

# So, you want to have an occupation?

Occupation has been a traditional mode of student protest for the last 40 years. Occupations are a highly effective means of protest. They can put pressure on university management, who can in turn put pressure on the Government, and they can act as a space of education and resistance.

In response to the upcoming white paper on higher education we have compiled this short checklist of things to think about when planning and running an occupation.

## Choosing a location

In going into occupation you will be dealing with the politics of space. It is important to choose targets for **political** effect, but other considerations such as **access**, **visibility**, and **security** come into play.

- It is important to choose a location carefully. Disrupt management where possible. Get in the way of what they do. If you don't, you might as well not be there.
- Do not occupy a place with no access to running water. You will regret it.
- It's good to have access to food (i.e. you can get it into the building). Food that you bring with you should be practical: fruit and nuts will keep you alert and happy much more than crisps and sweets! Go skipping the night before for free supplies.
- Make sure there is access to toilets, unless you're planning a dirty protest.
- Make sure there is either a quiet space or turn off all music when people need sleep. Also, bring blankets and sleeping bags if possible. Lecture theatres can be uncomfortable.
- Bring laptops! Choose somewhere with Internet access (easier now in these days of wifi), or make sure you bring internet dongles that you've checked work.
- Also, check the space has phone reception (particularly if it's a basement).
- Make sure there are windows! Lots of lecture theatres lack these, and they are useful for fresh air and banner-drops.
- Think about whether your space is wheelchair accessible: this is far more likely to be the case in new builds than old builds. This is both a practical and political concern, in terms of how inclusive your protest is of the whole student community.
- Do not announce the location of your occupation publicly before it happens!

## Formulating Demands

Occupations should make demands. It is important that your opening meeting decides on these, that they are published on the Internet, and sent to the university.

- At least a few demands should be easy to meet. There is nothing more disheartening than being defeated on everything, and being ignored for being a "dreamer." These might be things like demanding a meeting with the Vice-Chancellor.
- You should have a demand for "no victimization of students, and no punishment for those involved in protest." (Reassure everyone by saying that you will occupy again if any student is victimised).
- Demands should be the sort of thing a university can do, not the sort of thing a government can do. However, they can be things the university can say to the government.
- Make it clear that your occupation intends no physical harm to people.
- Often a university will want to go into negotiations with occupiers. If they do, then take them up on this. If possible, record all discussions and make sure they are fully relayed to the whole group. Definitely keep documents of EVERYTHING.
- Do not get bogged down in negotiations. If you feel they are going nowhere, they probably aren't, and they may be used by management to sap your energy.

### Starting the occupation

There is no set way to start your occupation, and what happens will depend on a range of factors, such as what type of institution you are occupying, how many occupiers you have, and the politics of the student union. Here are just a few considerations:

- At the beginning, try to get as many people there as possible. Starting an occupation from a big meeting or a demo can be a good way to get lots of people there from the start.
- Be sensitive to other students' politics: the last thing you want is people feeling like they've been tricked into an action they didn't agree to.
- If you think you can win, organise an extraordinary general meeting of your Students' Union and pass a motion to occupy. Alternatively, an agreement from an unofficial anti-cuts group can also help gather support.
- If you know where you are going, get a few people in before you announce it to everyone. This will help stop security guards keeping you out.
- When you assemble people to go into occupation do NOT assemble at the place you are going to occupy (unless it is essential to your plan, e.g. staying in a room you've previously booked legitimately).

### Internal Politics

It is also important that occupations are run in a democratic and accessible manner, but quite what this means should be decided internally.

- Many occupations have been run on the basis of "consensus decision-making".
- Consensus decision-making can help to avoid fracturing the group, but can sometimes stop decisions actually being made, or slow them down considerably.
- If there's a mix of political backgrounds in the room, then have a mix of decision making systems: some votes, some wavy hands. Just don't wear yourselves out arguing with each other.
- It's probably a bad idea to have a leader. Leaders tend to be dicks, and also make people far more culpable to the authorities.
- For the same reasons, do not set up a "steering committee". Instead appoint working groups for specific tasks that are then dissolved once the task is complete.
- Make sure that student union sabbatical officers don't take over the occupation.
- Occupations should be "safe-spaces", in which any discrimination based on gender, sexuality, disability, race, and ethnicity are actively combated.
- It is sensible to have a general meeting at least once daily at a set time, so that developments can be discussed. Let these meetings run the occupation, and decide when to leave.
- Meetings should not be allowed to go on for hours and hours. If something complex needs doing it may be good to set up a working group, who then report back .

### Media

Media is massively important for any occupation. Doing good media work will allow you to get your story heard, gain support and solidarity, and exert far greater pressure. Here are a few things you need to create:

- Facebook Group (Perhaps set up facebook account so that this is anonymous)
- Twitter Account
- Email address - Gmail gives you a lot of space for free.
- All occupations should have a website, where people can get quick access to information about location, demands, updates and news, photographs, and have links to your facebook,

email, twitter etc. Most occupations so far have used wordpress and run websites in a blog format as it's free and easy to use.

- Someone should have a decent camera to take print-quality photographs as newspapers will avoid sending photographers if they can. That also means bringing the connector cable for your camera!
- It's important to put out press releases at the beginning and throughout the occupation. These should be sent to local and national press, posted on your website, and on Indymedia.
- Set up an email list for people who want to get updates on what has been happening in the occupation.
- If possible, have a phone where you can be contacted. A new sim card with a number just for this means that you can share round the responsibility.
- Assign people in a rota to respond to incoming communications. You will be bombarded, but all journalists must be responded to, and all incoming emails must be read. It is a hard job, but you must keep on top of it.
- For how to write press releases and technique on speaking to journalists, there's a really good guide by the Climate Camp media team here: <http://climatecamp.org.uk/press/neighbourhood-media-pack>

### Wellbeing

- Occupations should be drug-free. The last thing you want is to get done for smoking a doobie when you're making serious political points. Eat fruit instead.
- Although hopefully not used, it's sensible for someone to have a first aid kit.
- Security is important but people should not lock doors from the inside. Rather it's good to have a rota of people on "security" duty at doors 24 hours a day. It's tiresome, yes, but necessary for the occupation to keep going.
- Where possible, at the end of the occupation leave buildings as you found them. You do not want to get arrested for criminal damage. Photograph all rooms before you leave them as evidence in case you are accused of damage.
- Have fun! We've seen everything from Ceilidhs in the Law Faculty at Cambridge, to socialist magic at the Mansion House at Middlesex. Do everything you can conceive of. Make trouble.
- That said, be aware of where CCTV cameras are.
- And if you are going to do something illegal, cover your face.

### Occupation as an open space

- Having your occupation as an open space can be great. If possible, put on public meetings and events. This will help people understand that you are properly non-violent, and may even attract sympathetic students to join your cause.
- Some people may also want to offer donations to the occupation (this happened at the Middlesex occupation in May 2010.) While it can be complicated to set up a paypal account, it may be useful to say on your website if there's anything you need.
- Flyer the local area with information about the occupation. Say on the flyers what it is and what it's about. Getting local support and support from students who don't personally want to occupy can be crucial to keeping an occupation going.

### Supporting other occupations

We hope that there will be a whole load of occupations going on at once, We also know that management of universities will talk to each other. Here are some tips on what you can do to support each other, and keep this movement going.

- When you hear of another occupation starting, email them or phone them to send your support. Everyone loves this shit.
- If you can, send a speaker to other newer occupations to tell them about your experiences and offer support and guidance.
- Keep other occupations up-to-date with concrete changes in your conditions (i.e. what management and the courts are doing, how you have responded.)
- When your occupation finishes, go and visit other occupations and help them out.

### Ending the occupation

- Decide together when to leave. Organise a rally, have a demonstration, make a whole lot of noise. Contact all your supporters and ask them to greet you outside the building when the time comes.
- If you are being threatened with disciplinary or legal actions people must be allowed to make their own choices on whether they want to stay or leave, but remember: united we stand; divided we fall.
- If management take out injunctions on occupiers, do not panic! Contact a good lawyer (see legal briefing sheet and bust card.) Often even sympathetic solicitors will be over-cautious (it's their job.) There is often no need to leave until the police arrive in significant numbers.
- Do everything you can to avoid arrest. If people do want to get arrested, then this is a personal decision that they must judge themselves.

We will also be writing a short leaflet on occupations and legal issues.

### Resources

**The Occupation Cookbook** – This is a document that came out of a set of occupations in Croatia. It has very useful information on direct democracy. <http://slobodnifilozofski.org/?p=1915/>

**National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC)** – A student-based organization working on protests around HE policy. Useful for resources and support. <http://anticuts.com/>

**Education Activists Network (EAN)** – Similar to NCAFC but also with members of staff involved. <http://educationactivistnetwork.wordpress.com/>

**Seeds for Change** - Good information about consensus decision-making and direct action training. <http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/>

**ULU** – University of London Union has good policy on the issues, and may be able to offer support to students in occupations in the University of London <http://www.ulucol.ac.uk/>

**Climate Camp** - Experienced green activists with a good document on how to deal with press. <http://climatecamp.org.uk/press/neighbourhood-media-pack>

**Indymedia** – Independent media server. A good place to spread information about what is happening in your occupation. <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/>

**NUS** is really useful if you want to look up how not to run a campaign against fees. [www.bureaucraticanduseless.org.uk](http://www.bureaucraticanduseless.org.uk)