



auckland university students' association

TE ROOPU TAUIRA O TE WHARE WĀNANGA O TĀMAKI MAKĀURAU

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Discussion paper on NZUSA Membership

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Background

The New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA) is a national student body that represents some – but crucially not all – tertiary students in New Zealand. Its mandate, as it has been for a number of years, is to advocate for a barrier-free education, which sits alongside its day-to-day work of representing the “student voice” in the media, lobbying Government Ministers and Public Sector Officials in favour of student interests, providing submissions on legislative and policy change and bringing together and upskilling Student Association Executives. Over the years, NZUSA has done great work in advancing student interests on a national scale with the implementation of 0% interest student loans, the \$50 increase to the Student Allowance and Living Costs in 2017 and the first phase roll out of Fees Free.

However, NZUSA and its Member Associations have both fundamentally changed since those wins were secured. Most notably, NZUSA no longer has any permanent staff to help operationalize the broader strategic goals of the National Executive and the National Office and it appears that it is no longer able to run large scale operations such as its previous Student Income and Expenditure Report. Furthermore, some members are asking whether the high financial cost of membership is worth it.

AUSA currently pays **\$45,500** a year to be an NZUSA member, and our Executive and staff question the value we receive for this contribution. There is so much more that we could be doing for our students with \$45,500, particularly while we are experiencing increased demand for all our services. Due to the legacy of Voluntary Student Membership (VSM), the impact of COVID, and the struggles we have faced when engaging in conversations about funding from our

university, we lack the financial resources to deliver these services to all the students who need them effectively.

We are also aware that some members are questioning, in the age of VSM, whether they have the mandate, and by extension whether NZUSA has the mandate, to take a partisan stance on issues, on behalf of all students (see the recent [YES2020](#) campaign as an example of the partisan stance we are referring to).

All of this necessitates reviewing NZUSA's current structure and asking (1) whether the Status Quo for a national student voice is still effective and cost-efficient and (2) whether there are alternatives worth considering.

Case for Change

There are several drivers for necessitating a change in the current structure of NZUSA. On a political level, the question is what responsibility should individual Member Associations have to run campaigns, engage students politically and to be active in a national conversation about student issues? On an operational and financial level, does NZUSA's ability to campaign and lobby warrant its membership costs? Strategically, if our Association wasn't a member of NZUSA, would we want to join given the structure, deliverables and costs involved? For the last few years, the general consensus at AUSA amongst our Executive and staff has been "no".

It would appear that the Student Associations of Waikato, AUT and Canterbury Universities share similar reservations, as they are not members of NZUSA (in Canterbury's case they were a founding member in 1929, but later withdrew). Collectively these Universities account for 55,000 students whose voices are not represented in NZUSA because their Student Associations either do not see the value in becoming a member, or because the membership levy is too high, or in some cases, both.

NZUSA also plays host to sub committees and Associations which act as representative and consultative bodies for specific communities of students. Examples of these are the National Disabled Student's Association and the New Zealand Rainbow Student Committee. While these bodies are used as opportunities for members to share ideas and work together on larger campaigns, only NZUSA members are invited to be a part of these conversations which means that they are also not truly representative of all tertiary students in New Zealand. Should AUSA be successful in withdrawing its membership, our executive members who sit on these various committees will no longer have a seat at these tables. However, there is nothing stopping our

executive members from reaching out to their counterparts across the country on a regular basis to share ideas and work together outside of the NZUSA framework.

It's important to recognize here that this is not a proposal to do away with a national student voice and, by extension, a national Maori and Pasifika student voice either. The importance of ensuring that student interests are advanced and communicated to the highest decision-makers in the country is paramount and the good work that has been done in the past is a testament to that. However, in this new financial and political operating environment that many Student Associations are currently navigating through, it is worth asking whether there is a more effective, and frankly cheaper, way of doing what NZUSA currently does.

It's possible for NZUSA to be more financially efficient whilst still fully representing New Zealand tertiary students. Cost saving measures that could be introduced are:

- All Student Associations could pay a marginal membership fee to pay for the overheads associated with facilitating a national student voice and supporting Taura Pasifika and Te Mana Akonga.
- At a conference at the beginning of the year, the Student Associations (represented by their Presidents and General Managers) could come together to train, learn and determine what issues/areas they wanted to work on/push for on a national level and on their own campuses. This conference would then elect a National Spokesperson, appoint a Secretary to facilitate the administrative work required and establish working groups to ensure that the work of Associations was interlinked as much as possible and that equivalent roles were regularly sharing information and resources.
- All Student Association Presidents would then be part of a Community of Practice/Assembly meeting monthly to discuss issues of mutual concern, combined submissions on behalf of all Students' Associations of legislative and policy change and to ensure that the campaigns and other initiatives that were agreed to at the beginning of the year were both on track and that each Association was doing their part to facilitate them.
- The Secretary would then keep track of all opportunities for students to participate in consultation on legislative and policy change and would arrange for meetings for a delegation of Student Association Presidents to meet with Ministers and other Public Officials.

The proposed changes outlined above would save approximately \$90,000¹ of expenses each year, reduce AUSA's membership levy by 70%, and still allow NZUSA to achieve its mission. The reduced membership fees could potentially attract Canterbury, Waikato and AUT to join as members, further strengthening the national Association.

The structure above is just one viable alternative and proves that there are alternative ways for NZUSA to conduct its business that does not rely on members paying large membership fees.

So why not advocate for these reforms?

In short, we have. Over the last several years, AUSA Presidents and other members of our Executive have expressed concerns at NZUSA Executive meetings that NZUSA is not efficient or cost-effective under its current model. We've expressed our unhappiness with the \$45,500 membership levy we pay and the perceived value we receive from this. None of these concerns have been addressed, and we have seen no change at NZUSA. The shared experiences of multiple AUSA Executive members over several years lead us to believe that any further attempts to reform NZUSA from the inside will be successful.

Proposal

Whilst we agree that a national student voice is important, we do not believe NZUSA is currently an effective or efficient instrument to act as this voice. Attempts to reform NZUSA from the inside have so far been unsuccessful. We do not have faith that any further attempts to reform NZUSA from the inside will be successful. We therefore believe the following steps are necessary:

1. Pending a majority vote at an AUSA General Meeting, AUSA should give NZUSA 12 months' notice that we are terminating our membership in accordance to section 5.6 of the NZUSA constitution²

¹ Notes/assumptions:

- Member levies cut by 70%
- Secretary assumed to be 0.1FTE at minimum wage
- Spokesperson honoraria to cover travel expenses and other frictional costs
- No rent or other office costs (secretary works from home)

² As required by the NZUSA Constitution. if notice is given in June 2021, we will remain an active member until June 2022

2. AUSA will use the remaining 12 months of our membership to work collaboratively with NZUSA and its members to see if any reform can be affected from within the organization to address the issues outlined in this document
3. AUSA is committed to working collaboratively with Te Mana Ākonga and Tauria Pasifika to ensure their ongoing financial security
4. Revisit the topic of NZUSA membership in early 2022 and make a decision, in consultation with our members, whether we will rejoin or not

SUMMARY

We understand that a national, cohesive student voice is crucial to the work that we do as a Students' Association. Currently, NZUSA is not an effective or efficient instrument to act as this voice. Despite elected NZUSA Presidents promising changes to the levy structure and internal reform, these changes are yet to be achieved. In order for NZUSA to take our concerns seriously, we have decided that it is necessary for us to withdraw our membership for the time being in the hopes that our concerns will be addressed. In addition, AUSA is committed to working in good faith with NZUSA and its Member Associations over the next 12 months to explore the ways in which we can reform the organization. Considering this, if our concerns are addressed and enough change is affected, AUSA will consider rejoining as a member.

Both the 2021 AUSA Executive and Student Council have approved the four step proposal outlined above.