

## **NUS Further Educations zones conference 2012**

When I signed myself up for this conference it wasn't something that I knew a great deal about. NUS to me was getting 20% off ASOS and I was completely unaware of all the hard work and effort that goes on behind the scenes to make sure that we, as students, have the best, the fairest, and the most profitable learning experience throughout our years of studying. I like to try new things though and I saw the conference as a learning opportunity, a chance to learn more about both NUS and further education, which given my current studies as a foundation student could not be more relevant to me, and also a chance to meet new people and to push myself out of my comfort zone. I definitely did all of these things.

The theme of this years conference was "Explore. Dream. Discover.", a theme I think relevant to any study whether it be fe or he, and as Art and design students at Ravensbourne I think this is something we are particularly good at. Having the creativity to challenge what is happening within the education system, to reimagine our learning and our welfare, is a fundamental characteristic of all those I met involved with NUS and with their student unions and it was inspiring to see people's passion for their fellow students and for what is right. Most attending the fe zones conference were presidents/vice-presidents of their student unions within their colleges of thousands of students, officers who work everyday to improve student life and education; leaving me, a mere foundation student on an fe course at a university, a little bit like a duck out of water; but as someone pointed out to me it is us students that all this work is for, and its important that we understand all the work going on on our behalf.

I attended a number of different workshops over the two days relating to different aspects of fe, problems which need to be tackled and ways in which these can be solved. Fe encompasses a much wider range of study outside of art foundation courses and so I tried to attend sessions relevant to fe students at Ravensbourne. With a lot of current focus on qualification reform, the future of apprenticeships, unemployment issues etc, I found some of the sessions, though interesting, were not really issues faced by students doing an art foundation course.

One of the issues which really interested me is that of FE loans, and the opposition of the governments plans to implement loans for students over the age of 24 studying a level 3 course. I can understand that the idea of having to pay fees and taking out a loan, compared to a free course is going to discourage mature students from going back into further education, but with my art foundation course having a fee for those over 19 I find it unfair that this does not comply with age limits across the rest of further education, and don't see the equality in no loan being available for this age gap between 19-24. The government have said that any mature students studying an access to higher education level three course will have this loan debt written off on completion of an he degree. An art foundation is arguably a platform to higher education enabling you to build up a better portfolio for a much stronger degree application in design and I think that financial support for art foundation students should reflect this.

NUS is working to tackle the issue of loans and though it is unlikely that they will be able to deter the government from implementing this they are working towards making sure the detrimental impact this has on mature students is reduced. As a young foundation student

planning to go on to university debt from student loans is inevitable for me so perhaps I find it hard to sympathise with those older, already with financial loans and mortgages etc to whom these fe loans will have a significant impact. I've no doubt that the fe committee at NUS will do everything they can to ensure a positive outcome from this issue.

Student Unions work so hard to ensure they are responding to the needs of students and it is important that their work is recognised and accounted for. I attended a workshop on accountability in a world of freedoms which raised the interesting ideas of where freedom can take us, the opportunities and risks that it presents, and how by demonstrating accountability SUs gain commendation for their work. We looked at different ways to do this and it was really interesting to hear from a mix of colleges, things that they have been doing to ensure transparency between what the SU team do, students and staff. I think you can learn so much more through discussion and other people's experiences and I feel this is one of the main strengths of the whole conference. Some of the most interesting ideas came from other students, or officers, and not just those leading the workshops.

Just as it is vital student unions are held accountable for their work and actions, these unions should have the chance to hold the presidents of NUS to account for all the work they have been doing in the past year, to question outcomes, to commend achievements. There was a large session in which we did just this with both Toni, president of NUS FE and Liam, president of NUS. Having been out last night and feeling very tired first thing in the morning the specific details of what they have achieved went slightly over my head (fortunately this information is in my delegate guide) but I could see the positive impact their work is having on fe students across the country and how humbled they felt by the gratitude they received for their work.

I think perhaps the most inspiring aspect of the whole conference was not batman serving us dinner (which was super hero fancy dress themed) or the Manchester Bangor society making me feel out of breath just watching their energetic dancing, but the after dinner speaker, Adrienne Peltz, NUS president USI. She spoke about her struggle from poverty in South Africa and the limits this placed on her education, to her moving to Northern Ireland to have her baby and the problems faced there with further education and how this frustration at the faults in class and education systems drove her to fight for better and to fight for improvements and got her to the position she is in today. I found it inspiring to see how sheer determination, in knowing that her capabilities surpassed what the system expected of her, could lead to such a strong character who continues to stand against what is wrong with the education system and supports the development of further education.

Seeing people like her, and other students who campaign for what is right, made me reflect on myself and what little impact or effort I have had on making a positive change. I ran a Disney film club at school last year but that's not going to change the world! I have a great deal of respect for these people with the courage to change the system and have a much better appreciation of everything that goes on behind the scenes of my everyday student lifestyle.

As well as learning a great deal, contributing in discussion of what policies need identifying for change over the next year, attending workshops and hearing speakers, I had a lot of fun

on the conference. I got to network with people from across the country who mocked my posh, southern accent, walk down a street more gay than Brighton, and stay in a hotel room by myself with two double beds! It's true; there ain't no party like an FE party. NUS Further Education zones conference 2012

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