

OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ASSOCIATION

Central Executive Committee (CEC)

2 - 4 July 2021

Scotland and Wales Manifesto Update

The CEC is asked to:-

- i) **note** this update regarding the activity carried out in promotion of the OU Students Association manifestos for the May 2021 Scottish and Welsh elections

1. Introduction and context

- 1.1 This paper aims to provide an update on how the manifestos for the May 2021 Scotland and Wales were deployed and some of the impact that they have achieved so far, as well as what we've learned from the process.
- 1.2 It was hoped that producing manifestos for the Scottish and Welsh elections would achieve impact on three levels:
 - a) Influencing the policy-making process to include more issues that impact part-time and distance-learning students
 - b) Raising the general profile of the OU Students Association in the policy and public affairs space
 - c) Increasing OU Students Association members' awareness about our activity in this area and engaging them in the process
- 1.3 This report is split into three main sections, the first of which details the activities carried out in promotion of the manifesto. The second section discusses some of the impact of this activity, and the third section reviews the learning we have gathered so far.

2. Manifesto Activity and Promotion

- 2.1 *Manifesto launch:* For each manifesto, with the support of the DigiComms team, we created a short video containing multiple students from each of the nations. These were intended to be a concise, easily digestible explanation of why we were publishing the manifestos and what each of them contained in terms of the Association's policy asks for candidates. These videos were promoted on the Association social media platforms, by Area Reps within the nations and by the OU in Wales and OU in Scotland.

- 2.2 *Dedicated nations space on oustudents.com:* We also used the manifestos as an opportunity to create the oustudents.com/Wales and oustudents.com/Scotland pages on the website. These became dedicated spaces to host the respective manifestos and provide nation specific information for students regarding how to register to vote, how to sign up for a postal-vote, and how to find your local constituency. We hope to keep these spaces active and find nation-specific content that will be useful to members.
- 2.3 *Influencing and raising awareness with candidates:* In a coordinated approach involving the OU in Wales and OU in Scotland, the manifestos were emailed to circa 500 candidates in Scotland and circa 250 candidates in Wales in the weeks leading up to the elections. Since the election, the manifesto for Scotland has been resent to all successfully elected candidates with a congratulations message and an invitation to engage with us on the issues. The manifesto for Wales will similarly be sent to successfully elected candidates in the coming weeks.
- 2.4 *Student email campaigns:* A tool was created on the Association website to enable students in Wales and Scotland to email the manifesto to their local and regional candidates with a pre-written message that just needed their name adding to it. This was shared and promoted on the Association's social media platforms as well as by the Area Reps and by the OU teams in the nations.

3. Impact

- 3.1 *Response from candidates:* We received many positive and supportive messages from candidates representing parties from across the political spectrum. The following are just a small sample of quotes from the responses received:
- *"Thanks for your email. I am a graduate of the O.U and agree with your manifesto. There are still too many inequalities in the system." – Labour candidate (Scotland)*
 - *"I wholeheartedly agree with the policies highlighted in the manifesto and as someone who went back to Uni at 43 to study, I know the challenges that distance learning can throw up, It is even more important than ever in light of this pandemic, with people losing their jobs that re-training and accessibility to courses is vital to our economy. Digital accessibility is key and it is something that needs addressed in lots of areas in Scotland. Disabled students should not have to do deal with the bureaucracy and the yearly assessments to prove their disabilities so it is vital we tackle the inequalities facing our disabled students so they can have a seamless approach to distance learning and ensuring people with caring responsibilities are treated with fairness. I'd like to thank you once again for your lovely email and if elected in May, I would be more than happy to support your manifesto pledges to ensure more equitable support is in place." – SNP candidate (Scotland)*

- "...appreciate you sending me this. I am a big supporter of the OU." – Conservative candidate (Scotland)
- "I myself completed a Masters and (much later) a PhD, part time while working (although not through the OU), and I know how very lucky I was to be able to cover the costs myself from my work, and to be able to find time away from caring responsibilities too. I want that possibility for everyone – I think that access to higher education at different stages in life is hugely important." – Labour Candidate (Wales)
- "I am a passionate supporter of the Open University and the higher education sector. My sister is currently working towards a degree through the establishment, and although she didn't go through the Open University, my Mum was a mature student when she went to university. I believe fully in the need to make higher education more flexible and accessible." – Lib Dem candidate (Wales)
- "As an OU graduate I read your manifesto with great interest. I personally have benefited enormously from my OU degree giving me both confidence and opportunities which opened doors to employment. I gained my degree when I was caring for my young family and to be able to study at my own pace and from home was essential." – Lib Dem candidate (Wales)
- "Should I be re-elected to the Senedd these are issues that I would hope to consider as part of a commitment to lifelong learning opportunities." – Labour candidate (Wales)
- "As an OU alumni (give the OU the gravitas it deserves) I am pleased to hear from you guys and am fully behind the OU and everything it does." – Plaid Cymru candidate (Wales)
- "I actually completed my undergrad degree with the OU, gaining a BA (Hons) in International Relations back in 2012... ..At the Green Party we agree with all of your asks and would fully support a review into removing barriers for people with protected characteristics, and also raising the cap on childcare grants." – Green Party (Wales)

3.2 *Follow-up activity:* The email to successfully elected candidates in Scotland has resulted in a meeting with the Scottish Conservative's spokesperson for Education, Pam Gosal, who is keen to find out more about our priorities. At the time of writing, this meeting is in the process of being arranged.

3.3 *Student engagement:* The student email campaigns received relatively low engagement, although higher in Wales due to use of the Association Wales Facebook group. A number of students in Wales reported using the tool and receiving responses from candidates.

4. Learning

4.1 *Working with the OU:* Coordination of communication plans with the OU in Wales and Scotland helped our manifesto to land with more impact. Additionally, ensuring emails from ourselves and the OU to candidates highlighted that we are an independent organisation with our own agenda was important in raising the Association's profile and ensuring it wasn't overlooked

as an additional mailing from the OU itself. These approaches can be used in future elections such as the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections.

- 4.2 *Support:* There was significant support for our policy-platform from the responses we received, which points to a balanced set of reasonable and realistic asks on behalf of OU students.
- 4.3 *Campaigning:* Although engagement with the student email campaign tool was relatively low, the development of such a tool was a success that can be drawn upon in the future. The challenge identified here is increasing awareness and engagement with this type of activity in the future.

5. Contact

- 5.1 Do not hesitate to contact me (dan.moloney@open.ac.uk) if you have any queries or comments.

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