

HISA's 2026 elections: Report to UHI North, West and Hebrides Board of Management



Summary

Over the spring of 2026, HISA conducted elections for the 12 Student Officer roles across the UHI partnership for 2026-27. These positions collectively form HISA's Student Officer team and Executive Committee, and usually take up governing body positions across UHI. All students were able to vote for two Cross-Campus Officer roles and then one Local Officer role at their academic partner (though three such roles at UHI North, West and Hebrides).

This year, we built on substantial revisions and enhancements made for our 2025 elections, including updated candidate training and resources, election rules and publicity. We also continued to benefit from 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 and enabled students to log into our website as if it was any other UHI platform.

We held our main **Student Elections** from January to March, and then **by-elections** over April and May to fill four posts (three of which remained vacant in the Student Elections and one where the elected candidate declined to take up post). We achieved candidates in all but one of these four by-elections. This gives us a nearly full Student Officer team going into the 2026-27 academic year.

Turnout in the main Student Elections was 3.75%, slightly down on last year's 4.17% but still up on two years ago.



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

1: Introduction

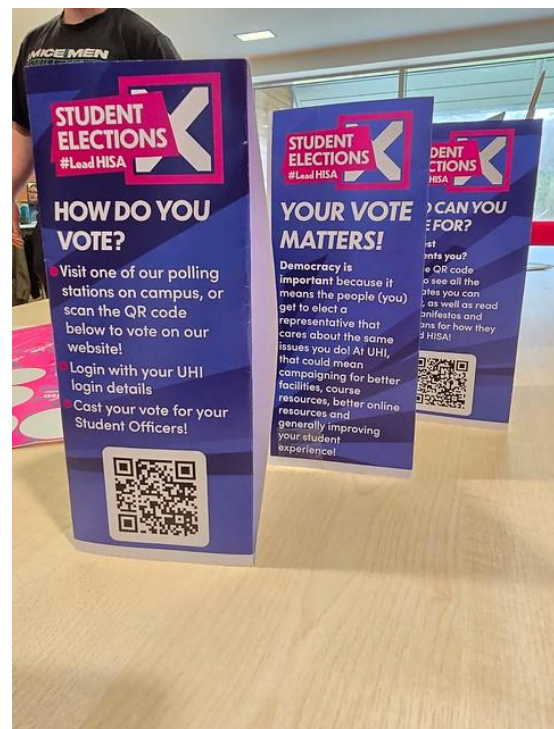
Under the 1994 Education Act, each further and higher education establishment is required to have a Students' Association that elects its officers through a fair and democratic election. HISA's Articles of Association state that we must hold elections for two Cross-Campus Officers (President and Vice-President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

This Student Officer team was revised over 2025-26 to reduce in number from 16 to 12, maintaining the local link but ensuring a more cost-effective system. At the same time, the HTC Depute President post was removed following discussions with HTC management and a consultative vote of HTC students (meaning HTC students would be represented from 2026-27 directly by the President and Vice-President Education).

Our main Student Elections saw nominations open in January and voting took place during the week of 9th March 2025. Two by-election windows took place in May 2026 with voting 5th to 7th and 26th to 28th May respectively.

Building on redevelopments in 2025, our elections saw a strong communication and outreach plan, including:

1. A clear "brand" for our elections, with graphics specific to each stage (eg nomination and voting).
2. Comprehensive [election rules](#), drawing on effective practice from across the sector.
3. A detailed [Nominations pack](#), providing full information for those interested in the roles.
4. A wide range of [training for candidates](#), including a compulsory introductory session, training on campaigning and expenses, and – after the elections – and employability session run by UHI Futures to enable both successful and unsuccessful candidates to reflect on the skills they developed during the elections.
5. A social media competition with cash reward/prize for voting.
6. The use 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 busy 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 and student data transfers operated smoothly.

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.

We were grateful to UHI North, West and Hebrides staff for their considerable support with the elections, especially for enabling us to do class talks and for encouraging students during the nomination and voting periods. Unfortunately due to staffing capacity constraints within HISA we were unable to run as many polling stations as we would have wished.

3: Elections process and results

Key dates for our main Student Elections were as follows:

- **Nominations Open:** Noon (12:00) Monday 19th January 2026
- **Nominations Close:** Noon (12:00) Thursday 19th February 2026
- **Candidates Briefing:** 6pm, Thursday 19th February 2026 (plus repeats on request).
- **Candidates Training Workshops:** Friday 20th to Monday 23rd February 2026
- **Manifestos Deadline:** Noon (12:00) Thursday 26th February 2025
- **Online Campaigning Starts:** 9am, Monday 2nd March 2026
- **Physical Campaigning Starts:** 9am, Monday 9th March 2026
- **Voting Opens:** 10am, Monday 9th March 2026
- **Voting Closes:** 4pm, Thursday 12th March 2026
- **Election Results Announcement:** 5pm, Friday 13th March 2026



Due to significant publicity and promotion work the level candidacy was high, albeit there was some candidate withdrawal upon engaging with briefings and training and due to personal circumstances. At the opening of voting, we had 20 candidates in total.

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

The National Union of Students acted as Returning Officer, enabling them to 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 management, and our staff at campuses across UHI organised local promotional work.



The [results of the Student Elections voting in March, including our declaration video, are on our website](#). 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	700	Oliver Sweeney
Vice-President Education	639	Andi Garrity
Argyll Depute President	26	Tsz Chung Tang
Inverness Depute President	98	Chloe Young
Moray Depute President	148	Callum Stepien
North, West & Hebrides Depute President (Hebrides)	87	Alasdair Macleod
Orkney Depute President	33	Esméemilja Mackenna
Perth Depute President	269	Alexandra Paton *
SAMS Depute President	67	Merlin Farrell

* The elected candidate subsequently resigned, triggering a by-election.

By-elections held between 20th April and 7th May led to candidates returned as follows:

Role	Total votes cast	Winning candidate
North, West & Hebrides Depute President (North)	3	Cole Garscadden
Shetland Depute President	3	Jay Bain

Further by-elections were held between 11th and 28th May, in the first case due to a lack of candidates in both the main Student Elections and the above by-election, and in the second case due to the timing of the resignation of the candidate in the main Student Elections.

Role	Total votes cast	Winning candidate
Perth Depute President	60	Corben Bruce

Nominations were sought for North, West & Hebrides Depute President (West) but the one candidate was disqualified due to a breach of election rules. We will explore options for a by-election in the new academic year.

This means we have a nearly complete Student Officer team for 2026-27.

Sabhal Mòr Ostaig have their own local students' association, with an entitlement to an appointed place on the Executive; and as stated in part 1 there is now no longer an HTC Depute President.



4: 2026 Student Election statistics

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

While our candidacy numbers are too small to explore in depth, one interesting observation is that by far our two highest age ranges for candidates in the main Student Elections were 18-21 (33.33%) and 50-59 (23.81%).

In the main Student Elections in March, 859 members voted (3.75 4.17%), casting 2237 individual votes. This represents a slight decrease on last year (946 members representing 4.17%, casting 2984 individual votes).

Day of polling	Voters
Monday 9 th March	223
Tuesday 10 th March	260
Wednesday 11 th March	187
Thursday 12 th March	192

As with last year, voting tailed off slightly over the four days, with a peak on day 2.

Turnout by Academic Partner showed very broad consistency against size of student population, with notable over-representation of turnout at UHI Perth and SAMS, and under-representation where there were no candidates from or campaigning in that location.

Academic Partner or centre	Number of voters	% of total turnout
UHI Perth	286	33.29%
UHI Moray	156	18.16%
UHI Inverness	146	17.00%
UHI North, West and Hebrides	108	12.57%
Scottish Association for Marine Science	67	7.80%
UHI Orkney	35	4.07%
UHI Argyll	31	3.61%
UHI Executive Office	15	1.75%
Sabhal Mòr Ostaig	6	0.70%
UHI Shetland	6	0.70%
HTC	2	0.23%
(Blank – presumably unknown or incompletely registered)	1	0.12%

Some other headlines in voter statistics include:

- Full-time voters represented 81.37% of turnout.
- By level of study, further education students represented 46.33% of turnout, degree students 25.96%, HN students 22.47%, and PGT and PGR less than 2% each.
- 65.42% of voters were on one-year courses and 26.54% on two-year courses.

5: Evaluation and analysis

There are considerable successes we can point to in our 2026 Student Elections:

1. A high level of candidacy across our posts, with a number of contested elections (including, importantly, the posts of President and Vice-President (Education)). Indeed only two posts in the main Student Elections had only one candidate.
2. Very high levels of engagement in certain locations (for example 67 votes in SAMS, or three candidates for Argyll Depute President), which can reflect local conditions such as outreach to classes or the mode of learning.
3. Contested posts for both Cross-Campus Officer roles is also something that has not happened often in recent years. The profile and good work of incumbents may have contributed to awareness of these roles. That many stood who were in local roles demonstrates the potential progression paths being recognised by officers.
4. Good standards and depths of manifestos from candidates.
5. Good engagement in our candidate training programme.
6. A healthy number of candidates from online courses (including candidates not based in the Highlands and Islands region).
7. Some significant travel undertaken by candidates for multi- and cross-campus roles.
8. Following two rounds of by-elections, a nearly full Student Officer team for 2026-27.





On the other hand, there remain some continuing challenges:

1. Capacity for polling stations – The main Student Elections came at a time of stretched resources and internal leadership transition. This meant that polling station opening hours were reduced from the previous year which will have had an impact on students being prompted to vote.
2. As such, turnout remains low by our own expectations and sector standards. Our student population includes more students studying online or part-time compared to other institutions, and we must continue to address this through constructive engagement in these spaces. We are addressing specific issues in many parts of UHI where we are not invited to do talks, where students are not routinely encouraged to check their UHI email, or where Brightspace discussion facilities are switched off. These are barriers which impact on other engagement beyond democratic participation and indeed beyond HISA's work.
3. The resource to run by-elections is not insignificant, and the unusual step to run two rounds of by-elections before the summer was in response to specific circumstances. It shows the high importance of achieving candidacy across all posts at the first time of asking in the main Student Elections.
4. While we did not have significant data variance compared last year, there remained some niggling data issues in terms of students not being in our system and thus being unable to vote. We will continue to engage with student records teams on this.



In terms of action for the future:

1. We must be aware of the next phase of UHI Transformation in the coming academic year and its impact on students and their experience at UHI. For instance this is both an opportunity to engage in meaningful and high-profile conversations about what HISA can do for its membership at a time of change, as well as a consideration for our capacity and for Student Officers' abilities to demonstrate delivery on their manifesto commitments.
2. There is increasing stability in our staffing structure, which will allow for clearer planning based on known or predicted capacity.
3. Partnership working with UHI/APs especially in the area of online courses is essential so we can promote our work, impacts and opportunities to students where we often struggle to do so. For instance we are less able in online courses to get into classes for induction talks and Student Voice Rep recruitment.
4. We are beginning work on plans for improved voluntary opportunities within HISA's structures, for instance local committees at some campuses, building up a bedrock of engaged students who may then consider paid elected office in subsequent years.
5. Getting online students on to campuses will help in terms of building that community, and we are engaged in multiple conversations with APs and subject areas about encouraging and enabling students to visit their local campus even when teaching is online.
6. As is always the case, the success of elections depends on HISA's impact and visibility throughout the year and not just a well-run and high-profile election process. We must continue to communicate our impact and value, for instance through our events and activities, work on the enhancement of learning and our reporting. This must be clearly evidenced to both students and to UHI decision-makers.

Simon Varwell

Director of Student Engagement and Representation, and Deputy Returning Officer
Highlands and Islands Students' Association

29th May 2026

