

## Election Report: NUS Affiliation Referendum, Trinity Term 2016

### **Introduction:**

The Referendum was held in sixth week of trinity term- Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> May to Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> June. The question read "OUSU is currently affiliated to the National Union of Students. Should it continue to be affiliated: yes or no?"

One open meeting was held before the election, on Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> May, at 8pm, in the Jacqueline du Pre Auditorium in St Hilda's College. Prior to this meeting a briefing meeting was held at the OUSU offices with leaders of both campaigns.

I will not comment too much on the nature of the election regulations since this referendum was the last to take place under the old election regulations. However, the changes to the regulations are, I think in light of the operation of the rules I ran the election, well advised.

### **The elections results were as follows:**

#### **Total Votes: 5974**

Votes for: 3409

Against: 2429

Abstentions: 136

For those who are interested, the subject with the most students voting was history. The college with the most students voting was Wadham.

### **Successes:**

The conduct of the campaigns throughout was exemplary and both sides were very respectful to the other and communicated with each other and myself to resolve any potential difficulties.

Turnout was 27.7%, which compares favourably to the turnout in OUSU's statutory elections.

Expenses were well dealt with, with OUSU providing campaigns with additional funds as part of the funding limit. This prevented students having to spend significant quantities of their own money on campaigning. All receipts were submitted on time.

### **Problems:**

Postgraduate engagement was relatively low; only 24.79% of voters were postgraduates. Although this shows a greater level of participation than in some annual elections, it does not reflect the proportion of postgraduates at the university.

There were a significant number of potential complaints. Most of the complaints were related to publications, advertising and media produced by either side and the methods of distributing these. These were mostly resolved satisfactorily informally in conversation with the leaders of both campaigns. An example of such a resolution was when an Access Officer sent out an informative email regarding the stance that target schools had taken in support of remain, however we resolved this by sending an email setting out the stance of the No Thanks NUS campaign. Similar resolutions to most of the complaints were found by allowing both sides to send out similar publications.

However, there were several instances where complaints had to be upheld regarding the content of campaign materials.

I am engaged in a process of working with the NUS to resolve a formal complaint regarding the conduct of certain NUS officials.

**Recommendations:**

The system holding campaign leaders responsible for the conduct of anyone who “campaigns” for their campaign is essentially untenable. It is not sensible to hold campaign leaders responsible for the behaviour of others who may use totally different methods and not be involved with the official campaign at all. There are issues regarding whether the Student Union’s electoral regulations, and expenses can be applied to external organisations, or individuals who are not part of Oxford University, which is something for consideration in future.

The process of fact checking campaign materials should have taken place before large numbers of leaflets were printed, as although both sides were cooperative in issuing redactions and making necessary changes, this was an unnecessary expense and use of time for them.

Rule changes regarding the use of social media are needed, since following the regulations, which were designed for an age of email, it is difficult to define what is acceptable and what is campaigning. For example, it’s hard to state what is considered a closed group when applying mailing list rules to Facebook. It is difficult and probably unnecessary to seek to regulate campaigning within, for instance JCR groups as small scale expressions of opinion do not, in my opinion have the potential to sway voters, and might indeed encourage engagement with OUSU.

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