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## APPG on Students meeting on voter registration – 14 July 2015

**Attendees:**

Paul Blomfield MP (Chair)

Jo Stevens MP

Cat Smith MP

Lilian Greenwood MP

Chris Matheson MP

Representative of the Office of Clive Lewis MP

Nicky Old, Head of Political Affairs and Communication, Universities UK

**Chair’s opening**

Paul Blomfield opened the meeting outlining that voter registration has been a key concern of the APPG on Students, and that the issue is continually raised by Members of the Group.

Last year, the APPG on Students held an evidence session on voter registration and integrated enrolment.[[1]](#footnote-1) This session is a follow up to this, and will hear findings from a report from Universities UK on the voter registration activities of Universities and Vice-Chancellors.

**Presentation from Nicky Old, Universities UK (UUK) - UUK survey of members on voter registration**

Nicky began by outlining that voter registration is an issue which UUK and its members, Vice Chancellors, have been aware if for some time - from raising concerns originally about the move away from block registration, through to more recent work in the last 18 months with both Cabinet Office and the Electoral Commission.

Post-general election, the university sector remains concerned about student voter registration for a number of reasons:

* It fits with the civic responsibility of universities to enable students to take part in the democratic process, should they wish to.
* The sector is mindful that we are entering a period with a number of elections - Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, London mayor and of course the EU referendum.
* There are the concerns about what may follow the Boundary Commission’s review of constituencies and the impact on universities’ representation, although this is not currently a main trigger for university action.

Last month Universities UK asked its members to complete a short online survey about student voter registration, and in particular the activities undertaken in 2014-15 ahead of the deadline for registering to vote in the General Election.

A total of 16 institutions in England, Scotland and Wales completed the questionnaire, and the key findings are as follows. A full report will also be circulated with the minutes.

***How many students were registered to vote for the general election?***

There is not yet a final picture from the Electoral Commission about the numbers of students who registered to vote, or therefore the number of students missing from the electoral roll.

Most of those who responded to the question about the percentage of their students who were registered to vote by the time of the General Election gave an estimate of between 40% and 60%. Two respondents reported 75%+ registration, and one estimated the number at their institution as being less than 10%.

***What activities did universities undertake in 2014-2015?***

* Almost all (15/16) respondents said they had conducted an information campaign, often in connection with their students’ union, on campus and in halls of residents.
* Just over half said that direct messages were emailed to students reminding them of the need to register, and including a link to be able to do this online.
* A quarter of respondents said that voter registration had been integrated with their student registration process at the start of term.

Other case studies include:

* One university staged fortnightly awareness-raising events at the start of the year, specific events in halls (where students are at leisure and have more time), and on National Voter Registration Day and ahead of the deadline for registering for the General Election.
* As well as locally-organised events, some respondents told us they had participated in the national NUS initiatives in March and April 2015.
* One university created a “Six key things” campaign for the six most important things students needed to do at the start of term as a new student - with registering to vote was one of the six.
* One university said a student-led hustings event with local candidates was a central focus of the registration campaign.

A partnership approach was identified as being central to voter registration. A number of institutions mentioned the need for three parties – namely the university administration, the students’ union, and the local electoral registration officer – to be involved in ensuring both processes and communications were clear and timely. In particular it was observed that the students’ union was the most successful in increasing engagement with the student body and mobilizing students to register to vote.

***Integrated online registration***

Considerable time and resource were spent to deliver these activities on voter registration, whereas an integrated online enrolment model would have been a more streamlined and potentially cheaper option.

One respondent noted “automatic enrolment would save significant time and expense”. However, many institutions felt that an awareness raising campaign would still be necessary to complement integrated online registration.

***The ‘Sheffield model’ explained***

A key success story in integrated enrolment is at the University of Sheffield.

The ‘Sheffield model’ offers full integration within the University of Sheffield’s online registration system, with students being asked to submit information via a single online form for both university registration and voter registration.

The information is included in one form – rather than pushing students out of the university site to an external site – which meant that it was more likely that students would complete this section as part of their registration process. The start of term is also the most optimum time for students to complete registration forms and other administration, as it can all be completed at the same time.

*Data protection*

A big obstacle which had to be overcome in Sheffield was the issue of data protection. Sheffield City Council and the University of Sheffield came to a formal agreement, under Data Protection, which allowed the University to act as a data collecting agent (effectively, the Data Processor) on behalf of the Council. The Council remains the data controller for any student data collected by the University for voter registration purposes.

The key aspects of the agreement are that:

* Sheffield City Council (SCC) appoints the University to collect additional voter information (specifically students' National Insurance number)
* The University supplies the student data to the Council once a year

*Finalising the model*

The University changed its Pre-Registration Service to incorporate some information on Voter Registration, and enhanced their Online Registration System to incorporate a new screen entitled Voter Registration Details.

In 2014 this meant that

* continuing students were able to complete those questions at the re-registration stage from July onwards
* new students were then able to complete those questions either at the Pre-Registration (online, in advance of arrival) stage or at the Registration event (upon arrival in Intro Week)

*Key principles in the model*

There are some important working principles which apply:

* Students do not have to complete the voter registration questions
* Students can declare their wish to register with SCC but do not have to provide the National Insurance number
* Once students have answered the questions, they do not get an opportunity to change their answers
* Students are asked these questions both as new and continuing students.

Universities UK is preparing a short case study with Sheffield University to explain the process to Vice-Chancellors, following interest in this at a recent Universities UK board meeting. This will be circulated to Members when it is available.

***Steps being taken in 2015-16***

Almost 60% of respondents said they intend to integrate voter registration with the start of term registration process in September 2015. These plans include a range of methods of integration including:

* working with local authority EROs to integrate as in the Sheffield model;
* ensuring that links to external registration sites are included in online or printed registration/induction materials.

Other intended methods of voter registration include the use of awareness raising campaigns/roadshows/events and supplying information for students about the steps they need to take. Many of the universities highlighted that these activities are most effective when the students’ unions takes the lead, the argument being that the messages are more effectively delivered by their peers.

Two institutions indicated that student voter registration would not be a focus of their activity in September 2015, but that any activity would be linked to deadlines for registering for forthcoming elections.

***Barriers to student voter registration***

The barriers to registration highlighted by respondents for integrated enrolment include:

* Data protection – or concerns about data protection and the need for more information about best practice and how to satisfy legal protection and duty of care issues.
* Technological/IT barriers to overcome
* Dealing with multiple local authorities adding complexity
* Concern about the number of tasks universities ask students to do at the start of term – some of which are more urgent (e.g. visa renewals, GP registration, student funding applications, disability support assessments)

Other barriers cited include:

* Students not knowing who is eligible to vote or where they could register to vote.
* Claimed student disinterest (in registration/political process)
* Voter registration campaigns seen by some universities as being too party political
* Students not knowing their National Insurance number which slows down or halts the registration process

Although it would be preferable not to require collection of NI numbers, the Cabinet Office issued helpful guidance in December 2014 making it clear that EROs could register students who had been unable to provide NI numbers if other data to verify their identity was available. This means that universities should still seek the NI numbers, but students could be registered if they failed to provide them as other university data collected at registration provided EROs with the necessary information. Advice on Data Protection Act implications of electoral registration combined with university registration would be welcomed by the sector – but the data contract developed by Sheffield could be applied elsewhere.

One respondent said: “We will continue to do what we can to get students to register. However, short of a return to enabling universities to block register students, we will always find it difficult to get student voter registration numbers up to their previous levels.”

***Next steps***

Universities UK has been active in raising awareness of this issue with its members, including through joint campaigns with the Electoral Commission, NUS and Association of Colleges.

The issue was raised at UUK’s board meeting at the end of June, and the decision to survey members to find out about what further advice and support they need.

We will use the UUK annual members’ conference (8-9 September 2015) to re-state the need for members to have measures in place to register students or raise awareness of the need for individual registration ahead of the 1 December deadline for the boundary review.

Universities UK would support any initiative by the APPG on Students to write to vice-chancellors and heads of student administration to encourage further action.

**Roundtable discussion**

Paul Blomfield asked for a clarification around the answers which were given in the survey to questions on student registration numbers and what these were based on. Nicky Old responded that these were an estimation; the impact of some activities were easier to measure, such as information campaigns in students’ unions, however other activities were more difficult to directly link to increased voter registration numbers. Paul Blomfield agreed that there is a danger of over estimation, and an assumption that ‘activity’ around voter registration is sufficient.

Lilian Greenwood said that identifying common barriers was really useful, as well as information on how to solve these. She also agreed that estimating student voter registration numbers was difficult, and the key source of data is the electoral registration lists. She highlighted an example of a ward in Nottingham which is almost exclusively made up of students– in this ward it is easier to specifically measure student voter registration numbers. Before the election 1000 were registered in this ward. This can be attributed to excellent work from the students’ union and NUS. However, it is worth noting that under block registration, 3000 were registered. She also highlighted that Nottingham Trent are definitely keen to explore the Sheffield model.

Paul Blomfield made the point that block registration was the most successful in university halls of residence rather than with those students living in the private rented sector. Therefore, it could be argued that individual electoral registration could be turned into an opportunity for ensuring registration amongst these groups.

Jo Stevens raised the question of whether one solution to integrated enrolment comes at procurement stage with enrolment systems. For example, if integrated enrolment could be made a core part of the suppliers offer, then this is easier for universities to buy in to. Nicky Old agreed this could be possible and would require working with the 4 key suppliers of enrolment systems.

Paul Blomfield added that at Sheffield, they were aided by the fact that their systems were bespoke and could therefore be amended in-house. However, all systems, even ‘off the shelf’ systems, have ‘tweakability’ as each university will need to input their own questions and forms into the enrolment process.

Chris Matheson asked whether there is an FAQ document available for universities. Nicky Old said they were developing this and could certainly circulate to the Group once ready.

Paul Blomfield highlighted one of the barriers which had been identified in UUK’s survey - the technological or IT barriers – and argued that often this could be a reason given by the Academic Registrar’s office, as opposed to directly from IT. The evidence he had heard from those working on the technology aspects of this is that it is actually fairly simple.

Addressing the other barriers which had been identified, he agreed that working with multiple authorities would definitely be a challenge. He argued that the claim from universities that voter registration is too political should be less after the general election.

Paul Blomfield also pointed out that the findings from the survey that a quarter of universities had integrated enrolment was likely to be an exaggeration and a misrepresentation of what integrated enrolment really means. Instead this probably refers to an additional link which has been added to the information provided to students in the form.

Paul Blomfield closed the meeting by highlighting that, although September is the key deadline for integrated enrolment activities, other voter registration activities in the run up to the boundary review in December are still essential.

1. Notes of the meeting is available here: <http://appg-students.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Individual-Electoral-Registration-getting-students-registered.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)