Elections 2013/14 Review & Action Plan

1. Introduction

"Democratic" is one of the Union's values, stating that it is a fundamental part of what we do as an organisation. Our commitment to this value is borne out in our year-on-year approach to elections. We are constantly looking to improve an already impressive, and sector leading, level of engagement. This plan review looks back on the three elections we ran this year whilst setting out plans to address areas of concern and potential to improve.

2. Your Reps & Council Elections 2013/14

2.1 BACKGROUND

This was the third year of branding the Autumn elections as the election for Academic Representatives. Using the name 'Your Reps & Council Elections 2013/14' we elected Year and Course Reps, 16 Ordinary Members of Union Council and the LGBT Officer. The total number of positions up for election was 115.

2.2 TIMETABLE

Nominations Opened	28 September 2013
Nominations Closed	13 November 2013
Voting Opened	13 October 2013
Voting Closed	22 October 2013
Results Announced	23 October 2013

2.3 TURNOUT

4,597 students voted in the election, up from 3,030 the year before. This represented a turnout of 27%, 7 percentage points more than 2012/13. To put this in context, this is above the national average of 19% for Sabbatical elections. In the last two years we have increased from 12.8% turnout to 27%, a fantastic achievement.

Undergraduate turnout was 39% and Postgraduate turnout was 14%.

2.4 LEARNING POINTS

A concerted effort to make these elections a big part of our welcome communications helped raise their profile. They were promoted in our handbooks and welcome video and all mentions of our Academic Representation Network. We have recently put a strong emphasis on our Big Elections and the Your Rep and Council Elections serve as a good introduction to a proud focus on our members engaging in our democratic functions.

3. The Big Elections 2014

3.1 BACKGROUND

A number of changes were made in our approach to The Big Elections 2014. An emphasis on delivering training and information sessions for potential candidates was our big change from the year before.

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https://www.imperialcollegeunion.org/news/deciding-stand
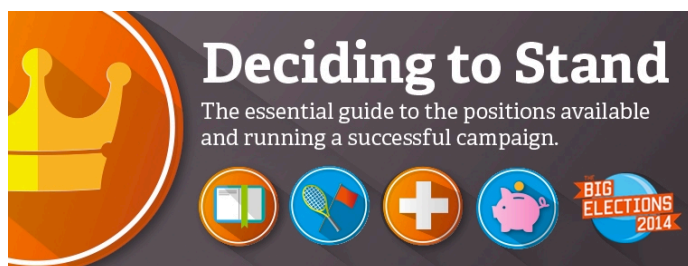
Our Deciding to Stand scheme aimed to de-mystify the roles available, what they entailed and what skills you needed. They also offered practical sessions such as writing manifestos and campaigning.

We refreshed the branding to make it more accessible and to bring it in line with the move of all of our election branding to the Union website.

Another change we made was to remove the requirement for candidates to reach a number of seconders. Before this was done using the eVoting software allowing students to see who was running and second them. This tended to descend in to a race to see who could get seconders. It was also felt that seeing a list of people standing could put other off from standing. The new system meant that the full list of candidates for each position was unknown until the 'Your Candidates Revealed' session, previously the 'Initial Candidates Meeting'.

We also introduced a number of Club, Society & Project elections into the process. All number of the larger clubs were approached and asked if they wanted to run their elections online. In total six clubs took part.

For the second year running Jim Dickinson, Chief Executive at UEA Students' Union was appointed by the Trustee Board as Returning Officer, with staff support from the Governance & Administration Manager and Education & Welfare Manager looking after the day-to-day administration of the election as Deputy Returning Officers (DROs).

3.2 TIMETABLE

Training Sessions	29 January – 3 March 2014
Nominations Opened	10 February 2014
Nominations Closed	1 March 2014
Voting Opened	7 March 2014
Voting Closed	14 March 2014
Results Announced	14 March 2014

3.3 DELIVERY
Attendance was not as high as we hoped in the training sessions but we did have a number of candidates standing as a result of the sessions.

Marketing and promotion was very similar to previous years except for some promotional material written in Mandarin as an experiment to target students from overseas who speak the language.

A change to the approach to email promotion was taken with a set timetable designed to combat the quieter times of voting whilst also taking advantage of times of the day when students were like to be on their email, was implemented. One of the new emails we sent was to students that that voted last year, were eligible to vote this year and hadn't yet.

The 'Meet the Candidates' had a format change allowing for candidates to question each other creating more of a debate feel to the show. Anecdotally this made for a more enjoyable show and matched the name of the program more accurately! Over 1,500 people watched the show on catch-up.

The Big Elections Results Party was held in the Metric Nightclub for the second-year running. Once again it was a big success adding a real element of excitement to the end of the process.

3.4 TURNOUT
A last-day surge in voting helped us to close to our highest ever number of voters. Missing matching our record by one vote, 6,537 students took part in The Big Elections 2014. This was made up of a record 60.1% of Undergraduates and 14.5% of Postgraduates. An overall turnout of 39.3% continued the decline of the last two years, mainly represented by a growing number of Postgraduate students at the College.

The trend of less Postgraduate students voting, whilst the constituency increasing, is one of concern. Despite a focus on improving the turnout and aiming the elections at Postgraduates, the trend has been the opposite of our overall Postgraduate engagement numbers.

Overall 151,802 votes were cast in The Big Elections 2014 making it the UK's largest ever student vote. The sheer number of votes is amazing and simply would not have been possible to process with paper votes.

3.5 COMPLAINTS
Following on from learning points from last year's Big Elections complaint some small changes were made to the rules of the process. As a result of these changes, increased candidate training and strong work by our team of Returning Officers, the elections were returned without any complaints and all positions announced that evening.

3.6 LEARNING POINTS
The training plan and sessions were well received by those that attended however the way we communicated the sessions and their timing need improving. Elections shouldn't be seen as something to run for if you have the right 'experience' and encouragement to stand for election should come all year round.

A full review in to the issue with Postgraduates and their lack of turnout needs to be conducted. Talking to the Graduate Students' Union, focus

groups with PG students and sector analysis should be undertaken before the calendar year to establish ways in which we can engage.

Engaging with Clubs, Societies & Projects with online elections was more of a task than we had expected. We were met with much resistance to the perception that the Union was taking over their processes. More than that however, was the discovery that many CSPs simply didn't follow the election rules as set out in the bye-laws. Examples such as weighted votes for committee members, interview panels and vetting by alumni were just some of the poor practices we found. The Governance Committee need to think about how much we want to 'unpick' this area. Having said that many of the responses we got were from CSPs that said that they held their elections in large rooms with all members invited. Candidates were asked to make a short speech, discussions and debate occurred and then members voted. The face-to-face element was important and it was a quick and efficient process. It is clear to see how enforcing an online system and inclusion in a process that lasts over six weeks could be detrimental to those groups.

Our last day surge in voting was, to some extent, planned with the email plan aiming to contact different cohorts and constituencies on the last day that hadn't voted. Indeed, the approach for the whole week was more planned and felt less reactive. We still over-contact some individuals if they happen to fit in to many of our segmented cohorts and an overall system change to counter the perception of 'spam' should be considered.

Despite creating promotional material in Mandarin, there was no noticeable increase in those international students voting. Overall international student voting was up but still tracked below the UK average of 49.2%.

4. Postgraduate Elections

4.1 BACKGROUND
As we had moved many of the traditional position of the Summer Elections in to The Big Elections, the main positions left were the Graduate Students' Union ones. As such the decision was taken to aim the elections at PG only positions and rename them accordingly.

4.2 TIMETABLE

Nominations Open	20 May 2013
Nominations Close	29 May 2013
Voting Opens	3 June 2013
Voting Closes	7 June 2013
Results Announced	7 June 2013

4.3 TURNOUT
Turnout in the Postgraduate Elections was predictably low, however lower than we were hoping for. 188 Postgraduates voted a turnout of 2.51%.

4.4 LEARNING POINTS
Decisions around the change of name and the way we promoted it were made very late on. The turnout in these elections have traditionally been driven by candidates with little Union promotion. We need to support this election properly next year, working with the GSU to ensure that this is a successful election providing the GSU with a working committee.

5. The Big Elections 2015 Plan

5.1 TIMETABLE

Nominations Open	2 February 2015
Nominations Close	1 March 2015
Voting Opens	6 March 2015
Voting Closes	13 March 2015
Results Announced	13 March 2015

5.2 CANDIDATE TRAINING
The same plan as before will happen, however an earlier start to promotion and explanation of the sessions will be needed.

Session	Topics covered	Delivered
Positions introduction – Full time positions	What the roles involve What is a Sabbatical? Who can stand Visa implications for International students Which is the best position for you?	January
Positions introduction – Student Trustees and CU Presidents	What the roles involve What is expected of a trustee	January
Manifesto Writing	Effective manifesto writing Being realistic Avoiding buzzwords	February
Running a successful campaign	Planning your campaign Your campaign message (what are your big ideas) Your campaign publicity How to campaign Public speaking How to engage a crowd Choose your audience Where to campaign Best utilisation of social media Websites and online engagement Campaign Team management	February
Initial Candidates meeting	Election regulations Expected behaviours Complaints procedure How to balance your campaign with work pressures	February

5.3 POSITIONS
The following new positions are planned for inclusion in The Big Elections 2015:
- RAG Chair & Treasurer

5.4 MARKETING
Our Board of Trustees oversees the whole organisation. During The Big Elections we elect two Student Trustees. We have improved the way in which we promote the positions for standing and with the change in the name to our Sabbatical Officers to Officer Trustees, the role of a Trustee in the Union should be clearer. An improvement to the way we communicate the Board as a whole should also improve the awareness of their work and importance to the good governance of the organisation. The Student Trustee positions should be well contested.

A feeling that our Live Stats have reached the place where we don't need to add more stats is common. However, as we did last year we should look at improving the way in which we present them and the usefulness of that presentation.

6. Conclusions

Our strategic aim SV1 within Amplifying the Student Voice looks to increase the number of students who take part in the election every year during the plan. In Appendix A it shows that again this year we have achieved this goal.

Overall the number of times a student voted in an election increased from 10,680 to 11,322 a difference of 642. As an average percentage of turnout across each year's three elections 2013/14 saw a mean of 23.1% a 0.5% increase on 2012/13 at 22.6%.

As last year the increasing number of Postgraduate students and our inability to successfully engage them is an issue. This is particularly acute in PG students who were not UGs at the College. Work must be done in this area, especially as this a growth area with Imperial West on the horizon.

7. Action Plan

Action	Deliverables	Date
Finalised Training Plan	A full list of training sessions and trainers Training outcomes	Nov
Final list of positions to be elected	Final list of all full-time and part-time positions to be elected in The Big Elections 2014	Nov
PGR PGT Engagement Review and Plan	Plan for targeting and engaging Postgraduate students in the election process	Dec
Communication Plan	Detailed communications calendar	Dec

8. Key Communication Milestones

15 December
Launch Nominations campaign

12 JANUARY
Candidates' Pack Published

26 JANUARY
Launch The Big Elections website

9 FEBRUARY
Continued nominations promotion

16 FEBRUARY
Launch Voting campaign

23 FEBRUARY
Final push on Nominations, and build up Voting campaign

25 FEBRUARY
Candidates' Manifestos published

6 MARCH
Voting opens

Launch live stats

Manifestos in Felix

6-13 MARCH
Voting promotion and stalls across campus

11 MARCH
Meet the Candidates live online

13 MARCH
Voting closes

Results Party

25 FEBRUARY
Candidates' Manifestos published

Comparision of Elections Turnouts for 2011/12, 2012/13 and 2013/14

2011/12   2012/13

	UG		PG		TOTAL		UG		PG		TOTAL	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Precentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Precentage
Your Rep & Council Elections	na	na	na	na	2,028	12.80%	na	na	na	na	3,030	20.00%
The Big Elections	5,260	58	1,279	19	6,538	41.10%	5,265	59	1,231	17	6,496	40.60%
Summer Elections	na	na	na	na	930	5.80%	926	10	228	3	1,154	7.20%
					9496	19.90%					10680	22.60%
										DELTA	1184	2.70%