Universities UK

Student voter registration in UK universities

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Vice-chancellors, registrars, student administration, policy advisors, communications and public affairs

Executive summary
This report provides an overview of the range of activities being undertaken in a number of UK universities to ensure students are on the electoral register, with a particular focus on the initiative in Sheffield to integrate voter registration with the start of term registration process for students.

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Attachments and links
[Voter registration on GOV.UK](#)

Contents: Student voter registration in UK universities

Background

In June 2014 a new system of electoral registration was introduced in the UK whereby students are required to register to vote individually rather than by a 'head of household' who registers all occupants at an address. This change meant that universities could no longer register their residential students en masse.

Despite steps taken by universities and students' unions, concern remains that students were underrepresented in the overall electorate at the General Election. We know, for example, that of the record-breaking 469,000 people registered to vote online in a single day (20 May) for the 2015 general election, 137,000 of them were aged 16 to 24.

With elections scheduled in 2016 for the Welsh Assembly, Scottish Parliament, Northern Ireland Assembly, London Assembly and Mayor of London, and the EU Referendum before the end of 2017, it is important that students are registered to be able vote – should they choose to do so.

It is also important as the Boundary Commission will be taking into account the numbers on the electoral register as of 1 December 2015, when it makes future recommendations about the boundaries for constituencies with possible implications for university constituencies because of the proportionately larger number of younger voters.

Survey of UUK members

At the end of June 2015 Universities UK asked its members to complete a short online survey about student voter registration in their university, 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. The survey was completed in some cases by the vice-chancellor or a member of the vice-chancellor's office, as well as by those working in student administration.

How many students were registered to vote?

We do not have an overall picture from the Electoral Commission about the numbers of students who were registered to vote or, therefore, the number of students missing from the electoral roll.

Most of the universities who responded to the question about the percentage of their students who were registered to vote by the time of the General Election said it was between 40% and 60%. Two respondents reported 75% + registration, and one estimated the number at their institution as being less than 10%. In most cases – but not all – this was an estimate based on activity undertaken, rather than verified registration figures.

We asked the question: "What steps did your university take to register students?" 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.

What steps did your university take to register students?
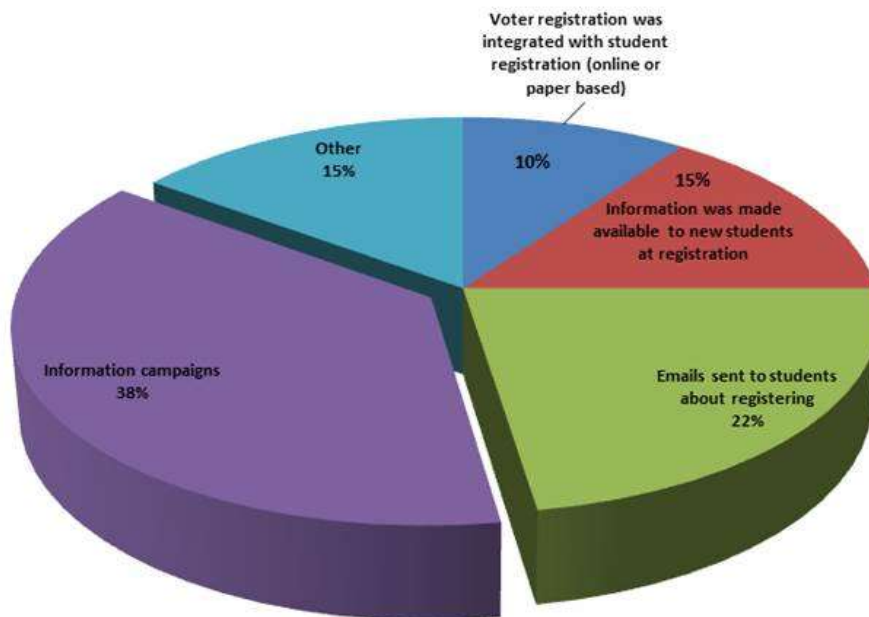
It was clear from the responses that direct engagement with the student body was important to convert the understanding of the need to register (why / how / when) into the act of doing this. The most successful means of doing this seems to have been through the university administration working closely with the students' union to mobilise students to get out and talk to their peers about this.

One university said their campaign involved students with iPads going out to places to talk to fellow students and get them to register on the spot. This approach was well received by students and contributed to an additional 12,000 student-aged people registering in the city.

Other universities took the approach that students needed regular reminders and opportunities to engage, with one staging 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 (5 February 2015) and ahead of the deadline for registering for the General Election (20 April 2015). 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 and included registering to vote as one of the six. This was publicised at the main induction events and in induction materials, and the university built a link to online voter registration as part of their online enrolment.

A number of universities cited the importance of social media in communicating the need to register, how to do this, and the important deadlines – and the role of students' unions social media presence was important to raise awareness and issue reminders.

Some institutions mentioned the need for three parties – namely the university, the students' union, and the local electoral registration officer at the local authority – to be involved in ensuring both processes and communications were clear and timely.

One university said a student-led hustings event with local candidates in the run up to the General Election was a central focus of the registration campaign.

Finally, a number of institutions mentioned reward schemes linked to voter registration: competitions between halls of residence, wristbands for students who presented screenshots of their online registration giving them discounts and offers on campus, music festivals and ice cream vans.

What all the examples above demonstrate is that university campuses and university communities were proactive and creative in response to this challenge. They were not short of activities designed to raise awareness of the need for students to register as individuals, and indeed the activities helped ensure students took action.

Considerable time and resource were spent to deliver these activities, where an integrated online enrolment model would have been a more streamlined and potentially cheaper option, with one respondent noting "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'

Initiatives in Sheffield to fully integrate voter registration with student enrolment have attracted the attention of [media](), government and the university sector. A number of universities told us that they had included a link to the GOV.UK online registration as part of their online enrolment, however this would take students outside of the university system and with no way to check whether students had indeed completed the actions required.

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 <u>and</u> voter registration. With the information included in one place – rather than taking students out of the university site to an external site – it was more likely that students would complete this section as part of their registration process and it was agreed that the start of term was the optimum time to do this.

The biggest obstacle to overcome – and an issue which most other universities mentioned – is 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 appoints the university to collect additional voter information (specifically students' National Insurance numbers)

- The university supplies the student data to the council once a year

The university then 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)

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 Sheffield City Council but do not have to provide the NI 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.

Following interest in the success of the registration model in Sheffield at a recent Universities UK board meeting, we are currently preparing a short case study with the University of Sheffield, including details of the Data Protection agreement.

Steps being taken to register students in 2015-16

Almost 60% of respondents said they intend to integrate voter registration with the start of term registration process in September 2015. This response seems to contain a range of methods of integration – from working with local authority EROs to integrate as in the Sheffield model, through to ensuring that links to external registration sites are included in online or printed registration/induction materials.

The majority of the remaining 40% of respondents indicated they would use a range of methods including the use of awareness-raising campaigns/roadshows/events and supplying information for students about the steps they need to take. In some cases they

felt this would be best served by students' unions taking the lead, believing 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 respondent fell into two camps: those that could be characterised as being institutional barriers and those which are social/environmental barriers.

The issues highlighted by respondents included:

- Data protection – or concerns about data protection and 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 things 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)

- Students not knowing their National Insurance numbers slowing down or halting the registration process

- Students not knowing who is eligible to vote or where they could register to vote.

- Student disinterest (in registration/political process)

- Voter registration campaigns seen by some as being too party political

Some of these issues could be solved by clearer guidance from the Electoral Commission or Cabinet Office on issues such as eligibility, how to get/check an NI number or clarity about whether this is needed or not. Advice on Data Protection Act implications of electoral registration combined with university registration would be welcomed by the sector – but on this issue it is something where the university administration needs to be satisfied

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. We will continue to work with them, and have also encourage them to make contact with Universities Scotland and Universities Wales to discuss campaigns ahead of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly elections in 2016, and will also provide contact details for our member institutions in Northern Ireland if required.

This information was presented to MP members of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Students on 14 July 2015. MPs attending the meeting were interested in the range of activities carried out by universities and plans for 2015-16, and have pledged to contact any university in their constituency to offer any support or advice they can provide.

We will continue to ensure members are kept up to date with information about student voter registration and any national resources available for their use.

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