



***Just how powerful is the student voice?
Listening to students after the General Election***

Tuesday 12th September; 10:00-11:00am; Committee Room 10, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

The APPG met to discuss the impact the student voice had in the 2017 General Election, the concerns and issues facing students during the election, and what their increased turnout means for young people and politics in the future. The event was attended by parliamentarians, students' union officers, and organisations with an interest in the further and higher education sector and student political engagement.

Nick Hillman, Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), opened the meeting by outlining why he believes the student voice has historically been politically insignificant, arguing that if politicians did listen to students we would see a different set of policies implemented in recent years. His reasons included low turnout, a lack of unity in voting preference, not voting in marginal seats, and the fact that politicians don't need to listen to students if they don't have a high concentration in their constituency. However, Nick believes the student voice can be powerful and argued that a united voice moving forward would ensure intergenerational inequity began to be redressed. Nick used the example of New Zealand, where a political platform of abolishing interest on student loans galvanised both students and graduates to vote, and enabled the implementation of the policy.

Amy Smith, President of Sheffield College Students' Union, spoke about what her union did in the run up to the election to encourage students to register and turn up to vote. Amy discussed how whilst students she spoke with did care about education issues, their primary concerns were issues such as the NHS, mental health, security for their families, costs of living and childcare and travel expenses. Amy went on to outline how she thinks the student voice could become more powerful, including by extending voter franchise to 16 and 17 year olds, having a focus on further education, and ensuring politics is approachable and understandable.

Shakira Martin, President of the National Union of Students (NUS), spoke about how students feel that they have been given a raw deal by politicians. The further and higher education sectors have experienced huge change in recent years, and this combined with the implications of Brexit meant that students felt that it was vital for their voice to be heard this time round. Shakira outlined the work that NUS did to facilitate the student voice, including a voter registration drive across the country, providing support and materials for unions, engaging with the NUS membership through emails, texts and social media, and hosting online 'Twitter Hustings' in ten of the most student-populated constituencies. Shakira argued that the large increase in youth voter turnout means that the government must now listen to the concerns of students, putting young people at the heart of education reforms and Brexit negotiations.

In comments from the floor, attendees discussed the concerns of students and suggested ways to amplify their voice:

- Education funding was just one of many issues students cared about during the General Election campaign, with principal concerns on the doorstep being centred on issues such as NHS funding.
- Distance learners and part-time learners especially are often concerned over public service provision, childcare costs and income and job security, over education-specific policy.
- Distance learners exist all over the country and therefore all MPs have students in their constituency.
- Voter registration should be integrated with student registration at universities and colleges.
- Students can have an impact beyond national elections, by being encouraged to take part in local elections where issues concerning student communities can often be decided.

For further information, please contact Ayesha Ahmed, Public Affairs Officer, National Union of Students (ayesha.ahmed@nus.org.uk).