A huge amount of the manifesto I ran for election on and the work I’ve done in the ten months since taking office has been on liberation activism, and we’ve had some huge wins and achievements. We’ve seen large-scale and successful Black History, Disability History and LGBT+ months as well as a fantastic International Women’s Day. We’ve seen a dedicated campaign against culturally appropriative costumes and an anti-sexual harassment campaign which was the springboard for conversations with the University which have led to their commitment on a strategic response to sexual harassment including staff training, policy development and publicity campaigns. Our liberation conveners and their groups have been tireless in fighting against oppression and marginalisation, and we’ve introduced liberation activism to sports teams and societies through ‘All In’, where we addressed barriers to participation in activities. And that’s just skimming the surface.

I’m incredibly proud of this work. We’ve made liberation activism more accessible and forced these issues onto the University’s agenda. This has also resulted in engagement on this from a whole new group of students, and often this has been positive. But we’ve also seen opposition to the autonomy and self-organising of liberation groups, accusations of ‘reverse racism’, and protests against safe space and no platform policies which are in the interests of our liberation campaigns. Let’s be clear; some of this is malicious, even if that malice is subconscious, and comes from powerful people not wanting to renounce that power. But I also think that too often we have undertaken great and important liberation activism from a start point of presumed knowledge which not all our students have. So I’ve put together this resource about liberation activism, not to open the door for students to question the rights of oppressed students to self-organise, or to legitimise those who say that liberation campaigns are too complicated or inaccessible, but so that our students are equipped with some level of basis knowledge about why this work is so important and why we hold the beliefs about it that we do.

Eve Livingston
Vice President (Societies and Activities) 2014/15
Our liberation campaigns - and those of the National Union of Students, the majority of other student unions, and many organisations like Trade Unions - represent women, BME, LGBT+ and disabled students.

Women:
'Women' is taken to mean all who self-define as women, including [if they wish] those with complex gender identities which include 'woman' [NUS Women’s Campaign]. 'Woman' is generally used over 'female' for this inclusivity.

BME:
The Black and Minority Ethnic group is open to anyone who defines as being from a non-white minority ethnic group. We do not use 'ethnic minority' as many of these ethnicities are global majorities. Sometimes 'black' is used to encompass all these ethnicities.

LGBT+
LGBT+ encompasses lesbians, gay, bisexual & trans students as well as any other non-heterosexual identity. We recognise that, although they are represented in the LGBT+ campaign, trans (identifying as a gender different to that assigned at birth) and non-binary (identifying as neither woman nor man) identities are gender identities rather than sexualities.

DISABLED:
The Disability and Mental Wellbeing group is open to any student who identifies as disabled, whether or not they are 'out' to the Disability Service. The group also includes those with mental health disabilities and recognises the difference between general mental wellbeing and mental health problems.

These groups exist to represent students who are traditionally marginalised, discriminated against and oppressed both in education and in wider society. Not everyone who is a woman, or black, or any of the other identifiers above, may feel oppressed or discriminated against, but as a group these students are systematically disadvantaged, as evidenced by lower educational attainment, higher drop-out rates, higher rates of mental health issues and much, much more. We also respect the lived experience of these students who experience discrimination in their own lives in a multiplicity of ways, not all of which is measurable or backed up by evidence, but which is equally important and respected.


3 EUSA Mental Health Report, 2013
Our liberation groups represent students from groups who are traditionally structurally oppressed. **Structural oppression is different from discrimination as it is rooted in historical and enduring power relations.** Racism, for example, is rooted in colonialism and imperialism. Ableism (discrimination against disabled people) occurs against the backdrop of a history where disabled people were seen as ‘freaks’ and displayed in the circus, amongst other inequalities. These are just some examples, but illustrate the systematic inequality of our liberation groups which is different than discrimination against those not from structurally oppressed groups.

This is how we often get caught up in conversations about ‘reverse’ sexism or racism etc; it is absolutely possible to be discriminated against on the basis of your white skin or male gender, and nobody would suggest that you are not allowed to feel slightly put out by that. However, it is disingenuous to frame this as racism or sexism because these are formed of discrimination combined with structural oppression, and men and white people have never been structurally oppressed. These groups traditionally have power over women and people of colour, even without individuals in those groups meaning to exercise or sustain that power.

An understanding of power is central to understanding liberation activism and its central tenets; all these campaigns are, at their core, about **challenging and redistributing power – taking it from where it is concentrated and sharing it out amongst everyone.** It can therefore be challenging for people who don’t identify into liberation campaigns to engage with them, because acknowledging this power inequality means acknowledging the power that you hold and your place within these power structures, which is sometimes an uncomfortable truth.

**Useful Resources:**


We use the concept of ‘self-definition’ for our liberation groups, meaning that it is up to individuals whether they feel they identify as a woman, BME student, LGBT+ or disabled. This is because, put simply, students who experience oppression or discrimination know best about that oppression and discrimination and are best placed to tackle it. Oppression and marginalisation can sometimes manifest as a lack of representation – there have been fewer women MPS in history than there are current male MPS, for example⁴ – and so it would be horribly ironic for liberation campaigns which aim to address this to be led by people who don’t identify into them.

Likewise, it is oxymoronic for oppressed people to gain power under the leadership of a person from a group who has oppressed them. If feminism only succeeds, for instance, because people take a male leader more seriously than a female leader, then it has succeeded by playing into the very power relation it aims to challenge – which isn’t really a success at all. Oppressed people should also have the right to safe and exclusive spaces where they can speak & act freely, without having to temper what they’re saying/doing for the comfort of their oppressors. Those not affected by oppression experience the rest of society in this way, but for oppressed people this may be the only space they have in public life where they can feel truly comfortable and equal.

Leading from ideas of self-definition, liberation groups at EUSA are also autonomous. This means that they operate separately from the rest of EUSA’s democratic structures, and can therefore pass policy in opposition to EUSA-wide policy, for example. This is because, by their very definition, the views and ideas of liberation groups may not be shared by a majority of students, and also because, as mentioned above, the students directly affected by these issues know best about them.

⁴ http://www.buzzfeed.com/sirajdatoo/women-mps-in-parliament
Intersectionality is the understanding that people are not one-dimensional and may be affected by multiple and layered/intersecting discrimination which can manifest in different ways depending on different identities. Black women, for example, will face different barriers than white women and so there is a diversity of experience even within a women’s campaign. In striving to be more intersectional, we recognise that liberation campaigns have traditionally been dominated by the most privileged amongst them – white gay men in LGBT+ groups for instance, and middle-class white women in feminism. Many campaigns have made steps in recent years to address this – for example, NUS UK Women’s Committee has reserved places including a Black Women’s Rep, Lesbian Rep and Trans Rep.

**Useful Resources:**

Intersectionality 101, NUS UK Women’s Campaign: [http://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/nusdigital/document/documents/11837/69b77bff28a622e34be2ccc0c793a50ad/Intersectionality%20101.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAJKEA562WKFU6MHNQ&Expires=1428327585&Signature=Z5CEvMYUFXYYIOLz2iyJkR7r8%3D](http://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/nusdigital/document/documents/11837/69b77bff28a622e34be2ccc0c793a50ad/Intersectionality%20101.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAJKEA562WKFU6MHNQ&Expires=1428327585&Signature=Z5CEvMYUFXYYIOLz2iyJkR7r8%3D)

Ideally, it should be. Almost every liberation activist hopes for a day when everyone can be treated equally. However, we consciously use the term ‘liberation’ over ‘equality’ because it implicitly acknowledges that the starting point is different for different people owing to the power structures already mentioned, and that treating everyone the same only maintains the distance between them, and therefore perpetuates those power structures and relations. A useful visual tool for understanding this is the image below – think of the boxes as liberation campaigns aiming to bring oppressed people up to the same level as the powerful.

Also relevant here is the idea of privilege. Sociologist Peggy McIntosh gives a clear description of privilege when she describes it as “an invisible weightless backpack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks.” The struggle of those held back by race/gender/disability/sexual identity might not be obvious to others who don’t experience that struggle. ‘Check your privilege’ is often sneered at, but the basis of it is important; that privilege can cause people who have it to have ‘blind spots’ where they are not aware of the issues facing others, which are not visible to them. It is therefore important to listen to the voices of those in liberation groups and to respect their accounts of lived experience.

Useful Resources:

Peggy McIntosh, White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack [https://www.isr.umich.edu/home/diversity/resources/white-privilege.pdf](https://www.isr.umich.edu/home/diversity/resources/white-privilege.pdf)
Firstly, they often are not. It can be a symptom of inequality that as soon as a liberation activist snaps, they are vilified for it in a way that someone more privileged wouldn’t be. It’s also important to unpack why you might define this behaviour as aggressive – feminists, for example, have often been accused of being too aggressive and angry which can point to expectations of women to be ‘feminine’ and ladylike. Subverting that is seen as incorrect, yet succeeding by tempering a message to placate an oppressor is not really success at all.

That said, sometimes oppressed people get angry that they spend their lives being discriminated against and having to work twice as hard as other people to achieve the same things. Anger is an understandable reaction and it has won things – Nelson Mandela was angry and sometimes violent. The Suffragettes were famously ‘aggressive’. The anger of an oppressed person towards their oppressor will rarely be as scary or powerful as it would in reverse, because of aforementioned power dynamics. A woman who says she ‘hates men’, for instance, does not have the same effect as a man who says he hates women, because these statements are made against a backdrop where, amongst other inequalities, 2 women are killed every week by a man and 1 in 4 will be victims of sexual assault committed by men.

Useful Resources:

In defence of angry feminism: https://evelivingston.wordpress.com/2014/07/28/in-defence-of-angry-feminism-2/


Image credit: https://www.pinterest.com/julieharnisch/
It is almost inevitable that in the journey to being an effective liberation activist or ally you will get something wrong, and it is the right of people who identify into liberation groups to call you out on that. Being called out can be uncomfortable and embarrassing but is a necessary part of becoming a good ally. It is a myth that liberation activists will bite your head off the minute you get something wrong – rather, it is how you move forward from this which is important. As long as you are respectful and open to learning, nobody will think any less of you.

If you are called out, try to remember that being accused of racism/sexism/homophobia/transphobia/ableism etc is not as bad as actually experiencing these things. Apologise and try to learn from the mistake you made. Respect that it might not be obvious to you how your comments or actions are offensive, but that the experts are those who are affected by them.

Also remember that your intent is less important than its outcome – this is the basis of the Equality Act and other legislation, so isn’t a controversial idea! You might not have intended any harm, but causing it accidentally is still deserving of your apology and attempts to learn from the mistake.

Useful Resources:

Getting Called Out - How to Apologize: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8xJXKYL8pU

Firstly, almost no liberation activists actually believe that all men, for example, are actively and intentionally sexist. Rather, we acknowledge that men (namely cis men, those whose gender identity matches that which they were assigned at birth) as a group hold power over other genders and can perpetuate this inequality, both intentionally through active misogyny, and unintentionally through internalised sexism which is part of being brought up as a man.

However, the main problem with the ‘not all …’ trope is that it is derailing, meaning that it is often used to detract attention from the actual issue at hand. Responding to a conversation about the shocking sexual assault statistics which say that 1 in 4 women will be victims of assault7 with ‘but not all men assault women’ suggests that this is a more important issue than the actual violence facing women - being more angry about the generalising of one gender than the sexual assault of another is a problematic response, symptomatic of existing power structures where problems facing men are afforded much more time and energy than those facing women.

The homogenisation of groups in this way fundamentally comes from the fact that there are members of these groups who act in a way that sustains their dominance through racism, sexism, transphobia, ableism and homophobia. Oppressed people have experienced this first-hand and have no way of knowing upon looking whether or not someone from a dominant group is racist, sexist etc. To use a helpful analogy, nobody blames the victims of dog attacks for being scared of dogs, yet as a society we expect oppressed people and groups to continue with their lives as if nothing has happened, and in fact suggest that they are the problem for fearing their oppressors.

Useful Resources:

Of course all men don’t hate women. But all men must know they benefit from sexism: http://www.newstatesman.com/2013/08/laurie-penny/men-sexism

#YesAllWomen: http://www.slate.com/blogs/bad_astronomy/2014/05/27/not_all_men_how_discussing_women_s_issues_gets_derailed.html

7 www.womensaid.org.uk/domestic_violence_topic.asp?section=0001000100220036sionTitle
It is a myth that those who identify into liberation campaigns don’t welcome the support of those who don’t. **There is absolutely a place for allies and supporters, as long as they are standing up for issues that have been identified and led on by those directly affected.** Allies should be wary of how much space they are taking up in conversation about liberation activism, and in who they might be speaking over when they choose to talk. **You should also try to educate yourself instead of demanding the time and energy of those affected to educate you** – often oppressed people are expected to take on this labour, another burden caused by their oppression. Many people from oppressed groups have written clearly and comprehensively about these issues, and the vast majority of these resources are available freely online.

Often people respond to suggestions of how to be a good ally with the assertion that it is a lot of work and hard to get right. It may well be hard to get right – as discussed already, you will inevitably get something wrong, but it is how you move forward from that which is important – but it is not true to say that this is too difficult. **Rather, allies can be grateful that they are privileged enough not to experience this discrimination throughout their lives** and are able to support campaigns without the emotional labour of coming up with and leading on them.

**Useful Resources:**

10 ways to be an ally: [http://whitepriv.blogspot.co.uk/2010/02/10-ways-to-be-and-ally.html](http://whitepriv.blogspot.co.uk/2010/02/10-ways-to-be-and-ally.html)
I hope this resource will be useful as a starting point for understanding liberation activism and being able to engage with it in a respectful way that doesn’t ultimately perpetuate the same power relations our liberation groups exist to challenge. This is by no means an exhaustive resource and only a tiny selection of other resources are listed here, but I hope it answers some basic questions and provides a base level of knowledge on how liberation activism works and why it is vital, and should be at the heart of everything we do.

For more on EUSA’s liberation work, I hope you’ll find the following links useful.

**Vice President Societies and Activities** – the VPSA is the full-time sabbatical officer with the overall remit for liberation work. Feel free to email on vpsa@eusa.ed.ac.uk or come into the Potterrow office to speak to the VPSA.

**Liberation group campaigns** – You can find information on our liberation groups’ current campaigns and activities on the EUSA website at [https://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/getinvolved/yourvoice/liberationgroups/](https://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/getinvolved/yourvoice/liberationgroups/)

**Liberation Policy** – our website lists all liberation-related policy passed by EUSA’s student council. You can find it here: [https://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/eusapolicy/liberation/](https://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/eusapolicy/liberation/)

**NUS Liberation Campaigns** – EUSA is affiliated to the National Union of Students and therefore to its liberation campaigns. You can find more information on NUS’ liberation work here: [http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/introduction-to-the-movement/liberation/](http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/introduction-to-the-movement/liberation/)