

Elections 2015/16 Review & Action Plan

Andrew Keenan – Interim Head of Student Voice and Communications

1. Introduction

- 1.1. *Democratic* has been one of ICU's four values since the creation of the 2013-16 Strategic Plan. Our annual election cycles are the most visible and important manifestation of this idea, and provide the biggest opportunities for students to democratically influence Imperial College Union.
- 1.2. There are three main election cycles each academic year: Your Rep & Council Elections, which take place September to October; Leadership Elections, January to March; and Summer Elections, May to June. There are other elections throughout the year, such as for Horizons Reps or vacant CSP roles, but these are not currently given the marketing and publicity platform provided to the main three.
- 1.3. Elections should be seen in the wider context of our democratic structures and processes. Other routes for students to engage with Imperial College Union's democracy include participation in Union Council and its subcommittees, and interaction with elected officers such as Officer Trustees, CSP leaders and Academic Representatives, as well as taking up one of our 2000+ elected positions.

2. Your Reps & Council Elections 2015/16

- 2.1. 2015 was the fifth consecutive October election cycle using the *Your Rep & Council Elections* name and branding. A large proportion of our UG Year, PGT Course and PGR Group Reps were elected, as well as our Ethics & Environment Officer, Council Ordinary Members and the GSU Executive.

2.2. YRCE15 key statistics, 2011-16

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Voters	2028	3030	4597	4600	4513
Turnout	12.8%	20%	27%	26.8%	25.96%

2.3. Turnout

- 2.3.1. If it was an Officer Trustee election, the YRCE15 turnout would put us in the top 20 students' unions in the UK; this is an achievement to take pride in and is a strong contributing factor to the growing success of the Academic Representation Network.
- 2.3.2. However, these elections have not seen significant development or improvement for almost three years. Turnout has plateaued since the rapid increase seen from October 2011 to October 2013. In fact, a small decline is visible, potentially due to demographic factors such as the higher rate of growth in Postgraduate numbers.

2.4. Learning points for YRCE16 and beyond

- 2.4.1. The branding & identity are now five years old; they are closely linked to the Big Elections branding last used in 2015 and discontinued for March 2016. The brand should be renewed for YRCE16 to bring it line with the visual identity and positioning used for the Leadership and Summer Elections 2016.
- 2.4.2. YRCE16 would benefit from renewed messaging, to potential candidates and to voters, which would closely link the election to other areas of ICU's work and values. This could include:
- 2.4.2.1. The importance of student leadership positions
 - 2.4.2.2. Links to Officer Trustee policy achievements and priorities
 - 2.4.2.3. Fresh messaging on the role of Council and its members
 - 2.4.2.4. Promotion of our Investors in Volunteers accreditation
 - 2.4.2.5. Portraying YRCE16 as the first chance for new students to participate in ICU democracy
- 2.4.3. Candidate support, such as training, is not usually provided during YRCE. This is due to the lower number of cross-campus roles and the lack of Officer Trustee roles, as well as staff resource pressures at the start of the academic year. However, a large proportion of YRCE roles are for first year students, meaning that some form of information and training may be necessary.
- 2.4.4. Establishing a master list of Academic Representative positions to be elected in each YRCE is an ongoing challenge, as it involves negotiating with almost 20 departments and over 100 MSc courses. Allocating more time to this process and returning to written agreements with each Head of Department office should streamline this.

3. Leadership Elections 2016

- 3.1. 2016 was the first year of the new identity of *Leadership Elections*, with the *Big Elections* name and branding discontinued. This was due to the age of the Big Elections identity, as well as recommendations that followed BE15 about changing our messaging to highlight the leadership, professional development and graduate-employment aspects of the role.

3.2. LE16 key statistics

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Voters	6539	6496	6538	7258	7966
Turnout	41.1%	40.6%	39.31%	42.47%	45.47%
UG participation	58%	59%	60.2%	59.6%	61.3%
PGT participation	19%	17%	12.4%	18.3%	28.6%
PGR participation			16.4%	26.7%	25.0%

3.3. Candidate support

3.3.1. Takeup of candidate training remained low, although slightly increased on last year. Feedback was generally positive, but many sessions had low attendance. Candidates may not be aware of the training, or have an understanding of what it has to offer; the provision of training should be reviewed to minimise the staff resource expended while improving support to candidates and maintaining the standards of campaigning overall.

3.4. Turnout

3.4.1. LE16 turnout remains one of our organisational strengths and one of our most impressive engagement metrics. However, deeper analysis of participation across time and demographics shows a mixed picture. Inroads are rapidly being made into PGT participation, particularly in the Business School. However, PGR participation has fallen slightly after growth last year, and UG participation has been broadly static, with only minimal growth of three percentage points across four years.

3.4.2. We have not yet developed a deep understanding of the volatility in PG participation over the past few years. Until we do, we cannot be assured that this growth is sustainable and a platform for future development. We have also not fully explored why UG participation has stabilised.

3.4.3. Electoral participation shows a slightly lower growth rate than CSP memberships across the same time and demographic measures, and a considerably lower growth rate than top-level ICU engagement figures. The number of students who voted in previous elections but did not vote this time has grown slightly to 32.5%, meaning over 1700 students chose not to vote in 2016 having done so in 2015. There are opportunities here for increasing what could be called 'conversion' – encouraging and enthusing already-engaged students to take part in our elections.

3.5. Officer Trustee candidate numbers

3.5.1. LE16 was the most successful election cycle yet in terms of candidates for Officer Trustee positions, with 11 candidates for President (matching the total number of OT candidates in 2015/16) and 9 for Deputy President (Welfare) at the close of nominations. These figures were well beyond even optimistic expectations and are worthy of detailed reflection, to capture the root causes in the hope of repeating the achievement.

3.5.2. Possible root causes include:

3.5.2.1. High-profile roleholders, visible to students and associated with successful campaigns

3.5.2.2. Strong theme in publicity of 'leadership' and positive comparison of OT roles to graduate employment, encouraging more career-minded and ambitious students to consider OT positions.

3.5.2.3. Increasing student awareness of welfare and student support issues at Imperial, and ICU's role in highlighting and solving them.

3.5.2.4. Result of long-term shift in the 'pipeline', the support and encouragement given to student volunteers to develop – many candidates had years of experience in the Rep Network, CSPs or Constituent Unions and saw President as a natural progression.

3.5.3. Conversely, no candidates put themselves forward for Deputy President (Finance & Services), an almost unprecedented scenario. If this had happened without the mitigating factor of high numbers of candidates for President and Deputy President (Welfare), this could have presented a considerable risk to Imperial College Union's reputation and to the legitimacy of LE16 itself.

3.5.4. Possible root causes include:

3.5.4.1. Result of multiple years of discussion of discontinuing DPFS role

3.5.4.2. Generally positive but light-hearted portrayal of current DPFS in student media, making it less likely for students to envisage themselves in that role

3.5.4.3. Frustration of student volunteers with our financial systems and processes, reducing willingness to work with them.

3.6. *CSP participation*

3.6.1. In line with BE15, several of our largest CSPs were automatically included in LE16. There was a reduction in pushback from CSP leaders compared to BE15, as the Activities team increased the communication and support given to these societies.

3.6.2. As was practised this year, the membership threshold at which a CSP is included in the elections should be chosen afresh each year to balance CSP democracy with the overall scale of the elections. Communication with CSPs around the reasoning for their inclusion should be made as early as possible, at least two months before the opening of nominations. The positive case for their inclusion – the legitimacy and long-term health of their club – should be made explicitly clear, to prevent accusations of 'top-down' control from ICU.

3.7. *Meet the Candidates*

3.7.1. Organising the Meet the Candidates posed a significant challenge this year. This problem had many contributing factors. Some are short-term issues that can be fixed relatively easily; others are more deeply embedded in our volunteer structures and working relationships.

3.7.1.1. Lack of buy-in from student volunteers, particularly those from the Media groups

3.7.1.2. Lack of early coordination with student groups

3.7.1.3. Misunderstandings and confusion over 'ownership' of the media basement and events expected to receive student contribution

3.7.1.4. Equipment and volunteer shortages due to a high-profile DramSoc production being held at the same time

3.7.1.5. Membership crossover between major Media groups – most contact made with DramSoc, IC Cinema, ICTV, IC Radio or Felix ends up with

one small group of highly-engaged volunteers, meaning Media output is heavily reliant on a few skilled individuals.

3.7.1.6. Staffing pressures

3.7.2. A successful Meet the Candidates was held, after considerable last-minute work; it was reliant on a small number of student volunteers giving up a large amount of their time. In future, Meet the Candidates must be put on a solid footing by being incorporated into discussions with the Media and Arts societies earlier in the year, and clear expectations of student volunteers in those groups being communicated.

4. Conclusions

- 4.1. Strategic aim SV1 – annually increasing the number of students who take part in our elections – has been achieved once again. We have maintained our position as the students' union with the highest electoral participation in England & Wales, and for the first time ever, claimed the UK title. This is rightfully a point of pride for the organisation, and a highly-visible symbol of our success in engaging our membership.
- 4.2. Elections engagement is growing more slowly than many other engagement metrics. Deeper analysis of participation could produce useful insights into this, as well as recommendations for multiple teams within ICU. For example, a fuller understanding of the correlation between turnout and other metrics such as candidate numbers, candidate demographics, participation by department, or marketing measures, could help shape future election strategy, candidate support and promotional work.
- 4.3. The success in terms of Officer Trustee candidates has lessons for elections marketing and branding, as well as ongoing promotion of OT achievements throughout the year. Similarly, the lack of DPFS candidates exposes potential risks around the popularity and image of some of our elected roles.
- 4.4. Incremental branding changes such as a renewed title and visual identity have delivered an incremental overall increase in participation. However, demographic shifts in College are likely to work against us, as student number growth is concentrated in lower-engagement groups and work continues on the development and expansion of new campuses away from our areas of strength.
- 4.5. If we are to break through the 40-45% engagement plateau, we must embark on more fundamental innovation of our democratic methods and structures.

5. Recommendations & Actions

Action	Owner	Deadline
Rebrand YRCE16 with new name, visual identity and messaging, in line with LE16	AK/SH	In advance of YRCE16 in September
Improve candidate support package for YRCE16	RC	In advance of YRCE16 in September
Reintroduce written agreements with departments regarding Rep positions to be elected	SY	In advance of YRCE16 in September
Review communication of Officer Trustee priorities and achievements throughout the year	AK	In advance of YRCE16 in September
Review the role and method of candidate support and training	RC	In advance of YRCE16 in September
Explore resource cost of full analysis of our datasets with intention of generating insights that shape future election strategy	AK	In advance of LE17
Complete review of our democratic structures, with impact on election cycles evaluated	AK	In advance of LE17
Complete review of DPFS position and agree OT roles for 2017/18	AK	In advance of LE17
Agree plans for Meet the Candidates with relevant student groups	AK	In advance of LE17