NSS REFERENDUM REPORT, 2017

Background

The National Student Survey (NSS) is an annual survey of all final year undergraduate degree students at institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The NSS responses are shared with academic departments at the University of York and inform the many metrics used to develop an annual action plan to improve student experience. The data is also used in the national league tables that rank higher education institutions in the UK.

Last year the NUS passed a motion to boycott the NSS to challenge the government’s proposed reforms to the higher education sector. These reforms include the introduction of a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which aims to help students choose where to study, by providing clear information about teaching provision and student outcomes.

A referendum was called due to policy calling to boycott the NSS not reaching a consensus amongst the Officer Group and students. The decision to accelerate the referendum timeline was made by the Officer Group due to the time sensitive nature of the proposal, with the University due to begin promotion of the NSS in early February.

James Humpish, the Policy Coordinator, explained:

"The question of whether YUSU should support a boycott of the NSS was originally supposed to be included in the current policy review. Once the policy pack was released, the officer group considered the time-sensitivity of the issue and voted that it went to referendum as is their prerogative. In any case, it will be the student body as a whole that determine the result and I look forward to an engaging debate, campaigning and voting."

The referendum question was agreed to be:

‘Should YUSU campaign for students to boycott the National Student Survey (NSS)?’
The Campaign leaders were Sophie Flinders (Yes Campaign) and Will Gibb (No Campaign).

Michael Hewitson, Democracy Manager of Leeds University Union was named the External Returning Officer.

Tom Meares, YUSU Democracy & Campaigns Coordinator, was named as Deputy Returning Officer.

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**Timeline of the Referendum**

1. The Officer Group voted to conduct an extraordinary referendum under guidelines set out by By-Law 8: Referenda, paragraph 9. (20/1/2017)
2. A blog was published to highlight key issues points surrounding the referendum (24/1/2017).
3. A candidate briefing took place to cover the rules of the referendum (24/1/2017)
4. A web-page was launched with the referendum information including key dates and debates (25/1/2017)
5. Campaigning started by both the ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ teams (25/1/17).
6. A debate was held on 30/1/2017, chaired by James Humpish, Policy Coordinator (30/1/2017)
7. Voting opened (30/1/2017 8:30pm, after the debate)
8. Voting closed (06/02/2017 10:00am).

**Publicity and Engagement**

The referendum was officially announced in a web page on the YUSU website on 25th January. A blog was published on the 24th to communicate the key areas before the launch of campaigning on the 25th.

The referendum web pages contained key information including referendum rules, the timeline, contact details for campaigners and the returning officers etc.

In addition to the website, YUSU promoted neutral social media, and graphics to promote taking part in the referendum
The campus paper *Nouse*, as well as non-ratified media like *The Yorker* also produced articles and comment pieces surrounding the referendum which engaged the student body in the decision making process.

### Campaigning & Voting

Online campaigning and physical campaigning opened alongside the launch of the Referendum web-pages on Wednesday 25/1/17. Both campaign leaders were briefed on the rules over the course of the week. Each campaign team was given a budget of £80, with £60 of that reimbursable.

The debate between both sides took place on the 30/1/17. During the debate a member for the ‘Yes’ campaign changed his position on the question during the debate and withdrew. The meeting was paused while replacement panel members were secured. Following a motion on a change to the conduct of business, (backed by a clear majority in the room, with three abstentions) the meeting continued.

Voting was held entirely online at yusu.org/vote, opening at 8:30pm on Monday 30/1/2017, and closed at 10am on Monday 6/2/2017.

### Results & Turnout

Students were asked to vote on the following question:

‘*Should YUSU campaign for students to boycott the National Student Survey (NSS)*?’

And were given the options; Yes, No and Abstain. The results are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Votes Cast</th>
<th>Turnout (%)</th>
<th>Total ‘Yes’ Votes</th>
<th>Total ‘No’ Votes</th>
<th>Total Abstentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>958</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>568</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For a referendum result to be binding, the constitution requires it must reach a turnout quoracy of 5% of the (18,446 strong) student body - which equates to 922 votes. This was reached on 05/02/2017.
Complaints

The Deputy Returning Officer (DRO) received the following complaints to returningofficer@yusu.org

1x complaint made in regards to covering of accessibility markings
A complaint was made to the DRO stating that the ‘Yes’ campaign had covered accessibility markings on various university buildings. This was raised with the ‘Yes’ team by the DRO and was promptly rectified.

1x complaint of inappropriate markings on campaign materials.
A complaint was made by the university that a banner for the ‘No’ team had used inappropriate typography. The banner was removed by the DRO and was amended by the ‘No’ team. The ‘No’ team made it clear that they had not meant to cause offence, and were happy to correct the banner.

1x complaint re: removal of campaign signs
A complaint was made as to removal of a placard from outside the university library. This was investigated by estates and they stated that none of their team had removed the information. No further action was taken. Estates stated that no further evidence was available.

Other Issues

Concerns were raised over campaign teams use of social media during the referendum. Issues pertaining to spamming of opponents’ campaign pages and unconstructive debates. As this did not breach harassment guidelines and no official complaints were submitted, the DRO did not deem it appropriate to take these matters further. It was made clear during the campaign briefing that the harassment would not be tolerated and appropriate sanctions would be taken.

Questions were raised about the appropriate number of participants for each side at the debate event. It was decided by the Policy Co-ordinator, responsible for chairing the debate that up to three was an appropriate number, after one team requested four panel members and another requested two.

Recommendations
To increase training on appropriate social media behaviour during elections and referenda periods. This is being developed ahead of the YUSU elections in spring term.

To consider what additional support and training would be valuable for elected student chairs with chairing meetings that may well include unforeseen outcomes and events.

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**Comment from the External Returning Officer**

“The Deputy returning Officer has kept me up to date with proceedings in regards to the referendum question ‘Should YUSU campaign for students to boycott the National Student Survey (NSS)?’.

“Complaints have been dealt with in an appropriate and timely manner, in particular the handling of the unusual circumstances at the debate .

“I’m happy to state my confidence in the contents of this report dated 6th February 2017 and as the Returning Officer I am satisfied that the result of the referendum is as a result of a free, fair and democratic process.”

Michael Hewitson
Democracy Manager
Leeds University Union

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Tom Meares
*Deputy Returning Officer, YUSU Democracy & Campaigns Coordinator*

6 February 2017