

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

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NUS AGREE GUIDANCE OVER AUTONOMY OF UNIVERSITY CHRISTIAN UNIONS

The right of University Christian Unions to restrict leadership posts to Christians has been recognised in new guidance issued in September 2007 by the National Union of Students (NUS) together with the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF).

In recent years, Hull, Exeter, Birmingham, Warwick, Edinburgh and Heriot-Watt Universities have all faced opposition from student bodies because of their religious beliefs. The new NUS/UCCF guidance will only apply on campuses where the Student Guild or Student Union has adopted it.

The agreed guidelines are as follows:

1. Students should be free and encouraged to establish faith-based societies, recognised by their Students' Union, with the object of practising and promoting any religion as part of their educational and social experience and development at the college or university.
2. The religion in question may be identified in the aims and objects of the constitution of the society by reference to a set of doctrines or to the belief and practice of any lawful religious group or body, or by any other suitable means.
3. In principle, students' union societies have the right to adopt the name that in their view best expresses their own identity. However if any member of the Union considers that the name is deliberately misleading, the member should be encouraged to raise the issue first with the society concerned in order to attempt to resolve the issue informally. Should it not prove possible for the matter to be resolved informally, then the matter should be resolved through the Union's normal democratic processes for changes to the constitutions of affiliated societies. Students' Unions should never discriminate between one religious view or another in the provision of facilities and services to societies; they should therefore always seek to resolve any disputes about names according to neutral criteria.
4. The obligation on Students' Unions not to discriminate on the grounds of religion, and any obligation on a Students' Union not to have a direct central religious affiliation, does not prevent the recognition of faith-based societies.

5. Student societies should be democratically student-run. Faith-based student societies may affiliate to external bodies whose objects are compatible with their own, but such affiliation must (a) be capable of being withdrawn at any time, and (b) not compromise the autonomy of the student society.

6. It is assumed that students joining a society support the aims and objects outlined in its constitution. Students should thus be informed of the aims, objects and any rights or responsibilities arising from the society's constitution when joining a society. Any member must be free to leave the society at any time.

7. Societies may have both open and members-only meetings but should be encouraged to promote open meetings wherever possible.

8. The leadership (executive committee) of a faith-based society may be restricted to members of the society. The right to change the objects and the right to elect leaders may be likewise restricted.

9. A Students' Union will normally require the appointment of leaders or the committee of every society to be subject to a democratic process in which all members of the society can stand for positions and are enfranchised to vote. This requirement may also be applied to faith-based societies.

10. The 1994 Act requires that the procedure for recognition of societies and the allocation of resources or privileges by the Students' Union such as access to publicity, premises and financial support should be fair, set down in writing and freely accessible to all students.

11. Any allegations of discrimination or harassment made by or against the society or its leaders must be dealt with via the appropriate University or Union harassment or equal opportunities procedure for the protection of all parties.

12. Where either a Students' Union or Christian Union consider that they are unable to facilitate affiliation of the CU to the SU for any reason, provided that all of the above guidelines have been followed, the two bodies are encouraged to make a joint approach to the HEI or FEI to secure facilities such as access to publicity, premises and financial support.

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Salt and Light Papers is a series of occasional papers on contemporary issues of social concern. It is published online by the Affinity Social Issues Team. Its purpose is to help Christians to think through questions of relevance to our place in the world around us. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Social Issues Team.