

University Council

Students' Union Report

April 2024

1. Introduction

Sheffield SU is an independent charitable incorporated association, regulated by the Charity Commission relative to the Charities Act, and by University of Sheffield Council relative to the Education Act. As of the 1st August 2024, Sheffield SU shall be further regulated by the Office for Students relative to the recently passed Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act.

It is a requirement of the [Education Act \(1994\) Part II](#), that the Governing Body of the University of Sheffield ensures Sheffield SU's compliance with certain conditions provided by The Act, including ensuring that the SU is operated in a fair and democratic manner and is accountable for its finances. The primary mechanism for this undertaking is the development and monitoring of a Code of Practice, which was reviewed as recently as Summer 2023 and is provided within the [University Calendar](#) (pg 134).

In conversation with the University Secretary, we have agreed to provide a regular report to University Council to update on matters of compliance relative to the Code of Practice, as well as to give Council the opportunity to hear of our broader work, and indeed the wider student experience here at the University of Sheffield.

At the last meeting of Council, we shared the initial results of our annual 'Student Voice' survey. For this report, we are focussing on the development of the SU's new strategic direction and how our conversations with students, including the Student Voice data, are shaping this.

2. Regulatory Updates - SU Elections Results

Between **4th and 7th March 2024** elections for the following were held concurrently:

- 7 Full Time Students' Union Officers
- 5 Part Time Students' Union Officers
- 2 Elected Student Trustees

'Voter turnout' refers to the total number of eligible students who voted in the elections. Voter turnout in these elections was 6,979 voters, or 21% of the student population [31% of our 'engaged members']. This is an increase of 1 percentage point from 2022 [where the turnout was 6,860], and sees our fourth year of increased turnout.

Voter turnout and student population during the past 5 SU Officer Elections are given below.

*Contains referendum votes, so Officer Election turnout is lower

Election Year	Student Population**	Voter Turnout	Percentage turnout
2018/19	30,395	5,775	19%
2019/20	31,277	9,383*	30%
2020/21 (FTO elections only)	32,013	5,479	17%
2020/21 (PTO elections only)	32,013	1,159	4%
2021/22	30,129	4,614	16%
2022/23	32,982	6,860	20.7%
2023/24	33,377	6,979	21%

**The student population figure with regard to eligible voters is usually larger than the UoS census figure because of certain categories of students (such as ELTC, or SIC attendees) who are eligible to vote in SU elections but are not included in the UoS census.

Candidates

The number of candidates at the open of polling, in comparison to the previous year, were as follows:

Election	2023	2024	Difference
SU President	8	11	+3
Activities & Development Officer	3	5	+2
Education Officer	3	4	+1
International & Community Officer	3	6	+3
Wellbeing & Sport Officer	7	2	-5
Welfare & Sustainability Officer	5	5	0
Liberation Officer	5	3	-2
BAME Students' Officer	7	12	+5
Disabled Students' Officer	4	4	0
LGBT+ Students' Officer	4	4	0
Mature Students' Officer	3	4	+1
Women Students' Officer	4	11	+7
Elected Student Trustee	2	4	+2
Total	58	75	+16

The overall number of candidates increased from last year, the most notable increases are among the Part Time Officer positions, in particular BAME and Womens. We saw increases for the majority of Full Time Officer positions, though notably decreases or plateaus for two of four roles Officers re-ran for.

There were also a number of nomination withdrawals following the Candidate Briefing. Most of these withdrawals were from Part Time Officer positions, though some were in Full-Time and perhaps reflective of a lack of desire to challenge an incumbent officer - a new challenge with this being the first time candidates may stand for a second year of paid elected office.

A standard objective for all-student elections is that each position is contested (has more candidates standing than there are vacancies). This objective was achieved for all elections.

The Director of NUS Charitable Services Ltd is the designated Returning Officer for Sheffield SU elections, overseeing and being available for appeals of decisions made by the on-site Deputy Returning Officer. Their official report is available at appendix A.

3. Free Speech: OfS Regulation

As with the University, the students' union shall be regulated for the purposes of the promotion and protection of freedom of speech by the Office for Students, with the new scheme live as of 1st August 2024.

This is a new scenario for students' unions, with no prior regulatory duties owing to OfS or its predecessor regulators.

We have been attending and contributing to OfS webinars, taking advice from NUS and their legal advisors, and responding to the various OfS consultations regarding the new scheme and related guidance. We remain concerned about OfS' ability to regulate the sector impartially and effectively on these matters, particularly when it comes to navigating competing and conflicting legislative requirements regarding ensuring protections from harm, but acknowledge that regardless, we must develop our policy suite, train our people - including hundreds of student leaders - and proactively promote and manage freedom of speech matters throughout our work.

We have also been engaging with university colleagues to ensure that UoS students encounter as little confusion and duplication of policy and process as is practicable whilst ensuring our respective compliance with the new regime's requirements.

We are confident that our existing people and practices are well-placed to accommodate new requirements, and have been awaiting the publication of OfS guidance before finalising our own free speech code of practice.

3. The Student Voice Survey and its Impact on Our Emerging Strategy

Between November 2023 and January 2024 we collected the views of more than 10% of the student population via our annual ‘Student Voice Survey’. We asked them to answer questions about what they want and need from the SU, the University, the City of Sheffield and the UK. We have [summarised the results of the Student Voice Survey on a single page](#), in the interest of making it as accessible as possible. University colleagues are encouraged to review that document and note that, at the bottom of the document, there is a link to the Student Voice data dashboard and other links to much more in depth analysis of the survey.

At the February meeting of Council we shared the initial results from the Student Voice Survey. We have now begun to draw conclusions from that research, and other insight, which are shaping the SU’s likely strategic direction.

4.1 Using our Influence

Typically a students’ union’s strategy is largely inward looking. Most SU strategies focus on the SU itself, and how it could better engage its members. This is understandable, but Sheffield Students’ Union has ambitions for much more. In developing our new strategy we are always mindful that the SU has an educational mission that is set out in law. Supporting and representing our members will always be at the heart of what we do but we are keen to use our influence in the sector, as a leading SU, to achieve more.

We want students to have the best possible student experience and they have told us that in order for that to happen, we need to think about a students’ life *holistically*, rather than focussing on their engagement with the SU.

In order for me to have the best possible student experience, I need...			
...a SU where I feel I belong . A place that is my community, my go-to for support,	...a university that listens to me. A university that puts my university	...a city which listens to its students’ needs and appreciates the contribution we	...a government that listens to the voice of students. A country where I can find work after graduation. A

<p>a place for fun and the hub of my extracurricular experiences.</p>	<p>experience before profit. A university that has modern facilities.</p>	<p>bring. A vibrant city in which I feel safe, welcome and am able to find work.</p>	<p>country that welcomes International students, invests in public services, transport and the environment.</p>
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There is clearly a recurring theme here; students need to feel that they are **heard**. Sheffield Students' Union is well placed to use its influence to lead local and national conversations and champion all students, not just those at the University of Sheffield. We are one of the largest SUs in the UK and we are repeatedly cited as the best SU. People pay attention to what we do and what we say and we have an opportunity to use our voice on the national and local stages. Starting at the macro level, then zooming in...

- We will work with NUS and our MPs to change the political conversations about students and have them recognised as a national asset rather than a burden, or ammunition in the culture war.
- Sheffield is a city of more than 60,000 students, meaning that more than 1 in 10 of the city's population is a student. We aim to work with the Council, SYMCA, Sheffield Hallam University and local MPs to ensure the student voice is heard when decisions are made about the city's future.
- Students are in Sheffield to study and graduate with a good qualification, this is their overwhelming priority and the one thing that all our students have in common. Working with the University we will create communities of interest which are built out from the course, school and faculty level.
- The students' union will continue to be a place of belonging for students. We aim to improve our (already excellent) services and facilities. We will break-down barriers to engagement and prioritise inclusivity and accessibility in our service design.

4.2 Next Steps

The SU strategy is very much a work in progress at this stage. The insights we have shared with Council in this report are, at the same time, being discussed with SU Trustees and, later, SU staff and student representatives.

The ambitions set out above are necessarily high-level at this stage and there is work to do in order to parse these goals into a set of projects. In addition to determining the impacts we wish to make we are developing a 'Theory of Change' which will describe the steps we need to take

in order to achieve the outputs, outcomes and impacts we are seeking. This necessitates the development of a new suite of strategic KPIs and measures.

Our aim is to have the strategy approved by Trustees at the final Trustee Board meeting of the year in June, and we will share that outcome with Council colleagues at the soonest opportunity.

Appendix A: Returning Officer's Report



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Returning Officer's Report Sheffield Students' Union

Election	Officer Elections
Returning Officer	Peter Robertson, NUS Charity Director
Deputy Returning Officer	Mems Ayinla, Director fo Student Influence

Dates of Nominations:	2023-12-11- 2024-02-16
Dates of Voting:	2024-03-04- 2024-03-07
Number of Candidates:	75
Number of Votes:	6,979
Percentage of Voter Turnout:	21
Number of Complaints/Appeals:	8 Complaints & None Appeals Received
Number of Complaints/Appeals Upheld:	The Returning Officer received 8 formal complaints during the elections. This is in comparison with 10 complaints being received in 2022. All 8 complaints were investigated, with warnings being issued on 4 occasions, a campaign ban issued on one occasion and 3 dismissed. Complaints & None Appeals Upheld

Returning Officer's Comments/Recommendations

There are no further comments or recommendations.

Confirmation of Fair Election

I hereby declare that this election was run in a fair and democratic manner which satisfies the stipulations as laid out within the 1994 Education Act.

Returning Officer Signature and Date

Signed: 
NUS Charity Director and National Returning Officer

Date: 08/03/2024

