



NUS-USI Lobbying Toolkit for Students' Unions

How to get your views across
and develop an effective
lobbying strategy

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Academic year 2000/10 will be an incredibly important year for higher education in Northern Ireland. The NI Executive, and, specifically the Department for Employment and Learning, is holding an independent review into variable tuition fees and student finance. The outcome of this review will inform future financial arrangements for students and the broader funding structure for universities themselves.

With this in mind, its time to get lobbying!

Devolved government in NI has now been operating since May 2007 and the future of higher education, and these other key issues, will be now decided locally, by the relevant government Departments and, ultimately, by the Assembly and its locally-elected members, representing you, your colleagues and society as a whole.

It is fundamentally important that students are involved in this decision-making process and this tool-kit gives you tips on what you, as a union, can do to get your views across, influence decisions and get your students motivated to join your campaigns. This toolkit can also serve as a useful lobbying template, so feel free to adapt it to campaigns you may be planning on other issues!

Why lobby?

Lobbying is all about trying to influence the opinions and actions of decision-makers, demonstrating to them the concerns of students regarding the future of higher education, and the need for students to be key stakeholders in the review, as well as the concerns of students on all the other key issues your union is campaigning on. Lobbying can take all kinds of form, ranging from letter-writing and email campaigns, to making presentations, organising rallies and actually getting out there and meeting the people who make the decisions you want to influence. The toolkit offers you tips on how to actually go about your lobbying strategy and utilise some of these techniques.

Lobbying politicians: how to go about your lobbying strategy

Step 1: who are the decision-makers

Before you set about getting your views across, you need to think about who is out there making the decisions you want to have a say in. Depending on the issue at hand, it's useful to look to the relevant government department responsible for the issue. In the case of higher education and tuition fees, the Department for Employment and Learning has key responsibility. Different departments have power over different things, and by finding the right one for your issue, you can find out which ministers and civil servants you need to take to.

Government departments

Each department is led by a Minister who is an elected MLA representing a particular party. Each department is staffed by civil servants and is overseen by a committee meeting on a weekly basis to scrutinise the work, its minister and civil servants. Each committee is made up of MLAs and has a Chair and Deputy Chair. Committees and departments can be contacted in order to get your views across, attend events or respond to a particular issue or report.

MLAs

There are currently 108 MLAs representing the people of Northern Ireland at the Assembly. They represent constituencies across NI, and each of them can be contacted individually or met with face-to-face. MLAs usually set aside Fridays to meet with their constituencies – just phone their office and make an appointment: it's simple as that!

MPs

Don't forget about the MPs representing NI constituencies in Westminster! The nature of the UK political system means that, even though power transferred from Westminster to Stormont, our MPs can still influence the long-term direction of student finance and other issues of importance in England and Wales, as well as in NI.

There are currently 18 MPs from NI who sit in the House of Commons in Westminster, and who vote on any future changes to the higher education system in England and Wales, even though their votes won't affect students in NI. But, by finding out the intentions of our MPs (most of whom are also MLAs), we can predict how they will vote locally in the Assembly. We can also gain information to give to our colleagues at NUS-UK in order to better inform its campaigning team ahead of Commons votes. The table below shows what parties operate here and how many MLAs they have in Stormont belonging to each party.

Party affiliation	Number of MLAs
Democratic Unionist	36
Sinn Fein	27
Ulster Unionist	18
Social Democratic and Labour	16
Alliance	7
(Independents)	2
Green (NI)	1
Progressive Unionist	1
Total	108

Depending on what you're campaigning on, you might want to lobby your local council. You could engage one of the 582 councillors representing areas across NI, or even the Mayor of each individual Council. Councils in NI are in the middle of a large re-structuring process, and this will affect how you contact and engage with them. The current 26 Councils is going to be reduced, so do bear in mind that their websites and contact details may change in the future.

Downloads

- List of all NI government Departments and who works there:
www.communityni.org
- List of Assembly Committees, what MLAs are on them, what party they are from, and who the Chairs and Deputy Chairs are:
[www.nicva.org/index.cfm/section/article/page/assembly committees](http://www.nicva.org/index.cfm/section/article/page/assembly%20committees)
- A-Z LIST OF MLAs
www.stratagem-ni.com/azmlas.php

- Find out which MLAs represent which constituencies here: www.stratagem-ni.com/nimps.php
- Current list of councils and contact details: www.direct.gove.uk/en/DI1/Directories/DevolvedAdministartions/DG_5003601
- List of Councillors sitting on the current 26 councils: www.councillor.info/councils.asp

Step 2: what do you want to say, and what have the decision-makers been doing about the issue?

For students' unions and NUS-USI to be successful in lobbying decision-makers, we need to understand how they think and how they've acted on the issues in the past, in order to work out how best to influence them in the future.

With regard to higher education and tuition fees, at a local level this will be the first time that many of the MLAs will have had a say in this area. Previous evidence shows that local political parties have broadly been opposed to fees in the past and that they had sought alternatives to the status quo. Concerns were raised by unionist parties when the question of raising fees in line with inflation was brought before the Assembly. Therefore, the case for the abolition of fees in NI may be harder to make.

Gathering information and feeding back

This is why it is so important that information be collated on political parties and the perspectives of individual MLAs. Local party policies on this issue are often vague and sometimes non-existent. To better inform our lobbying as soon as possible, and this is very much where you can come in!

Due to the geographical nature of politics in NI, it won't be enough to lobby those MPs/MLAs whose constituencies surround your specific union. Across the HE campuses in NI, there will be approximately 6 local MLAs and 1 MP per union. At its simplest, the lack of unions in the west of NI would mean that, based on lobbying only politicians that are local to you, vast swathes of NI would be left out.

We suggest that you lobby local politicians representing your constituency and use your own contacts, or those of other officers/staff, in order to lobby those further away. By doing this, you

will be able to paint a picture of the political landscape and build relationships which will be hopefully influence MLA decision-making.

Where the decision-makers stand on the issues

You know which decision-makers you want to engage with, but you need to think about where they actually stand on some of the issues, so that you can work out how you want to present your message. There are a number of useful ways you can research how they voted or acted on an issue in the past. A key website to track votes/speeches for all MPs/MLAs is www.theyworkforyou.com. Simply type in the name of the MP or MLA in question and you can see a textual record of what they said in the Assembly or in the House of Commons, in relation to a particular issue.

It can also be useful to consult the party website of the politicians you want to lobby to see if they have their own specific policy:

Party	Website
Alliance	www.allianceparty.org
DUP	www.dup.org.uk
Green (NI)	www.greens-in.org
(Independents) Gerry McHugh	www.niassembly.gov.uk/members.bios_07/mchugh_g.htm
Kieran Deeny	www.niassembly.gov.uk/members.bios_07/deeny_k.htm
PUP	www.pup-ni.org.uk
SDLP	www.sdip.ie
Sinn Fein	www.sinnfein.ie
UUP	www.uup.org

Step 3: you know your message; you know the politicians' records on the issue; it's time to get out and meet them!

Arranging a meeting with a politician is easier than it sounds. Most will have easily accessible constituency offices where you can arrange appointments with staff. Just head to their party website to find a list of all their constituency offices and addresses. With Stormont being where it is, MLAs will also be happy to meet there, if their constituency is far from your union. Stormont is open to the public, so you are fully welcome to pop along to meet a politician, attend a meeting or simply

just stand in the lobby area and see who you can see. Just bring your student card or other forms of ID.

Ahead of the meeting, you'll check out how they have voted on the issue in the past, as well as any other campaigns that they may have been involved in, by looking online at any press releases they've issued. Most politicians have their own specific interests, and one of them may not be the issue you're most concerned about. If this is the case, then it is your job to make it one of their interests. As constituency representatives, a key angle to approach a politician on is how the issue of interest to you will affect his/her constituents.

Ahead of the meeting

It's really important to build prior knowledge of the politician you are going to meet. Many will be supportive; others will be not. But by approaching all sides with your concerns, then you are more likely to inform their decisions and, perhaps, show them some angles they had not previously considered.

See if you can have a written brief forwarded to the politician or ideally to a staffer, so that what you are presenting will not come completely out of the blue. All politicians want to seem to be on top of an issue during a meeting so don't think that your brief won't be read!

On the day

On the day of the meeting you must do one thing above all else – **be punctual!** Politicians are renowned for their lateness but, on the rare occasion they may be on time, do not risk being even slightly late. You should also be aware of how much time the politician has, as s/he may have other meetings/votes to take part in. With regard to MLAs, the best days to hold meetings are Wednesdays and Thursdays, while Fridays are reserved for constituents living in their areas.

It is important that you set the agenda. Politicians are very capable of, talking about anything but the original purpose of the meeting. So, after some niceties, get down to business! Explain why you are there – that you want to convey the issues of the student body that you represent, and your hope that the MLA will write to the minister of the relevant department to advocate the full inclusion of the student voice on the issue. Politicians are usually very willing to take up cases on behalf of constituents/interest groups. If you are there about higher education fees, you might want to ask three key questions:

- What is the purpose of higher education?

- How can we make higher education sustainable?
- What are the principles of a fair education system?

While you are there, it may also be wise to inform them of other campaigns/issues. Politicians are fans of all positive publicity and they are not likely to overlook the opportunity to launch or take part in a campaign/event you are running.

Step4: after the meeting

Let NUS-USI know the outcome of your discussions, whether it be positive or negative. This will help us form a database of views. You should also write to the politicians afterwards to thank them for their time, to summarise the points made by both sides, and to offer your services in the future. Now that you have developed the initial relationship with them, you should aim to keep in touch to update them on further developments in this and related areas. Try writing to them regularly or sending them an email. www.writetothem.com is an excellent resource. Simply type in your postcode and, with just a couple of clicks, you can send a batch email to all of the political representatives in your area. Alternatively, you can find all the individual MLA email addresses here:

www.niassembly.gov.uk/members/membership07.htm

Lobbying your Vice Chancellor

Step 1: before you meet

We suggest you carry out the same background work on your VC as you would a politician. In relation to higher education fees, a VC may be slightly more guarded in his/her views, however, many spoke out around the time of the 2004 Act that brought in top-up fees. Press/university publications from the time could be useful for a meeting now.

If your meeting is about higher education fees, you might want to ask the same key questions you asked in your meetings with politicians:

- What is the purpose of higher education?
- How can we make higher education sustainable?
- What are the principles of a fair higher education system?

You should also ask your VC to contact the Minister for Employment and Learning, asking the Minister to fully include the perspectives of the student body in the tuition fee review, as the views of the universities will be of prime importance to those who make high-level decisions in government.

Step 2: after you meet

As with your lobbying of MPs and MLAs, write a letter of thanks and express your hope that such meetings can occur on a regular basis on this and related issues. Then pass on your feedback to NUS-USI, so we can form a view on what the university decision-makers are thinking, as we should not underestimate how much of a say they have in the final outcomes.

Engaging the student body

Student participation in your campaign is vital to its success - not just to drum up support for the issue at hand, but also to demonstrate to politicians and vice chancellors what matters most to students on the ground. In order to do this, it's important to raise awareness across the student body of the issues at hand.

You'll already have tonnes of excellent awareness-raising strategies you've used in the past, but here are just a few ideas that might come in handy:

- **Funding debates** – NUS-USI is planning another one of these in 2009, but there is no reason why your union cannot do the same! You can invite politicians, academics, journalists, and include student officers encouraging each of them to have a lively debate on the issues. Record what gets said, video the proceedings and put them on your website or YouTube. Then use this to gain PR and press attention, or to write back to the politicians and show them how the issue is gaining pace.
- **Officer elections** – why not have a specific hustings on the issues surrounding fees and student finance? What would incoming officers like to see done? There are some key questions you could get candidates to answer in their manifestos or in hustings. What would you keep about the current system? How do you address the problem of debt? What is the purpose of higher education? If graduates are to make a contribution, should it be linked to 'course price' or 'earnings'? What is your position on fee variability?
- **Data** – review what data the university collects to see if this can inform your views on fees, finance, drop-out rates.
- **Message board** – mark out a SU area where students can post questions for you to relay to politicians/VCs. Send these to the politicians/VCs. Send these to the

politicians using the tips suggested here and print questions and responses in student papers.

- Ask politicians if they would be willing to conduct a regular **surgery** on your campus. This would provide a great opportunity for students to meet-and-greet local representatives, but also for the politicians to hear what matters on the ground.
- Get your campaigns into local media/student media – the wider the audience the better the understanding. Think about some of the new online forms of viral marketing, where social networking sites like YouTube, Facebook, Bebo and any number of blogs can get important messages spread to large numbers of people in a very short space of time.

Feedback

By compiling a dossier of information on politicians and VCs' views, we hope that we will then be able to formulate a plan as to how we are going to approach the 09/10 review and other important issues. Your help in providing us with the information you get will be vital.

This toolkit can be used as a guide to effectively lobby key decision-makers in higher education. By raising awareness of our views now, both on campus and among those in government, we will stand a much better chance of getting a full student say in whatever form the higher education and funding review, and any other key issues, will take.

Good luck, and keep in touch!

Guide to political structures and Stormont

What's what and who's who in Stormont – a very short introduction to the NI Assembly and local political structures

Devolution in the UK means a national Parliament in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, transferring levels of power from the UK Parliament.

The Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales took devolved powers in July 1999 and Northern Ireland in December 1999. Devolution was suspended in October 2002. On 8 May 2007 power was once again restored to the Assembly.

The Assembly meets in Parliament Buildings in the Stormont area of Belfast. The main building is located in the Stormont estate, a 164 hectare public park in the east of Belfast.

What does it do?

The Assembly takes responsibility for debating and making laws, and overseeing the work of the government departments. There are currently 108 elected members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs).

The NI Executive is made up of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and 10 ministers for the government departments, and meets to agree on issues and put forward new legislation for the Assembly to debate.

How does it all work?

Established under the Good Friday Agreement, the Assembly is based on power-sharing. Each MLA self-designates as either 'Nationalist', 'Unionist' or 'other'.

The First Minister and Deputy First Minister are appointed from the largest two assembly 'blocs' from the above designations. Ministers are nominated to the Executive by the four parties with the greatest share of the vote in Assembly elections, and not by the First Minister.

Some resolutions must gain cross-community support in order to be passed, encouraging increased collaboration and

consensus on important issues. Statutory committees oversee the work of each department.

The Department for Employment and Learning has key responsibilities for further and higher education and training in Northern Ireland. Powers over criminal justice and policing have not yet been devolved.

Who's who?

First Minister	Peter Robinson MP MLA	DUP
Deputy First Minister	Martin McGuinness MP MLA	Sinn Fein
Junior Minister	Jeffrey Donaldson MP MLA	DUP
Junior Minister	Gerry Kelly MLA	Sinn Fein

Agriculture and Rural Development	Michelle Gildernew MP MLA	Sinn Fein
Culture, Arts and Leisure	Nelson McCausland MLA	DUP
Education	Caitriona Ruane MLA	Sinn Fein
Employment and Learning	Reg Empey MLA	UUP
Enterprise, Trade and Investment	Arlene Foster MLA	DUP
Environment	Edwin Poots MLA	DUP
Finance and Personal	Sammy Wilson MP MLA	DUP
Health, Social Services and Public Safety	Michael McGimpsey MLA	UUP
Regional Development	Conor Murphy MP MLA	Sinn Fein
Social Development	Margaret Ritchie MLA	SDLP