



HISA's 2025 elections: Report to governing bodies

Summary

Over the spring of 2025, HISA conducted elections for the 16 Student Officer roles across the UHI partnership. These positions collectively form the Executive Committee of the Students' Association, and usually take up governing body positions across UHI. All students were able to vote for the two cross-campus roles and then one, two or three local officer roles (depending on our structures at each Academic Partner).

This year, we made substantial revisions and enhancements to our 2024 processes, including updated candidate training and resources, election rules and publicity, plus the important addition of Single Sign-On for the HISA website's voting platform, which aimed to give us up to date access to records of eligible UHI students.

There were two elections in 2025: our main **Student Elections** running from December to March, and a **by-election** in April to May to fill two remaining positions (Depute Presidents for UHI Argyll and SAMS). All posts were filled, giving HISA a full Executive team going into the 2025-26 academic year.

Turnout in the main Student Elections was 4.17%, an increase on last year's 3.02%, which in fact due to changes in our reported membership represents a 51.09% increase on the turnout (due to differing total memberships over the two years).

This report aims to update governing bodies in UHI and the Academic Partners on these elections, contributing towards their responsibility under the 1994 Act to ensure free and fair elections in their students' association.



1: Introduction

Under the 1994 Education Act, each further and higher education establishment is required to have a Students' Association that elects its officers through a fair and democratic election. HISA's Articles of Association state that we must hold elections for two regional Cross-Campus Officers (President and Vice-President Education) and at least one Local Officer from each academic partner.

Our main Student Elections saw nominations open in December and voting took place during the week of 10th March 2025, while nominations for the by-election for the UHI Argyll and SAMS Depute Presidents opened in April with voting during the week of 5th May 2025.

From July 2025 HISA's new Insight and Democracy Coordinator, who is responsible for operational delivery of processes such as our elections, undertook a review of key processes including our election nomination and voting stages. From this, a number of changes were introduced including:

1. Development of a new "brand" for our elections, with graphics specific to each stage (eg nomination and voting).
2. Revised [election rules](#), drawing on effective practice from across the sector.
3. A comprehensive [candidates' pack](#).
4. Updated [training for candidates](#), including a compulsory introductory session, training on campaigning and expenses, and a chance to meet with key HISA staff to better understand the roles of those they might be working with.
5. A [social media competition](#) with cash reward/prize to raise profile of voting.
6. The addition of Single Sign-On for the HISA website, where nomination and voting took place, enabling students to use their regular UHI login details rather than create a new account. This also has the advantage of enabling students to easily access other member-only functions such as joining a club or society.





2: Preparing for the elections

Working with staff, especially in teaching and support roles, at Academic Partners is crucial to the success of our elections, because of the day-to-day contacts with students that they have. As such, we arranged this year through AP management teams the promotion of our “recommend a friend” form whereby staff (and students) can trigger an anonymous email of encouragement to a student to consider standing, and a heavy programme of class visits to promote the opportunities available through nominations. Our local teams have also undertaken promotional work through stalls in campus open spaces, digital communications through our website, social media and newsletter, and through AP-based services such as display screens, plus our various channels of engagement with Student Voice Reps (SVRs) including meetings.

Across UHI, we worked closely with UHI’s data protection and student records teams to ensure Single Sign-On was effectively implemented.

This partnership working is further crucial given the roles local officers usually play as student member posts of governing bodies, so liaison with governing bodies and governance professionals is a key part of our election processes – not least in the form of this report.

Both academic and support staff at UHI Shetland offered their wholehearted support for the elections and assisted promotion wherever possible. Responses to requests for class visits were excellent, with HISA staff receiving a warm welcome into classes and ample time being allowed during lessons at both nomination and voting stages of the elections.

Staff at Lerwick campus, Scalloway campus and Mareel actively encouraged their student groups to vote. Time to vote was permitted during lectures and workshop time, enabling students to attend polling stations. UHI Shetland staff participated with HISA in class discussions on the importance of the student voice and the significance of democracy within the student community, and society a whole. This level of collaborative working, coupled with the strong campaigning effort of the candidate undoubtedly contributed to an increase in voter turnout from 5.55% in 2023/24 to 6.35% in 2024/25 at UHI Shetland.



3: Elections process and results

Key dates for our elections were as follows:

- **Nominations Open:** Noon (12:00) Monday 9th December 2024
- **Nominations Close:** Noon (12:00) Thursday 20th February 2025
- **Candidates Briefing:** 5pm, Thursday 20th February 2025
- **Candidates Training Workshops:** Friday 21st February 2025
- **HISA Staff Speed Meet:** Tuesday 25th February 2025
- **Manifestos Deadline:** Noon (12:00) Thursday 27th February 2025
- **Online Campaigning Starts:** 10am, Monday 3rd March 2025
- **Voting Opens & Physical Campaigning Starts:** 10am Monday 10th March 2025
- **Voting Closes:** 4pm Thursday 13th March 2025
- **Election Results Announcement:** 5pm, Friday 14th March 2025

Due to significant publicity and promotion work, candidacy was significantly higher than 2024's Spring Elections, albeit there was some candidate withdrawal upon engaging with briefings and training and due to personal circumstances. At the opening of voting, we had 25 candidates in total.

Voting took place by Single Transferable Vote. Voting was available through our website, and at polling stations at many campuses using a desktop polling app from MSL, our website provider.



The National Union of Students acted as Returning Officer, a service available as part of our affiliation to NUS by which they provide external validation of results and advice on complaints or complex judgements. HISA's Director of Student Engagement and Representation (Simon Varwell) acted as Deputy Returning Officer, meaning he was responsible for decisions about the elections and declaring the results. Our Insight and Democracy Coordinator (Paul Stalker) was responsible for day-to-day operational delivery.



The [results of the Student Elections in March, including our declaration video, are on our website](#), and the names of candidates returned in each role, with the numbers of votes cast in total for each position (not just for the winning candidate), are as follows:

Role	Total votes cast	Winning candidate
President	776	Xander McDade
Vice-President Education	738	Holly Pearce
HTC Depute President	5	Susan Loughlin
Inverness President	186	Chloe Young
Inverness Depute President	186	Holly Storton
Moray President	92	Sarah Marshall
Moray Depute President	91	Emmaleigh Hay
North, West & Hebrides Depute President (North)	79	Cole Garscadden
North, West & Hebrides Depute President (West)	76	Abigail Teague
North, West & Hebrides Depute President (Islands)	71	Alasdair Macleod
Shetland Depute President	64	Harley Green
Orkney Depute President	38	Mila Tabone
Perth President	294	Andi Garrity
Perth Depute President	288	Millie Haokip

Our May by-election for the two remaining positions led to candidates returned as follows:

Role	Total votes cast	Winning candidate
Argyll Depute President	1	Craig Ward
SAMS Depute President	7	Hannah Lehmann

This means we have a complete membership on our Executive at the end of elections which was not the case in recent years (Sabhal Mòr Ostaig have their own local students' association, with an entitlement to an appointed place on the Executive).



4: Election statistics

Thanks to Single Sign-On, we were able to extrapolate some useful data about voting via MSL, our website provider.

In the main Student Elections in March, 946 members voted (4.17%), casting 2984 individual votes. This represents an increase in turnout of around 51.09% compared to the 2024 Spring Elections where 613 members cast 1731 individual votes. Among those who voted:

- 85% of voters voted for a Cross-Campus Officer role (President or Vice-President Education), 75% for both roles and the remaining 10% for only one or other.
- 88% of voters voted for a Local Officer (all other posts based within APs).
- 65% of voters voted via the HISA website, nearly double last year's figure, demonstrating the ease which Single Sign-On provides for the voting process.

Over the **four days of voting** (Monday 10th to Thursday 13th March), voting was broadly spread out but with some tail off towards the later days. There were significant spikes in voting during typical working hours and very little overnight turnout.

	Day One (Monday)	Day Two (Tuesday)	Day Three (Wednesday)	Day Four (Thursday)
Votes	852	848	661	623
% Votes	28.55%	28.42%	22.15%	20.88%

There was a number of notable differences in turnout with regards to **student type** in the 2025 Student Elections. Postgraduate Research (PGR) students were significantly more likely to vote than others, and Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students were the least likely to have voted in the 2025 Student Elections.

	Voters	Total Membership	Turnout
Further Education (FE)	479	12541	3.82%
Undergraduate (UG)	422	8195	5.15%
Postgraduate Taught (PGT)	22	1765	2.25%
Postgraduate Research (PGR)	21	203	10.34%

Similarly, a breakdown of the vote by **mode of study**, highlights that there was a significant difference in turnout between students on full-time programmes of study and students on part-time programmes of study.



	Voters	Total Membership	Turnout
Full-Time (FT)	747	13650	5.47%
Part-Time (PT)	197	9054	2.18%

In terms of **age**, turnout ranged from 0.51% for under 16s to 6.34% for 18-21s.

By **Academic Partner**, some interesting things can be noted: including a correlation between SAMS' high turnout (despite the lack of a local officer candidate) and its high full-time HE numbers, and UHI Argyll's turnout and its low full-time and HE numbers.

	Voters	Total Membership	Turnout
Highland Theological College (HTC)	5	126	3.97%
Sabhal Mor Ostaig	6	355	1.69%
Scottish Association for Marine Sciences (SAMS)	30	192	15.63%
UHI (Executive Office)	17	713	2.38%
UHI Argyll	20	1517	1.32%
UHI Inverness	217	5290	4.10%
UHI Moray	102	2979	3.42%
UHI North, West & Hebrides	108	4126	2.62%
UHI Orkney	39	1117	3.49%
UHI Perth	336	5287	6.36%
UHI Shetland	63	992	6.35%



5: Evaluation and analysis

There are considerable successes we can point to in our 2025 Student Elections:

1. An increased turnout from last year, due to increased publicity and visibility of the elections.
2. An increased level of candidacy from last year, with all positions filled by the end of the May by-election.
3. Positive feedback from surveys conducted of all candidates and of HISA staff, complementing how well organised the elections are and how supportive the process was, and the value and effect of the elections' new branding.
4. The implementation of Single Sign-On for our website.
5. Improved materials for publicity and candidate information, including higher profile on-campus presence, class talks and engagement with the student population.
6. A revised candidate training process.

On the other hand, there are some continuing challenges:

1. Turnout for our Student Elections, while up on last year, is poor by sector standards (the National Union of Students reported a national average of 16.4% among its member unions in 2024). Our figure is exacerbated by UHI's distributed student population including a high number of online and part-time students who are typically less likely to engage with democratic processes. We attempted to address this by reaching out to online programme leaders to offer class visits or VLE content to promote the elections but uptake of this was low.
2. While Single Sign-On was a success, there were some difficulties in ensuring we had timely access to full and up to date lists of UHI's student population.
3. Also, some variation in AP student enrolment practices (for example relating to short course students) meant that our overall membership in practical terms was several hundred lower than it should have been. Related questions also remain about legal entitlements to membership (for instance for under-16s) and legacy student accounts still being in the system. One consequence of this is that fully reliability of reporting on our percentage turnout is difficult to achieve.

In terms of action for the future, it should be noted in the first instance that HISA's democratic structure may change for 2026-27 in light of a current democracy review and/or following UHI Transformation. For instance, any reduction in the number of officers from our current total of 16 (already considerably higher than any other students' association in Scotland) would allow a simplification of message to students regarding candidacy and voting.

Beyond that, a second action relates to the engagement of online students, which as stated above is a wider dynamic. As part of broader aims to engage with those studying entirely online, we are working with Academic Partners to ensure that students are made aware of the value of engaging with their local campus where they have one, and that we can access online classes and learning spaces throughout the year for key intervention such as Welcome activities and election promotion. This relates to a wider point about scope for further partnership working with UHI and academic



partners on a shared understanding of the value of the elections and how most effectively to promote them to students.

A final challenge relates to harmonisation of practices relating to student records. HISA is unique in its membership being shaped by 11 different processes for recording students, and this risks variation in our reportable membership. We will continue to explore this through academic, administrative and data protection processes.

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