

# ELECTIONS AT THE STUDENT ASSOCIATIONS

## STUDENT VOICE RESEARCH PROJECT

*“THERE’S ALSO AN INVESTMENT WHICH YOU CAN MAKE WHICH IS TO MAKE  
THE EXPERIENCE EVEN BETTER FOR THOSE THAT FOLLOW YOU”*

TIM BLACKMAN, OU VICE-CHANCELLOR, 2019

EMMA STEVENS, OU STUDENT VOICE RESEARCHER

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# ABSTRACT

The 'Students Elections at the Association' research project explored aspects of student engagement with the OU Students Association (OUSA) elections process. To gain perspectives of the Open University (OU) student voice, an online focus group discussion was conducted. Thematic analysis identified, described and assessed themes of democratic engagement. It was found that primary motivations for voter participation were identity, contribution, awareness, informed choice and the relevance of OUSA. It is recommended that democratic processes are further refined to increase voter uptake. To create an active citizenship culture, OUSA engagement should be fostered early in the student journey through a joined-up approach with the OU.

## 1. BACKGROUND

### 1.1 OUSA and Governance

The Open University Students Association (OUSA) is an independent student union as defined by the Education Act 1994 and a registered charity (Open University Students Association, 2019a). Its mission is to be the community and voice for approximately 170,000 Open University (OU) students located across the UK, the Republic of Ireland and continental Europe (Open University Students Association, 2019b). The OU Students Association represents OU students at both the national and local level. Furthermore, a student is granted automatic membership of the Students Association once registered for study with the OU.

The OU Students Association governs through a representative democratic structure. Led by the President, the Central Executive Committee (CEC) sets OUSA policy and makes decisions on behalf of the student body along with the necessary checks and balances (Open University Students Association, 2019c). Ahead of the Biennial Conference, elections are held to elect (presently 23) representatives to the CEC and the Board of Trustees for a two-year term (Bye-Laws, 2018, SC11.2).

Terms of office run from 1 August of the year in which the biennial elections are held to 31 July two years after that election (Bye-Laws, 2018, SC3.9). By-elections may be used to fill vacancies, in which case the elected representative serves for the remainder of the term (Bye-Laws, 2018, SC11.2)

Prior to 2016, there was no provision for all OU students to participate in the Students Association elections (Robinson, 2019). Standing for election and voting for candidates took place at Biennial Conference where voter numbers were limited to around 300 students who attended the event on a first-come-first-served basis. In 2016, the election process introduced 'one member one vote' to extend voting rights to all OUSA members and 'self-nomination' to allow any student to stand as a CEC candidate (Sinha, 2017). Consequently, there is no maximum number of candidates who can stand in an election. Since 2016, voting in Students Association elections has taken place online by secret ballot using the single transferable voting system.

## **1.2 2016 and 2018 Student Association Elections**

Following changes to the Students Association elections processes, engagement levels improved in 2016 with an overall turnout of 1.8% (Robinson, 2019). A total of 4,368 voters participated in the main election and a total of 68 candidates stood for 28 roles (Sinha, 2017). However, the 2018 Students Association election saw

overall turnout decrease to only 1,519 voters taking part and a total of 41 candidates standing for 23 roles (Robinson, 2019). There was no material change to the student population between the years 2016 to 2018. From the data available, it was not possible to calculate an accurate overall voter turnout % figure. However, if the electorate was assumed to be made up of 170,000 eligible student voters, overall turnout was 0.9%. Moreover, voter participation in OU Students Association elections was low compared to the national average. In 2016 and 2018, the average turnout in Student Union elections was 15.7% and 18% respectively (Stanton, 2019).

### 1.3 Student Voice Research

The student voice embodies the thoughts, views and opinions of students' educational experiences and is articulated by means of direct consultation (Open University Students Association, 2019d). Student Voice Researchers are OU students who volunteer to work on themed projects relating to aspects of student engagement with the Students Association (Open University Students Association, 2019e). With the change to the 'one member one vote' system, there is a need to better understand how OU students' engage with election activities. More specifically, there is a gap in research when it comes to exploring OU students' experiences of democratic engagement.

Subsequently, in November 2019 the Elections Review Working Group (ERWG) commissioned three Student Voice Researchers to deliver a 'Student Elections at the Association' research project. The project brief was to investigate student engagement with the elections process, through which the student leadership team is elected. The focus of inquiry of the present research report was to explore students' motivations for voting in the Students Association elections.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1 Approach

Initial desk research was carried out using internal and external websites and documents, such as reports, to obtain background information to the project.

Additionally, a meeting was held with the OUSA Head of Student Support during the project's induction phase to help determine the main themes for investigation. Next, a focus group discussion was conducted online using semi-structured, open-ended questions. In this way, rich qualitative data was collected on fellow students' views of engaging with the Students Association's democratic processes. Furthermore, close-ended question polls were used in the session to collect quantitative data for high-level analysis.

The qualitative research method of thematic analysis was used to identify, describe and analyse patterns (themes) found in the students' dialogue, using notes made during the online discussion. To start, the researcher employed an inductive process to generate labels defining features of the data, termed codes (Pettigrew et al., 2016). The coding scheme was updated and refined through an iterative process of re-reading. Resultingly, the main themes relating to motivations for voter participation were located in the student voice.

### 2.2 Participants

Four OU students were recruited as participants through an advert placed on the Student Voice page of the OUSA website (Open University Students Association, 2019f). The opportunity was also shared on social media. Of the four participants, three students were undergraduates and one student a postgraduate. Moreover, all

participants were students new to the OU with less than one year of study. Participants shared that one worked at the National Union of Students (NUS) and another at a Further Education (FE) institution. Additionally, another participant volunteered as an OUSA Central Committee Representative. Therefore, the participants had some familiarity with Higher Education (HE) representative structures and processes. An incentive of a £10 Amazon voucher was offered to each participant who took part in the online discussion.

### 2.3 Online Discussion

The focus group discussion was hosted online using Adobe Connect and was facilitated by the OUSA Research and Information Officer. In attendance were four participants and three Student Voice Researchers who oversaw the session. Each Student Voice Researcher took a turn to ask the participants questions and to conduct short answer polls (see *Appendix A*). A slide showing the question being discussed was visible to the participants during the Adobe Connect session to aid group focus.

Consent to participate was sought individually prior to and collectively at the start of the online discussion. Participants were informed that the data collected would be anonymised and that the session was not being recorded. Notes were made of the participants' dialogue by the Student Voice Researchers and the Facilitator using pen and paper. Participants' typed responses in the chat box facility provided additional textual data. The duration of the online discussion lasted forty-five minutes in total.

## 2.4 Findings

Significantly, the participants viewed the elements of the voting process as potential motivations rather than barriers to participation in Students Association elections.

The themes identified are regarded as central to understanding the types of motivations of all the participants for voting in student elections. These themes are categorised as 'Identity', 'Contribution', 'Awareness', 'Informed Choice' and the 'Relevance of OUSA'. Whilst thematic analysis of the data established common group perceptions, it also preserved the subtle distinctions of the individual participant's educational experiences.

### 2.4.1 Identity

Aspects of identity influence motivations for voter participation. Identity refers to individual perceptions of self, as well as the group commonalities and student body characteristics identified by the participants. All four participants referred to themselves as "*new*", with a greater emphasis on being new generally denoting a shorter length of study. Participants 1 and 2 appeared to have been at the OU for the least amount of time, with Participant 2 stressing "*I'm very new*". Although Participants 3 and 4 were students new to the OU, the former had already completed an access module and the latter was undertaking a postgraduate degree. Therefore, Participants 3 and 4 were further along in their educational journeys than Participants 1 and 2.

Interestingly, duration of study appeared to correlate with academic attitude, or a student's willingness and openness to academic engagement. Participants 1 and 2

made several positive statements about their engagement with new academic activities whereas Participants 3 and 4 made none. For example, in a chat bot exchange Participant 1 said in reference to a module *"it's amazing!"* whilst Participant 2 responded *"I love literature too, so I'm excited!"*. This would seem to suggest that favourable attitudes to academic engagement might be linked to the length of time that a student has been in active study. Thus, the newer a student is to the OU, the seemingly higher the level of willingness to engage about their educational experiences.

One aspect of identity shared by the group was the possession of a political attitude. All the participants referenced a disposition towards democratic engagement, especially those that either volunteered or worked in the HE sector. Participant 4 who was employed by the NUS commented that *"I enjoy student politics"* whilst Participant 2 who worked for a FE institution noted, *"I'm politically minded"*. Participant 1 who volunteered as an OUSA Central Committee Representative said, *"I don't want to get on my political soapbox but..."* before elaborating further on a point of view.

Moreover, the group recognised that the OU student body was both diverse and unique in comparison to those belonging to traditional 'bricks and mortar' universities. Participant 4 observed, *"from my experiences so far there is a really wide range of students"*. That OU students were distance learners with atypical



learning needs was felt to be an important characteristic of the overall OU student identity.

#### Key points

- the willingness of student engagement at the start of the educational journey
- the diverse and unique learning needs of the OU student body

### 2.4.2 Contribution

As a motivation to vote, contribution means the participants' feelings and beliefs about how engaging with democratic activities benefits the wider community. Voting can be considered as a form of civic engagement. Discussing the responsibility of individuals (students) and the collective (student body) to engage politically elicited responses that suggested strongly held convictions. Participant 1 commented that *"any student union is as strong as its members, and it is a moral responsibility to vote"*, to which Participant 3 agreed. Thus, the strength of the Students Association was equated to the collective democratic engagement of its members.

Furthermore, the contribution of voting behaviours was discussed in two distinct ways. Nationally, the electorate's voting behaviours were linked directly to the shaping of public policy. To illustrate, Participant 1 argued that if people chose not to vote in a General Election, *"you could not complain because you did not put your voice forward"*. Locally, the participants overestimated the extent of voter participation in the 2018 Students Association election. This misperception was demonstrated in a chat box exchange following Poll 6 (see *Appendix A*).

Participant 2: *"I'm genuinely shocked the highest answer is so low!"*

Participant 1: *"I was cynical"*

Participant 4: *"not as bad as some of the institutions I know of! still feels v low"*

Participant 1: *"that's...less than 1%?"*

Participant 3: *"i thought it would be higher"*

Participant 2: *"I thought it would be a lot higher"*

Significantly, all of the participants were surprised by the low turnout of voters (1,519) in the 2018 main election. Three of the four participants assumed that voter participation of OU students would be much higher. Participants 1 and 4 who engaged with Student Unions, either through volunteering or employment, were the least surprised of the group. It is possible that the wider student population might be similarly overestimating voter participation. If this were to be the case, an assumption that fellow students might have already voted could potentially act as a motivation *not* to vote.

#### **Key points**

- the individual and collective responsibility of democratic engagement
- the beliefs/perceptions held by the student body about voter turnout in Student Association elections

### **2.4.3 Awareness**

Awareness as a motivating factor for voting in student elections refers to the knowledge of democratic structures, representatives and processes. Participants 1, 2 and 4 were already familiar with student elections and HE representative structures through their volunteering or employment activities. In response to Poll 1 (see *Appendix A*) which asked whether participants had voted in OUSA elections, all

participants responded that they had not yet had the opportunity to do so. That none of the participants chose the option '*There is a Students Association election?*' when answering Poll 1 (see *Appendix A*) suggested an overall group awareness of student elections.

However, an Autumn by-election had been held on 16 October 2019. The researcher cannot determine whether the participants received a voting code in time to vote. Yet, it is noted that registration for study with the OU in the present academic year occurred before the by-election date. Moreover, Participant 3 selected '*Yes, I read this, and clicked on the link to vote, I then voted*' in Poll 5 (see *Appendix A*) indicating that they had voted in the Autumn by-election. It is possible that the participant did not remember voting at the start of the discussion when answering Poll 1 (see *Appendix A*). Alternatively, it could indicate that there was a degree of confusion about what a by-election is in relation to main elections. None of the other three participants recalled receiving the email to vote.

Interestingly, the participants' knowledge of the present members of the CEC varied by role. In response to Polls 2, 3 and 4 (see *Appendix A*), three out of four of the participants knew who the current President was but only two were aware of their faculty and area representatives. This would seem to indicate that the level of awareness of the different CEC members was not equal and might be connected to the extent of each representative's visibility in the wider student community.

#### **Key points**

- the timings of OU student registration and OUSA elections communications
- OU students' levels of awareness of the different CEC members

#### 2.4.4 Informed Choice

Informed choice means the participant's ability to make an informed decision about candidates and how it affects their motivation to vote. Here, candidate manifestos were the most commonly cited motivation for voter participation, with all the participants identifying aspects of location, content and presentation. Participant 4 mentioned that it would be helpful to have concise manifestos and that candidate videos would make it easier to vote. It is noted that the latter has already been implemented. Participant 1 said that having a central, accessible place for candidate manifestos where they could be reviewed quickly and easily would also help when voting. Participant 3 commented that '*the manifestos were what caught my eye and made me want to vote*' when discussing motivations for voting in the Autumn by-election. However, knowledge of candidate manifestos was not the only significant motivation for voting. Participant 4 noted that knowing that the elected officer would have an impact "*would make voting worthwhile*". This insight revealed that a candidate's ability to deliver against an election manifesto was a key aspect of voter decision-making.

##### **Key points**

- the location, content and presentation of candidate manifestos
- the accountability of elected representatives to deliver against their election manifestos

#### 2.4.5 Relevance of OUSA

The relevance of OUSA regarding its ability to represent the student voice was recognised by the participants as a motivation to engage in election activities. When asked if the Students Association elections were relevant in representing students'

concerns and opinions, three participants answered “yes”. Participant 4 responded with *“I imagine they will do”*, adding that from past Student Union experience they could assume that OUSA representatives would have similar influence in representing the student voice. Participant 1 observed that *“when we are distance learners, OUSA is our voice”*. The relevance of OUSA to articulate and empower the student voice was particularly important when there was no physical presence of the student body at the OU campus.

Yet, the impact of OUSA was understood within the context of its overall visibility within the OU. Participant 1 felt strongly about the OU publicising the Students Association more, saying *“until the University and Students Association are more joined up, your average student isn’t going to know”*. The need for greater OU and OUSA collaboration was echoed by Student Representatives (members of the current CEC) who were consulted as part of the present research project. Student Representative A noted that *“we need to enlist the university to help – it works better if they say we impacted on X, Y or Z than just our saying this”*. One way that this could be achieved was explained by Student Representative B who said, *“I think a more visible presence on the main OU pages would be a good start, as well as ALs and student facing staff promoting the association better”*.

#### **Key points**

- OUSA representation of distance learner needs and interests
- the requirement for a joined-up OU and OUSA approach to student engagement

### 3. DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Local and national contexts

The types of motivations for voter participation as identified in the present research can be evaluated according to local and national contexts. During the online discussion, although the group of participants were new to studying with the OU, all of them reported being aware that student elections took place. Interestingly, new students with less than one year of study with the OU were the group most likely to have taken part in the 2016 Students Association elections with a higher than average turnout (Robinson, 2019).

However, the 2017 *Elections Review Survey Findings* reported that less than half the students surveyed (43%) were aware of Student Association elections (Sinha, 2017). Moreover, voter participation was lowest for those students with less than one year of study at the OU with 98% choosing not to vote (Sinha, 2017). It should be noted that the respondents with less than one year of study had joined the OU in October 2016 following the elections which took place in June of that year. Yet, these findings raise further questions about the ways in which students new to study with the OU come to engage with democratic processes and the points in their educational journey at which they choose to do so.

For the research participants, possessing the necessary skills and knowledge to make an informed choice about candidates in student elections was cited as a key motivation to vote. Correspondingly, in the 2017 *Elections Review Survey Findings* one of the reasons students did not participate in the 2016 elections was feeling unable to make an informed choice (Sinha, 2017). Overall, 40% of the respondents reported that they felt that they did not know enough about the candidates (Sinha,

2017). Furthermore, open comments from the survey revealed that not feeling informed was linked to both the content and presentation of candidate manifestos and the time constraints in reviewing them. These insights reveal how features of the democratic process, such as candidate manifestos, can act as either a motivation or a barrier to voter participation in Student Association elections.

Additionally, the differing levels of the participants' knowledge of the individual CEC members corresponded to voter levels of engagement in OUSA elections. For example, 87% of voters in the 2016 Students Association election voted in the Presidential contest (Robinson, 2019). Contrastingly, only 38% of voters participating in the same election chose to vote in the Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies Representative contest. This could be linked to varying levels of awareness of or interest in the different CEC member roles. Alternatively, it could indicate 'voting fatigue'. It has been observed from elections data that the number of voters participating in a contest decreases the further down a role appears on the ballot paper (Robinson, 2019).

Like candidate manifestos, perceptions about the relevance on the OU Students Association can serve either to encourage or discourage voter participation in student elections. All the participants in the present research found the OUSA elections to be relevant to their concerns and opinions. However, in the 2017 *Elections Review Survey*, 37% of respondents did not vote because they felt that the Students Association elections were not relevant to them (Sinha, 2017). Moreover, in a large-scale national student survey conducted in 2019, just 35% of current undergraduates said that the Student Union was an important part of their life, with only 29% of recent graduates feeling the same (Trendence UK, 2019). This evidence suggests a two-fold problem of the perceived relevance of Student Unions

at a broader level. Firstly, levels of student engagement with Student Unions tends to be low nationally. Secondly, there is a decrease in positive attitude to the Student Union throughout a student's educational journey (Trendence UK, 2019).

#### **Key points**

- the ways in which students new to the OU come to engage with democratic activities
- key features of elections can act either as a motivation or barrier to voter participation

### **3.2 Active Citizenship**

Yet, graduates have shown to be more likely to both volunteer and to vote than non-graduates (GuildHE, 2016). Therefore, Higher Education is uniquely placed to promote and foster experiences of active citizenship by offering students various opportunities to engage in civic life. Democratic engagement has been identified as the central element to the development of active citizens. This is recognised by the OU and the OUSA with Principle 4 of the *Student Charter* committing to actively promote and support the right of students to participate in the governance of the University through the Open University Students Association (The Open University, 2019). Furthermore, opportunities to contribute to the wider student community through voluntary work are provided through the OU Students Association (Open University Students Association, 2019g).

The knowledge contributed by the present research is that students new to study with OU show high levels of openness and willingness to civic and democratic



engagement. Therefore, it is recommended that efforts should be made to actively engage with students at the beginning of their OU journey.

**Active citizenship:**

- politically and academically engaged students
- who make a difference to their community through civic activities
- and have the skills and knowledge to participate in democratic activities

## Recommendations

To work towards building an active citizenship culture at the OU, recommendations are split into two strands of refining democratic processes and fostering student engagement, especially those new to study with the OU. These strands are aligned with OUSA's 2019/20 to 2022/23 strategic aims of:

- *Inform & Support:* to increase awareness and improve relevance of OUSA during every stage of the student journey
- *Engage & Involve:* increase student engagement levels and improve participation in democratic processes
- *Influence & Transform:* empower students to influence decision-making

(Open University Students Association, 2019h)

## Refining democratic processes

1. Follow up the 2017 *Elections Review Survey Findings* recommendation to create an overview of the democratic structure of the Students Association in flowchart format. Presently, this information is absent from OUSA webpages. An overview of the elections processes and timelines would also be useful.

2. Review where the function of elections sits within the OUSA organisational structure since it is currently without an owner. Assigning an owner would help drive forward the monitoring and refinement of elections processes.
3. Review the upfront commissioning, active reporting and monitoring of elections data. Data collection and profiling from the 2016 and 2018 Students Association were inconsistent, making comparative analysis problematic. Review how elections data is collected, stored and viewed within the context of GDPR.
4. Review the location, presentation, content and communication of candidate manifestos in relation to any relevant recommendations that might be made by the other 'Elections at the Students Association' research reports.
5. Create and adopt a student stakeholder engagement plan to improve the levels of awareness of CEC member roles.
6. Review the accountability and delivery of candidate manifestos.

## **Fostering student engagement**

1. Map an OUSA engagement cycle to the OU student journey according to entry points and learning needs profiles (i.e. new starters, returners, full-time learners, part-time learners).
2. Develop a joined-up approach with the OU to foster student engagement with OUSA, especially those new to study with the OU.
3. Create and adopt a principal OU stakeholder engagement plan for developing collaborative student engagement (such as early sign-posting of OUSA on the OU Student Home page).

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## APPENDIX A

### **SVR – Student Voice Researcher**

*Ice-breaker question: Please introduce yourself and tell us how long you have been studying with the Open University?*

#### **SVR1 poll and questions**

Poll 1: Have you voted in the OU Students Association elections before?

- Yes, I vote regularly
- Yes, I have voted once
- No, I have never voted (4)
- There is a Students Association election?

*SVR1 Q1: What are your reasons for not voting in the OU Students Association elections?*

*SVR1 Q2: As potential voters, do you feel that the OU Students Association elections are relevant to representing your concerns and opinions?*

#### **SVR2 polls and questions**

Poll 2: Please indicate below if you are aware of who currently holds the position of President of OU Student Association

- Yes (3)

- No (1)

Poll 3: Please indicate below if you are aware of who currently holds the position of your faculty representative.

- Yes (2)
- No (2)

Poll 4: Please indicate below if you are aware of who currently holds the position of your area representative.

- Yes (2)
- No (2)

*SVR2 Q1: What do you know about the work of the elected student representatives?*

*SVR2 Q2: What information would you like to see in a candidate's manifesto?*

### **SVR3 polls and questions**

Poll 5: An email from the OU Students Association was sent to all students last month (15 October) reminding them to vote in the Autumn-by-elections. Do you recall receiving this email?

- Yes, I read this and clicked on the link to vote. I then voted (1)
- Yes, I clicked on a link but did not vote
- Yes, but I ignored/deleted/marked as spam
- I don't recall receiving this email (3)

*SVR3 Q1: What made you vote?*

*SVR3 Q2: How would you prefer to receive communications and progress updates regarding student elections?*

*SVRQ3 Q3: How would you feel about this information being hosted on Student Home?*

*SVR3 Q4: If you were to vote in future, how long would you expect to spend in total, viewing candidate profiles/manifestos and then voting?*

*SVR3 Q5: Are you aware of the SA YouTube channel?*

*SVR3 Q6: Are you aware of the SA digital magazine, The Hoot?*

*SVR3 Q7: Are you aware of the student radio show?*

Poll 6: If you had to guess how many of the OU's 170,000 students voted in the last election in 2018, how many would you say?

- 2519 (1)
- 1519 (2)
- 519 (1)
- 119 (0)

Poll 7: Which platform do you think is best for promoting student elections?

1. The Hoot – SA magazine
2. Student Radio channel
3. Videos/ YouTube
4. Email

5. Other, please specify

*Facilitator question: How about a 2-page spread on the Hoot magazine, giving a brief overview of candidate manifesto to make it easier to review them?*