

Student Voice Research: Student Elections Project

“Any student union is as strong as its members” // Participant 1

The Open University Students Association is a voice for over 170 000 students. To fairly represent them, a few years ago, the OUSA made a significant change to their election system. Instead of having elections during a biennial conference to which only 300 students could attend, they introduced an online voting system where every student can participate. Despite this move to give the students an opportunity to choose their own representatives, in the last student election of 2018 only 1% of them took part. So, what are the causes for such a low involvement?

This was the main question I, and my fellow Student Voice Researchers, tried to answer. As I am rather new to the OU (I now am going through my second module), I have had little knowledge about the election system and the work done by the Students Association. Although this felt like a big disadvantage in working on this project, I quickly understood that I represent the average online learner who maybe wants to be more engaged in university life but does not have enough information to do so.

To better understand the topic, we were given the relevant materials from previous elections, among which was a review of the 2016 student elections. The central part of our project was to interview several students and hear their opinions regarding the OUSA elections. To understand the process from the other side, I also prepared a few questions for the elected officers, which were forwarded to them by the research team. Hearing from both the students and the candidates helped us build a clearer picture of the topic at hand.

What do the elected officers do?

Our student participants pointed out several barriers that lessened their engagement in voting. The main obstacle seems to be the lack of information about the roles of CEC (Central Executive Committee) members. Although CEC members are required to submit reports about their work, which are available on the website, those seem to reach only the more engaged members of the Students Association. It became apparent that their visibility for the wider student community needs to be improved. As one of the interviewed elected officers indicated: *“if you're not a member of the CEC/OUSA it's rather a challenge to know who representatives are.”*

Hearing more about the work of elected officers would improve students' awareness and build their connection with the Student Association. This view is also shared by the representatives themselves who experience this overwhelming lack of recognition first-hand. Both students and elected candidates see social media as a great tool for better communication. However, this channel has so far not been fully exploited when it comes to building dialogue between representatives and the

student's community. Using channels such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram can be an easy and effective way to reach students who want to be more engaged and better informed. As one of the participants said: "*student representatives do an incredible job but it's about closing the feedback loop in the most efficient way*". As an example of already existing good communication channels, one of the students mentioned the OU Scotland Twitter account.

We are different!

Well prepared and relevant to students' needs manifestoes are other important factors which can encourage students to vote. Being able to choose a candidate who best represents them and understands their struggles is essential to any voter. The OU students differ from their counterparts at more traditional universities; they are distance learners, often trying to combine their full- or part-time studying with work and a busy schedule. They come from different socio-economic backgrounds, different countries, different ethnic groups, and they would like to see this reflected in the manifestoes. "*The OU is not like other universities, we are non-traditional as a student body, and there needs to be awareness about how to deal with the different ways that students learn*" (Participant 1). This, however, does not mean that voters want to hear generic statements and impossible to achieve ideas. They want to see specific information to be assured that the candidate of their choice can actively represent and support them.

We want to vote, but we are busy!

Time spent on voting was another factor mentioned by the students as impacting their engagement in student elections. As typical OU distance learner is usually overloaded with everyday tasks and cannot devote hours comparing multiple manifestos for each of the 23 posts. Our online discussion participants were willing to spend between 30 to 60 minutes on the process because they would then be able to do it while commuting to work or during their lunch break. Easy to compare manifestoes was mentioned as a way to improve the voting experience and also make it quicker. During the online discussion, the suggestion of a 2-page spread with an overview of the candidates was met with big enthusiasm. This could also be easily shared on social media and therefore reach more students and improve their general awareness of the election.

Good manifestos, but how?

It is important for candidates to prepare well for their campaigning and have a good manifesto. To achieve this, they need to understand the role they aspire to, together with their future responsibilities and commitments. Although all candidates receive an introductory package from the Students Association, its content seems to be too abstract and incomplete. The CEC members who gave us their feedback acknowledged that the understanding of their future position came from talking to their predecessors. This corresponds with the findings in the election review from 2017. Despite the fact

that all candidates took the recommended steps, such as reading the provided documents and reflecting on work/life balance, the key difference between the elected/not elected candidates was making the effort to speak to previous post-holders (Elections Review survey findings, p.10). This turned out to be for them the best way to learn about the day-to-day duties and obligations which come with the role. One of the candidates interviewed in 2017 suggested: *“It might be an idea to create a space on the election timetable for students who are interested in standing for an elected post to be able to ask those currently in the role about their experiences.”* (Elections Review survey findings, p.11). As mentioned by previous and current elected officers learning from previous post-holders would help immensely when preparing for elections.

As candidates undertake the posts for a two-years term, they should fully understand what’s ahead of them. One of the current post-holders suggested that the best way of doing it would be to create short videos explaining each role. Additional information about the responsibilities should also include more clarification on time commitments. Although most officers were already actively involved in the Students Association, nevertheless they found the role more demanding than expected. To quote one of the elected candidates: *“Making it clear that you need to be able to hit the ground running, and that in practice it involves longer hours than those indicated.”*

Be visible.

A well-run campaign is essential for candidates to reach more students and secure their votes. As the Open University is focused on online learning one of the best ways to communicate with students seems to be through social media. Better guidelines for using different channels is mentioned by elected candidates as an improvement for future elections: *“Knowledge of the different forums and social media channels which may be used for campaigning, as well as some basic level of understanding what is permitted to share or not share, could have been helpful”* (elected officer) Well prepared candidates who speak up and also listen to students needs on social media could be a great way to improve awareness not only about elections but also about the Students Association itself.

Stronger together.

When talking about the election visibility, both students and elected officers see a disconnect between the OU and the Students Association. *“We need to enlist the university to help”* was a common opinion among our participants. As one of them added: *“I firmly feel OU needs to view OUSA representatives as the working partner they are, and thus value and support them as such, by making their contributions and presence known across OU student facing channels.”* The interviewed students expressed their interest in having more information about the Students Association and the student elections on the Student Home page. One of our participants also suggested that election dates could be automatically added to the students’ calendar, similar to information about tutorial days, as a simple and effective way to improve awareness.

What’s next?

It is probably not feasible to build awareness about the OUSA elections among all OU students. Still, there are many who want to be better informed and participate more, but they first need to see that the organisation is relevant to them and can make an impact. Better informed students will more likely feel the responsibility to vote during the next election, as they would understand that the elected officers are indeed the students' voice.

Our interviews with students and elected candidates pointed to a few changes which could help in achieving this:

- **Improved communication on social media**, which gives updates about work done by the Students Association and its representatives, would be a good starting place to reach more students.
- **Well prepared and easy to compare manifestos** would help students to choose the right candidate who best represents their specific needs and struggles.
- **Better informed candidates standing** for elections to ensure they are ready to undertake their tasks and responsibilities. Their awareness of the role could also improve their campaign and the communication with voters.
- **Improved communication and increased visibility** could probably be better achieved with a stronger collaboration between the OU and the OUSA.

References:

Sinha, P. (2017) Election Review survey findings, The Open University [Available at <https://www.oustudents.com/elections-review-survey-findings-1>]