OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ASSOCIATION

Central Executive Committee (CEC)
21 – 23 April 2017

ELECTIONS REVIEW

The CEC is asked to:-

i) approve the recommendations made in this paper

1. Introduction

1.1 A survey was carried out in January 2017 with the objective of obtaining feedback from both students who had voted in the 2016 elections and from candidates who stood for elections. The survey included both open and closed questions on the topics of barriers to engagement with the elections, nominations, hustings, campaigning, the voting process itself and key documents made available to students and candidates during the elections. The survey remained about for about six weeks; thereafter the findings were analysed and evaluated by the Association’s Research and Information Officer Pooja Sinha and discussed by the working group put together for the purpose of reviewing the current election processes. Members of the working group are Caroline Poppenga, Vice President Representation and Research; Peter Cowan, Vice President Administration; Cath Brown, Faculty Association Representative STEM; Claire Smith, Area Association Representative Wales; Patricia Gray, Area Association Representative Scotland; Rob Avann, General Manager of the Students Association; and Pooja Sinha, Research and Representation Officer of the Students Association. The survey can be found in the appendix of this paper.

2. Recommendations at a glance

a) Introduce the Association alongside the election announcement to increase engagement and explain the impact it has
b) Election period shortened to four to six weeks
c) Election process to take place in April/May
d) Two types of role descriptions; one at-a-glance and one detailed to explain the role
e) A flowchart giving an overview of the democratic structure of the Students Association
f) No changes to the nominations process
g) A manifesto structure with standard questions for all candidates as well as the individual submission as previously
h) Candidates can stand for no more than two CEC roles and must submit different manifestos
i) Campaigning rules to be accompanied by campaigning guidelines in order to aid candidates with the process and to ensure fairness
j) A stop on campaigning once voting starts to be included in the election rules
k) Two types of hustings: live hustings and a Q&A style forum on the VLE with appropriate moderation
l) Exploration of other channels to distribute podcasts/transcripts of hustings to engage with those students less active on the VLE

3. Detailed recommendations grouped by topic

3.1 Barriers to engagement with the elections / preparing for elections

- Some student respondents felt that they were not sufficiently informed about the work of the Association. Particularly in the run-up to the elections it would be useful to raise awareness of Association work, alongside outlining the impact that elected representatives have overall. This could be done by putting together mini case studies on successful past projects. Our recommendation is to increase publicity during this time period, as well as including some information introducing the Association with the election announcement that gets sent to students.

3.2 Timing and durations of the elections

- Based on the student responses, it was established that the voting period is too long and should be shortened to a maximum of two weeks.
- The timescale of the last elections meant that they coincided with a key period for exams and EMA submissions which should be avoided. Whilst it was acknowledged that it is impossible to completely avoid clashes with TMA/EMA/exams, care should be taken to minimise such clashes. Not only would this free more students up to vote, but it would also ensure that candidates have the appropriate time available to prepare themselves and engage with voters in the process. The recommendation was therefore made, to hold elections towards the end of April and early May and for the whole process to take between four and six weeks.

3.3 Key documents made available during the elections process

- Most respondents found the key documents useful. It was however noted that improvements could be made with regards to role descriptions to give greater clarity to students and candidates what the roles entail. The working group recommends that there should be two role descriptions. One giving a brief at-a-glance overview of the role and a more in-depth one which will be particularly relevant to candidates standing for election. This includes time
commitment required for each respective role. N.B: A detailed review of remits will be led by VP Admin and is anticipated to be completed in January 2018.

- There were calls for an overview of the democratic structure of the Students Association in flowchart format. The working group feels this would be beneficial to students to enable a better understanding of the organisation, particularly for potential volunteers who have had little previous involvement. It is our recommendation that such a document should be generated by the digital team.

3.4 Nominations

- The majority of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the nominations process. Other than the aforementioned recommendation to shortening the election process as a whole, no further changes are proposed to nominations.

3.5 Manifestos

- More than half of survey respondents were in favour of introducing a manifesto template. The working group feels that a blend of a structured manifesto form and room for creative candidate input should be implemented. Our recommendation is that the manifesto includes qualifying questions for all candidates, similar to the format which was applied to candidates standing for Trustee positions during the last round of elections. The standard questions would allow better comparison of candidates and would help students to make a more informed decision. In addition to the standard questions, there would be the individual part to enable candidates to submit a personal manifesto.

3.6 Eligibility

- The working group recommends that candidates can stand for multiple posts, but no more than two CEC posts and that a separate and different manifesto must be submitted for each role.

3.7 Campaigning

- Candidates in particular indicated that they would like greater clarity on campaigning and campaigning rules. The working group discussed that it may be difficult to enforce certain rules, such as campaigning on social media which is outside of controllable boundaries. It was therefore agreed to keep the existing campaigning rules but to publish a set of guidelines alongside which although not enforceable, should lead candidates to campaigning effectively. These guidelines would cover social media in line with the Association’s existing social media guidelines
- The possibility of giving candidates who require it a small allowance to spend on campaigning was also discussed so no advantage was given to those who
could fund campaigning themselves. To help with the process, it will be investigated how other SU’s manage online campaigning effectively.

- The working group recommends that active campaigning stops once voting starts. Whilst existing campaigning material would still be accessible, it would mitigate the risk of students wanting to change their vote. The working group advocates that once a vote is cast, it is cast. Furthermore it would lead to greater engagement of voters with candidates in the run up to the vote, as opposed to once the voting process goes live.

3.8 Hustings & VLE

- The survey indicated that there was a desire for greater interaction with candidates. As a result of this, the working group recommends that hustings events should take place online, possibly in a similar format to OU Live. Candidates should be given multiple dates to choose from, in order to ensure that they can be available. The hustings questionnaire previously used should be replaced by a Q&A style forum on the VLE. This would need to be appropriately moderated and chaired to ensure that questions were relevant to the respective role and not in any way personal to the candidates. It would also give students the chance to interact with candidates who did not take part in live hustings.

- The wider distribution of podcasts of the live hustings should be considered in order to engage with those students who may not be active on the VLE. The possibility of exploring other channels for this is recommended.

4. Items for further action

4.1 The working group will continue to refine the campaigning guidelines, manifesto questions and hustings process and will update the CEC in due course.

5. Conclusion

5.1 The recommendations laid out in this paper aim to make the Association’s election process fairer and more effective. Effectiveness is achieved through providing students and candidates with clearer and better information so they can make a more informed choice on whom to vote for and which role to stand for respectively. Increased publicity will be achieved by offering flexible dates for hustings and exploring the distribution of podcasts/transcripts via other channels in order to reach a greater number of potential voters and thus increase turnout. Fairness will be increased by introducing clearer guidelines for campaigning and standard questions on manifestos to allow for better comparison of candidates so students can make a more informed choice.

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Appendix: Survey Findings

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