub-committee appointed by the S.R.C. to implement policy on behalf of and under the direction of the S.R.C. These Local Committees are responsible only to the SRC's of which they are sub-committees.

Nusas is thus not an organisation based upon a system of individual membership. It is a federal body composed of representatives and democratically elected SRC's for whom individual students vote at elections.

This federal structure is a practical one in a large organisation and also prevents undue domination of the affairs on Nusas by its larger affiliated centres.

Nusas has three affiliate organisations - the National Union of Students Education Department, the National Union of Students Welfare and social action Department, and Aquarius. The relationship between these affiliates and the National Union will be discussed in evidence elsewhere.

(II) NUSAS THE TRADE UNION

By far the greater part of Nusas's financial turnover and administrative resources is spent on providing benefits to its students. This aspect of the National Union's activity of course receives little publicity in the press media and consequently is not at all widely known among members of the public.

The major benefit provided for students is the large Educational Aid scheme. This scheme is financed both by fund raising efforts on the constituent campuses and by donations from overseas. The scheme is administered by Nused, the education affiliate of Nusas.

Medical scholarships

In 1971 30 medical scholarships were awarded valued at R5300 to needy students. These scholarships are available (by resolution taken at the 1971 congress) to students at any University in the country, including black and Afrikaans language universities. This year it is estimated that at least 60 such scholarships will be awarded.

Loan Fund

Since 1949 when the fund was first established over R50,000 has been awarded to students in the form of interest free loans. Last year approximately R3000 was awarded in this manner.

Prison education fund

In addition to the above a fund is operated by Nusas to assist prisoners with their studies. During 1971 an estimated R6000 was spent on this project.

Overseas scholarships agency

While Nusas does not itself award any loans or scholarships for the purposes of overseas study, it does act as the agent for several universities and other bodies which award scholarships for overseas study to South African students.

Tutorial scheme

On the major campuses affiliated to Nusas over 1000 school pupils receive free tuition from students to aid them in their studies. This tuition covers every aspect of school education.

Travel

For over 40 years the Nusas travel Department has been organising overseas tours at cheap rates for its students. Over the past few years this Department has been expanded considerably to provide the largest operating travel service for students in the country. Besides cheap-rate overseas tours, Nusas now provides overseas charter flights at low price to Great Britain, Western Europe and Israel. These are supplemented by cheap tour arrangements in the overseas countries concerned.

Nusas enjoys associate membership of the International Student Travel Conference which allows Nusas to distribute the International Students identity card. The benefits of this card overseas are considerable. This card is the most widely used benefit of all those that Nusas provides.

This year, in order to maximise efficiency in coping with extended travel operations an independently operating organisation has been set up. It has been called The South African Students Travel Service Limited. At the beginning of 1971 a full-time paid travel manager was appointed to administer travel operations.

Insurance

Towards the end of last year a need was seen to co-ordinate the various insurance schemes operating for students on the campuses. It was felt that a national insurance scheme would provide premiums at a far lower rate than is offered at present.

Negotiations for the establishment of this service to students are still under way.

General communication and co-operation

A regular feature of the contact and co-operation between student leaders is the frequent holding of meetings or events of mutual benefit to those concerned. In the past Nusas has, by way of illustration, brought together Newspaper editors and provided venue and expert speakers on topics such as layout, reporting, newspaper administration and finance etc.

Similar meetings have been arranged for Student representative council treasurers. In addition such communication has served to alleviate many administrative problems experienced on the campuses. For example one problem that has been tackled in this way has been that of text books sold at prices out of the reach of the average student.

Events planned for the future will include a drama festival for student drama groups as well as a students arts festival.

(III) THE HISTORY OF NUSAS - 1924-1933 : FORMATION

Nusas was founded in 1924 at a conference with students from the then nine University Colleges present. Until 1933 the full participation of English and Afrikaans students was maintained, but in that year the withdrawal of what had by then become the Afrikaans Universities took place. The objectives of the Union were to bring together students on the basis of their studenthood, to advance their common interests and to provide a forum for the examination and resolution of their differences. Leo Marquard, the first President of Nusas, stated three purposes for the Union in a paper presented to the founding conference in 1924:

"We speak about national co-operation. It means this: In the nine big University Institutions of this country there are men who are beginning to take an interest in our national problems - education, native affairs, economic conditions, etc. At present their efforts in these directions are isolated. A students' union will help to co-ordinate these efforts, to give them direction and to infuse them with life. No one doubts that our national problems are urgent. Here then is an attempt to focus the energies of future leaders on these problems.

"Again I think it will be agreed that our different student bodies know too little of each other. This ignorance breeds distrust and engenders warped opinions of each others' capabilities, preventing anything like a proper understanding. The universities are all out for the same thing: a common pursuit of knowledge. A union will tend to break down the barriers between our universities, will help to organize studies and will make for higher efficiency.

"Turning to the other aspects of the Union - adequate representation and co-operation with the student unions of other countries - we find this is even a broader issue".

It was on this basis that the Union was formed. Marquard's points provided a workable basis for the Union for nine years, and were then to be contentious for another thirty-five years. The structure based upon them incorporated a forum - the Student Parliament, and a policy-forming and implementing body - the National Council, both based upon representation from the campuses, and both composed of members of varying opinions and aspirations. In essence, Nusas has continued in this pattern in the nearly fifty years of its existence.

1933-1939 Separation

In 1933 two related events took place: the now Universities of Potchefstroom, Pretoria, and Bloemfontein withdrew from the Union in rapid succession, and the University College of Fort Hare was proposed as a full member of NUSAS.

Bloemfontein (Grey College) left Nusas on the grounds that it was "too English, too Imperialistic, too negrophilistic in colour"; that it displayed a "liberalistic tendency, especially as a result of the strong influence of socialistic International minded Jews, for the most part denationalised Jews who wish to effect a general world citizenship without founding it on genuine nationalism" (Volksblad 22.8.33). Simultaneously with this break away, began the examination of the reason why blacks were not represented in the Councils of Nusas. Witwatersrand proposed that Fort Hare be admitted to full membership on "logical as well as moral grounds". By admitting the students of Fort Hare the Union would not be granting them a favour but only conceding them a right". The Witwatersrand move was made at the Council meeting in July, the Bloemfontein move at a student body meeting in August, 1933.

This latter event is important in that it marks the beginning of a process that is to

dominate the politics of the National Union, until the present date.

The nature of the organization then (as it remains today) is that it does strive to perform a representative function for the elements within it. Always the primary policy consideration has been to keep dissenting elements within the structure, and this has ensured that of necessity an approach has always been adopted which appealed to the majority of Nusas members at any particular time.

During the period 1933-1939 this is seen in the repeated efforts made to keep the Afrikaans students in Nusas at the cost of the exclusion of Fort Hare. But the process of a growing Afrikaner Nationalism prevented this and the battle was inevitably lost.

In 1945 Fort Hare was eventually allowed to join Nusas. This move can be attributed largely to the influence of the war on the students of Nusas.

1939-1945

The war clarified a number of aspects of policy for NUSAS and laid the foundation for the moulding of a uniform body of policy. A statement by the NUSAS Council at the outbreak of the war in 1939 urged that:

"At the end of the war a just peace be concluded which uphold the democratic rights of people in the victorious nations and defeated countries as well as in their respective colonies.

That every effort be made to make full use of the abilities of all elements in South Africa which are genuinly anti-fascist, including our non-european population."

The Council meeting of 1945 was a significant turning point which laid the foundations for the policy of NUSAS for almost 25 years:

pietermaritzburg proposed the simple resolution:
FORT HARE BE ADMITTED TO NUSAS COUNCIL.

The minutes record the remarks of Mr. J. Stewart which were indicative of the meeting which carried the proposal by II votes to 3:

"The Nusas objects were based on the defence of democracy, freedom of speech, education and economic opportunity - principles which had a very distinct meaning. NUSAS's past policy of appeasement and the middle way had been futile and a denial of its principles. The war had proved that there was no safety in compromise. Narrow racialistic theories were in conflict with democracy and Christian thought. If NUSAS were afraid to take risks it would cease to function. There was a definite request from Fort Hare for admission - the time had come to

admit Fort Hare".

The constitution was modified accordingly and it is worth examining the objects stated:

- a) To represent the students of South Africa nationally and internationally, and to maintain their co-operation with the students of other countries.
- b) To defend democracy, as the fundamental basis of every sphere of our national existence to the utmost against hostile ideologies, and therefore:
 - (i) To maintain the fundamental rights of all to the free expression of opinion by speech and press.
 - (ii) To encourage the promotion of equality of educational and economic opportunity for all in South Africa with special attention to the under-privileged.

- (iii) To ensure that the knowledge and culture of the Universities and Colleges is used in the interests of the people as a whole, and that University education is not the privilege of a class.
- (iv) To be conscious of the deficiencies of our present democratic system in South Africa, and to seek as searchingly as possible how they can be remedied.
- c) To maintain and further genuine co-operation in a spirit of tolerance, goodwill and mutual respect among all students and to make this, and other fundamental issues, deciding factors in future determination of policy".

The same council meeting instructed the Executive to take every possible measure to oppose the introduction of segregation into the universities.

The 1947 Council recognised academic equality but acknowledged a social colour bar, and the 1948 Council removed this to "recognise the right of all members to participate in all functions". 1945 marked a high water mark in NUSAS - for the first time since Marquard's enunciation of the reasons for the formation of the National Union in 1924, NUSAS as a whole formulated a clear policy and assumed a leadership position with respect to the students in it.

The altered membership of NUSAS allowed both for the generation of new policy and for the generation of greater support within those boundaries. The U.C.T. delegation's report to Council of that year read: "The 1945 Council Resolutions have led to great upheavals from which NUSAS has emerged stronger than before". And that of Wits read "The progressive attitude of NUSAS adopted in 1945 has led to a reawakening of interest and NUSAS work has been improving and increasing". A new era seemed to have set in.

1945-1956

The Executive meeting in 1949 issued a lengthy statement on the attitude of NUSAS towards black membership:

"Non-europeans are not members of NUSAS for any political reason, or any ideological reason. There are several simple practical reasons why we believe that they have a right to belong to a National Students' union:

- 1) They are an integral part of our South African student population.
- 2) They are studying the same courses for the same degrees as European Students.
- 3) Because they are students, they have similar problems, similar interests, to those of the European students, and it is the aim of Nusas to magnify the points of agreement and of similarity between students, rather than the points on which they differ. There are other - sectional - organisations to further the special language, cultural and religious differences.

- 4) Both the European and the non-European students will benefit by learning to understand one another's viewpoints and difficulties, because at the University we are dealing with the best educated members of all sections of the community. Because of this we believe there is nothing to fear on the contrary, we have found nothing but an increase in the understanding and goodwill between the different students who have had this experience".

The advent of the Nationalist government in 1948 saw the start of a conflict between NUSAS and the government which has persisted thereafter and intensified over the years. By 1954 the attacks on the open universities had made NUSAS aware that education, students and the universities could not be separated from the whole pattern of the society of which they were a part. A press statement of December 14th, 1954 from the President, Ernie Wentzel, indicates this:

"Just as the Government is now asserting its right to control African school education, so in the past it has frequently questioned the right of the Universities to their independence. And the argument on which it bases its demands on African school education - that it finances much of it - has also been used to justify its claim to dictate to the universities.

This argument loses sight of the fact that in most countries of the world education is heavily state subsidised. Yet in most the right of the university and the Church to organise their education as they wish is respected as a fundamental of the democratic system. This is so because it is the only guarantee against indoctrination.

Indeed the belief that Africans should be given only such education as accords with their role in South African society can only result in indoctrination in its purest sense. It will ensure that few Africans will be qualified to enter the universities

The realisation that the institutions of society were inter-dependent was to grow more

explicit, as was the feeling that NUSAS ought to be concerned with those people who should be among the ranks of students - but were not, and were victims of the apartheid system long before they were discriminated against directly as black students.

1956 marked a turning point for it saw the Union engaging actively in protest for the first time - a type of action that would become characteristic. This first protest was a letter to the Minister of Education:

"Nusas along with the majority of the authorities, staff and students of the Universities concerned (UCT and Wits) believes that the policy of non-segregation which has been practised for the past 40 years is right in principle and beneficial to all those who have studied under it.

It is of the opinion that the universities should determine whom they admit on the

grounds of academic merit only, and is convinced that any policy other than this leads to a deterioration in relations between the races". (Italics added).

1956-1964: Conflict

In 1956 the Union turned its attention to the defence of the academic freedom of the English-language universities and the defence of the right of black students to participate in them. The report of the then President, Ernie Wentzel, to the Student Assembly of 1956 is worth noting for the type of thinking and action which it expressed, a type to remain familiar in NUSAS for many years:

"The great difficulty we experienced this year in regard to the academic freedom campaign was the usual inability to anticipate adequately the intentions of the Government, and the correct and most effective means of combatting apartheid.

We had to balance constantly the necessity for keeping public opinion alive, and secondly playing our hand too soon before any real action had been taken by the Government.

Our action in regard to Academic Freedom has centred around giving publicity to the threat to the universities; in the right quarters. In regard to SRC's and other public opinion in South Africa, we once more adopted the procedure of keeping as wide a group of public opinion informed of the issues involved.

It was our opinion that a basis for sound publicity, when any more serious threat to the system at Cape Town and Wits is made, has been laid over the past year".

1964-1969

The attack on Nusas by the Government

now reached the dimensions of a major struggle. The Nationalists sought first to drive a wedge between the NUSAS leadership and the mass of students on the white campuses, and then to compel the universities themselves to exert pressure on NUSAS. These pressures, coupled with an extensive 'smear' campaign, were then followed by a series of attacks on the NUSAS leadership, the use of administrative pressures on students directly, especially black students, and a deliberate and progressive campaign to hamstring NUSAS's effectiveness as an interracial organisation.

Martin Legassick, a member of the Executive, commented, "The question remained how long the NUSAS leadership could continue to aggregate the disparate interests of South African students under the formula which had been painfully worked out between 1947 and 1957.

Intensified Government pressure in the country made non-white students more frustrated and bitter, while it brought fears of reprisals to the more conservative of the white students. Events at the different campuses illustrated the possibilities of renewed ethnic cleavage

The drive to separate the NUSAS leadership from its supporters on the white campuses took the form of an attack on the centre affiliation (SRC) system, which led to some resignations, and the formation of the first 'middle groups'. The smear campaign took the form of equating the actions of individuals as individuals in the ARM (African Resistance Movement) with NUSAS policy and the (unproved and untrue) contention that NUSAS was engaging in secret, subversive activities.

The attacks on leadership began.

Driver was banned, Robertson was banned, Sprack was deported, passports were withdrawn, and the Security Police's activity and intimidation increased.

From 1966 policy began to be interpreted more conservatively; from 1967 black students became more dissatisfied. Two factors were crucial - the pressure on the boundaries of the Union (that is, the spectrum of the student population which was represented in Nusas), this time within the English campuses, began to have a retarding effect on policy; the pressures of society began to make it increasingly impossible to function on a non-racial level.

The final major event in the internal policies of Nusas as a student organisation took place over the period 1968 to 1970. Black students were of the firm opinion that a white

dominated organisation could no longer effectively reflect the aspirations of the black students. They thus formed their own student union (The South African Students Organization) and broke all but the most tenuous of links with Nusas. The problem and its solution at the time can be seen in the following motion taken at the 1970 Nusas congress:

THAT THIS STUDENT ASSEMBLY NOTING (1) THE FORMATION OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENT ORGANISATION (2) THE RECENT DECISION OF THIS BODY NO LONGER TO RECOGNISE NUSAS AS THE NATIONAL UNION CONDEMNS THE WHITE DOMINATION AS ENFORCED BY THE APARTHEID POLICY WHICH HAS BEEN A DIRECT CONTRIBUTION TO THE EMERGENCE OF SASO, BELIEVES THAT, INsofar AS THIS DEVELOPMENT WORKS TOWARDS A JUST AND EGALITARIAN SOCIETY, IT CONSTITUTES A POSITIVE STEP IN THE REALISATION OF THE ASPIRATIONS OF BLACK STUDENTS TOWARDS AN OBJECTIVE COMMON TO SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS, IREESPECTIVE OF RACE: BELIEVES FURTHER THAT THE ROLE IN SOUTH AFRICA FOR A NON RACIAL BODY WITH THE AIMS AND OBJECTS OF THE NATIONAL UNION REMAINS OF PRIMARY IMPORTANCE THEREFORE (1) WHILE EXPRESSING DISAGREEMENT WITH THE PRINCIPLE OF RACIAL EXCLUSION IN ANY STUDENT ORGANISATION

(2) ACCEPTS THAT A NATIONAL UNION LIKE THE PRESENT NUSAS WHICH IS DOMINATED BY

WHITE STUDENTS CANNOT CLAIM TO REPRESENT
BLACK STUDENTS EFFECTIVELY

RECOGNISES SASO AS A BODY WELL
ABLE TO REPRESENT THE VIEWS AND NEEDS OF
BLACK STUDENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

(3) MANDATES THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE
TO ENTER INTO DISCUSSION WITH THE SASO
EXECUTIVE WITH A VIEW TO ESTABLISHING MAXIMUM
CONTACT AND CO-OPERATION WITH SASO, ON THE
BASIS OF THE PRINCIPLE THAT NON RACIALISM IS
THE INEVITABLE GOAL OF BOTH ORGANISATIONS,
ALTHOUGH THEY ARE FORCED TO ADOPT DIFFERENT
MEANS OF ATTAINING THAT GOAL;

This move (similar in some ways to that
of the Afrikaans students some 35 years earlier)
was a direct reflection of the growing move towards
black consciousness in the larger black community.

This brief historical survey is useful
in assessing the real nature of the national
union of South African students.

The following points emerge :

i) That ever since the formation of NUSAS in 1924 the social issues of the day have been vividly mirrored in the policy and attitudes of the organization.

ii) That the representative structure of NUSAS has always ensured that unless the organization did reflect student feeling and opinion as well as the social problems of students at the time the organization would lose the membership concerned. (Evidenced by the breakaway of first the Afrikaans and then the black students).

iii) That it is nothing new for students to be concerned with the problems of society and in fact this has been happening since 1924. This is, indeed, a vital contribution - a regenerating factor - which students bring to their society.

iv) For these reasons NUSAS has always had to balance maintenance of boundaries against formulation of policy - and the balancing of this

equation has provided a pattern of action and response which has in almost all respects been the dominant process within the organisation. It is certainly the chief factor which has contributed to the survival of NUSAS, and it is also the factor which has sometimes inhibited the development of policy and which has ensured the moderate character of the organisation. As soon as the policy of the majority diverges too far from that of the minority, collapse of the boundaries threatens, and as soon as the boundaries become too inclusive, policy formation is hampered. By its very nature NUSAS has then always been compelled to seek the middle of whatever road it is on, and its progress up that road has been measured by essays to left and to right. Until 1933 the Union was able to maintain its boundaries, student unity was achieved, and policy formation was direct and rapid. After 1933 its boundaries were never again secure.