Vote For Your Future
Student Voter Registration Guide
Voter Registration Best Practice

Executive Summary

Young people, and students in particular, face some of the greatest obstacles to democratic participation of any demographic group in society. Frequent changing of term-time addresses requires most students to re-register to vote every new academic year. Students are disproportionately likely to work unsociable hours and most lack the convenience and habitual experience of voting that older voters enjoy. And despite limited evidence of increased political literacy with age, young people are more likely than any other age-group to report lack of knowledge/information as their reason for not voting.

However, students living away from home enjoy the unique privilege of being able to choose whether to vote at their permanent or term-time addresses. And there is a large body of evidence to suggest that people who vote once are significantly more likely to vote in subsequent elections. As such, universities have a responsibility to educate and assist their students in joining the democratic process and make their voices heard.

The 2017 Higher Education and Research Act Section 13(1)(f) placed a statutory requirement on all English universities to facilitate student voter registration and this is enforced by the Office for Students. Whilst this does not apply to the devolved powers, a number of universities in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have nonetheless taken measures in recent years to go above and beyond in facilitating student voter registration and turnout.

Between 16-30 October 2019, Vote For Your Future, working with Times Higher Education, conducted a study of the UK Higher Education sector based on all universities’ efforts to promote voter registration and turnout amongst their students, in advance of the December 2019 UK General Election. We gave every UK Higher Education provider the opportunity to participate, and received over 70 formal responses, making this the largest data collection exercise ever undertaken on this topic in the UK.

Based on the responses we received, and a number of follow-up conversations with those working both within the HE sector and in local authorities on voter registration, the following document outlines the ‘best-practice’ measures that all universities can take to enfranchise and inform their students.

The measures are divided into five categories: Digital Integration (pp.3), Communications (pp.4-6), Turnout (pp.6), Monitoring (pp.7) and Engagement (pp.7-8). The scorecard for assessing universities’ performance was developed with Times Higher Education, with each institution awarded a score between one and five across each category. The best performing universities in each category are listed, as well as any notable initiatives highlighted to us in the responses we received.

For any questions on rankings and methodology, please contact Nat Shaughnessy on nat@vfyf.co.uk.
Digital Integration

Incorporating student electoral registration into the universities’ digital enrolment processes is by far and away the **most effective means for registering students en masse**. This is widely known as ‘the Sheffield model’, who first developed a system of this kind in 2014. The system collects all necessary data from students during enrolment (name, address, DOB, NI number), creating a pre-populated form for electoral registration. Provided the student is eligible to register and does not choose to opt-out, this is then transferred to the relevant Electoral Registration Office (ERO) for processing.

Software that automates this process has recently been developed by Jisc, who handle all of the data-sharing via UK Asset Management Federation in a way that is secure and fully compliant with GDPR. Jisc are also able to provide monthly reports, enabling registrars to monitor uptake and approximately track registration rates amongst students.

This software is most effective where the voter registration landing page is formatted to appear as similar as possible to the other stages of enrolment, so there is no ‘psychological break’ and students are encouraged to see voter registration as just another step in the process of enrolment.

Whilst the optimal use of digital integration is through the enrolment process, there are a number of other ways this can provide value throughout the year. Please see **Communications** (pp.4-6) below for advice on this.

**Case studies**

**University of Hull** have combined online voter registration with a compulsory e-learning module during enrolment. This teaches students about the importance of voting and when/how students can vote, before culminating in the Jisc voter registration platform.

**University of Sussex** does not allow students to complete enrolment without having completed the voter registration form. There is a free-text box for students who do not believe they are eligible, or do not wish to be registered at their term-time address, but every student must acknowledge the requirement to register and respond.

In light of an election being called, **Loughborough University** have recently followed up with students who did not give consent for registration during enrolment, securing a number of additional consents.

N.B. It should be noted that any integrated registration system requires agreement with the local ERO. This can be inappropriate for universities with a widely dispersed student body or a high proportion of commuters/students living at home, as they will be spread over multiple local authority districts. In such a case, an alternative is including a redirect to the [gov.uk/register-to-vote](https://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote) website at the end of the enrolment process. However, this does not carry the benefits of pre-populating the form based on previous information and there is no way of monitoring completion rates.
Digital Communications

Effective communications from both the University and SU are imperative to ensuring both high registration and turnout rates amongst students. There is a significant lack of understanding amongst the student population regarding the unique privilege and potential importance of being able to register in two places. Where possible, this should be stressed in any communications, particularly as for 95% of students the upcoming election falls within term-time.

The best performing universities in our study delivered targeted messages to students across multiple platforms with a calendar of communications focused around both the registration deadline and polling day. The most effective channels for delivering these comms are outlined below.

Intranet pop-up

A pop-up on the student intranet was widely reported as being the most effective way of ensuring all students are reached with the information required. This guarantees all students logging in within a 2-3 week period would receive a prompt to register, they then must make a conscious decision whether or not to take action.

The content of this pop-up is best kept to a minimum, with a clear call to action and deadline. Willing students should be able to click-through to the gov.uk/register-to-vote site and, if possible, an option included to ‘remind me later’ or ‘don’t show me this again’.

Email

Email can be an effective channel for reaching students, but only if used in a way that encourages students to engage. Generic, all-student comms (such as a message from the VC) may be useful in advance of a key deadline, but students are generally more likely to engage with content if it is tailored to their specific circumstances.

Examples of student groups that have been targeted based on notable best-practice examples from the Universities of Sheffield, Bath and Bristol include:

» First-time voters (easily targeted based on DOB and date of last election)

» Students living in halls (this can include specific information such as the location of polling station)

» 2nd and 3rd year students (will need reminding to re-register at their new address)

» By subject-area/degree (anecdotally, it has been reported several times that emails from heads of department/lecturers tend to achieve significantly better open-rates)

All email communications should be kept as simple as possible, with a clear call to action. Research has shown that young people are more likely to vote where the stakes are higher, there is a sense of ‘everyone’ voting and where access/convenience is maximised, so any communications emphasising these factors (e.g. “this is a marginal constituency,
your vote matters”) are encouraged.

Lectures

There are a number of universities that have sent all-staff communications, equipping lecturers with the information required to answer questions on student voter registration and encouraging them to give students two minutes at the start or end of lectures to register.

In line with the email communications research, this is likely to be particularly impactful if the lecturer is able to clearly explain the impact of public policy decisions on the subject being studied.

Digital Platforms (e.g. Digital screens around campus, desktops, university app)

Promoting registration and turnout messaging across digital platforms can be a useful prompt for students to register and vote.

Whilst unlikely to be effective without other messaging emphasising the importance and ease of voting, this can be a useful supplement to a wider campaign - particularly if students are reminded across multiple channels on the registration deadline day.

Case study

University College London has committed to setting the desktop background for all computers and digital screens around campus to a reminder of the registration deadline and a QR code linking to their Jisc registration portal. Additionally, the ‘UCL Go!’ student app will be used to send a notification to over 20,000 student users.

Social Media

Whilst almost all SUs and universities will utilise social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat) to promote voter registration and turnout through generic posts, there is little evidence of impact from this.

However, used intelligently, social media can also be a powerful tool in promoting registration and turnout - notably through using high-profile messengers that the university may have access to, and utilising course-specific and halls-specific Facebook groups.

Case studies

De Montford University have created an infographic video on registering to vote. They have posted this on three Facebook groups containing first, second and third year students, who will subsequently receive a notification.

One university (embargoed) created a video with their celebrity chancellor, to be advertised on social media when the election is announced.
Stalls/events

In the past, a number of universities and SUs, particularly on the registration deadline day, have run **in-person stalls and events** around campus encouraging voter registration. These include: UCL’s ‘Goat to Vote’ initiative, offering students the opportunity to pet a goat if they registered on an iPad; University of Bristol’s ‘Donut forget to register’ stall, offering a free donut to any student who registers; and the Union of Brunel Students’ offer of free ice cream for all students who have registered.

These events are limited by footfall and resource, but can nonetheless encourage hundreds of students to engage on the day and complement a wider communications campaign.

Turnout

Encouraging turnout is significantly more difficult for universities than registration, and in the vast majority of cases major turnout initiatives are led by the Students’ Union. However, there are still a number of measures universities can take to make voting easier for students and facilitate the activities of the SU in ensuring a high turnout on campus.

Most of these involve removing barriers to voting. For universities with large campus residences, this includes hosting polling stations, facilitating SU campaigns (e.g. incentives, walking buses) with effective information provision to ensure all students are aware of how to vote and how to take advantage of the SU’s activity. The universities that scored highest across this metric had often established **joint working-groups between university staff and the SU** to plan polling-day activities.

Student Unions are able to go much further, offering incentives to vote such as free drinks in SU bars and coffee shops for students with their polling card (e.g. University of Bristol, Plymouth Marjon University). Additionally, some SUs have trialled enlisting the help of student ambassadors on polling day responsible for getting out the vote (e.g. University of Bradford, Liverpool John Moores University).

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**Case studies**

**Huddersfield Students’ Union** runs a ‘walking bus’ to the local polling station, in addition to providing maps and routes to all students around campus. It also identified one student village where the polling station is inaccessible, encouraging students there to apply for a postal vote.

**Christ Church Students’ Union** put on minibuses in 2017 available for use both by students and local residents to the local polling station.
Monitoring

Monitoring the success of registration and turnout initiatives at a local level can be incredibly difficult, as EROs do not hold data on the demographics of its register and can only ever reveal constituency-level registration and turnout figures. However, it is nonetheless extremely important for resource allocation and improvement that universities have an accurate idea of the success of their registration/turnout initiatives.

Universities who have adopted the Jisc integrated registration software (or a similar in-house solution) are at an automatic advantage in this regard, as they are able to directly monitor the number of students registering through the service. There is still a blind-spot here for students choosing to register independently of this service via Gov.uk/register-to-vote, but (if the service is communicated effectively and integrated into registration) the extent of this is likely to be minimal.

For universities not using automatic registration software, developing a good relationship with the local ERO is crucial. It can monitor spikes in registration over short periods of time, allowing universities to reliably measure the success of communications and registration drives. EROs can provide registration and turnout rates broken down by polling district. This can be particularly useful for universities with large clusters of student halls, or universities with an accurate record of which polling district their students are resident in.

Case studies

University of Cambridge designed a staggered email communications plan to deliver registration information messages to students, giving advance notice to the local authority of this. They were then able to report back a daily above-average increase in registrations of between 20% and 80% in the week that followed these emails.

University of Southampton monitors marked registers after elections to benchmark registration and turnout rates from halls of residence.

University of Bedfordshire has set itself voter registration and turnout targets for local, SU and national elections within its strategic plan, monitoring these through close cooperation with the ERO and an integrated digital voter registration system.

Engagement

Finally, as outlined in the Executive Summary, universities have a crucial role to play in educating and engaging students in the democratic process and political debates.

For the majority of undergraduates, the 2019 General Election will be the first opportunity for students to participate in a national democratic poll. With the issues likely to dominate this election set to define the lives of young people in the UK for decades to come, it is the role of universities as educators to instill the importance of voting and ensure their students have all the information they require to make an informed choice.
Examples of measures to support political engagement include: welcoming a wide variety of speakers from across the political spectrum and academic community on campus, notably supporting and hosting candidate hustings during elections; producing and proliferating literature that outlines the importance of voting, how the right to vote was won etc; utilising the expertise of researchers at the university to analyse the likely impact of various policies; and including a consideration of the impact of public policy across all subjects within the curriculum.

About Vote For Your Future

Vote For Your Future formed during the 2019 European Elections as a joint venture between two youth organisations, reaching over 5.3 million young people on election day. Its success – coupled with the lack of any large-scale registration and turnout campaign in the UK – led to the organisation being set up formally in September 2019.

It is a non-partisan campaign aimed at making sure young people’s voices are heard through electoral registration and turnout. Since launching formally, it has already reached almost 4 million 18-25 year olds to ensure our generation is ready to vote.

It is now run day-to-day by Lara Spirit and includes over a dozen partners across the wider youth sector, as well as corporate partners including Grindr, Dusk and Bumble.

For more information about the campaign, please get in touch with lara@vfyf.co.uk, or for press enquiries please contact chris@vfyf.co.uk

Case study

University of Sheffield has previously created a dedicated General Election website for students, including insight and analysis from academics, details of events happening at the university during the campaign, and information on how to register and where to vote.