



HISA's 2026 referendums

Summary

This report aims to update governing bodies in UHI and the Academic Partners on two referendums held over the spring of 2026, contributing towards their responsibility under the 1994 Education Act to ensure free and fair democratic processes in their students' association

1: Context

HISA held two referendums of its membership in the spring of 2026. These were highly unusual events and were believed to be the first referendums HISA or its predecessor organisations have ever run in UHI.

The two referendums were as follows:

1. A referendum to approve our proposed revised Articles and Schedules, which boards are being asked to approve. This referendum followed a resolution of HISA's Board of Trustees on 20th February to seek student approval for the new governing documents. This was held concurrently with the main Student Elections with voting between Monday 9th and Thursday 12th March.
2. A referendum on our membership of the National Union of Students. This referendum followed a motion at [an All-Student Meeting in November 2025](#). It was held between 30th March and 1st April, concurrently with a vote on students' priorities for the next UHI Student Partnership Agreement.

2: Process

Given the precedent of no past referendums, considerable work required to be undertaken to ensure appropriate processes were in place for these referendums. Development of them drew on our relatively new processes for elections as well as wider sector good practice.

Features of the process included:

1. Development of [referendum rules](#), to ensure a free, fair and transparent process.
2. Appointments by our Trustee Board of Referendum Returning Officers, with NUS acting in this role for the Articles and Schedules referendum and an experienced staff member from Dundee University Students' Association for the NUS referendum.
3. A registration and training process for students (and others) to register as campaigners in the referendum.
4. Statements invited from registered campaigners, to be posted on our referendum information bases.
5. Online voting, with polling stations at some major campuses.



3: Results and next steps

Articles and Schedules referendum

This vote was, perhaps unsurprisingly, uncontroversial, and communication and turnout was aided to some extent by concurrent voting with our main Student Elections in March. This meant that HISA staff could promote and explain the referendum at polling stations and in other communications alongside the elections.

The results, [published on our website](#), were as follows:

- For: 200
- Against: 1
- Abstain: 19

Following affirmation of the result by the HISA Trustee Board on 7th May 2026 and noting/affirmation at our [Annual All-Student Meeting on 18th May 2026](#), these revised Articles and Schedules are now being presented to UHI's governing bodies before final adoption at a Company Law Meeting (consisting of HISA's trustees), so they come into effect for 1st July 2026.

NUS referendum

Candidates were registered for the "Yes" campaign (to disaffiliate), but none applied for the "No" campaign. It is notable that NUS officers did not register as campaigners, despite regular communication with NUS officers and staff. Subsequently, campaigner statements were only presented for the "Yes" case alongside HISA's own neutral guide [on the referendum's page](#).

The results, [published on our website](#), were as follows:

- Yes: 139
- No: 58
- Abstain: 7

Following affirmation of the result by the HISA Trustee Board on 7th May 2026 and noting/affirmation at our [Annual All-Student Meeting on 18th May 2026](#), the HISA President has taken steps to notify our intention to disaffiliate effective from 1st July 2026.

General observations

While quorum was achieved in both votes, turnout was substantially lower than at Student Elections in the past few years. While this is understandable for a non-controversial and largely technical topic such as our Articles and Schedules, and it might be argued that the profile of NUS among our membership is low, it is nonetheless worth exploring further how HISA can achieve higher turnouts at future referendums should we hold them.

On-campus polling stations were clearly a factor in turnout, as they are for elections. Both referendums took place at a stretched time for HISA including reduced staffing capacity. As we move to stability on this front, staffing of polling stations at more locations can be planned with more certainty.

As stated at the start of this report, holding a referendum was an unusual occurrence, and two of them reflected particular sets of circumstances. While referendums can be called at the behest of



our membership through appropriate processes, and therefore we cannot with certainty predict future occurrences, we do not anticipate any major topics going to referendums in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, it is appropriate that we continue to reflect on our processes for referendums to ensure that they work smoothly and deliver results that are fair and deliver meaningful and convincing outcomes.

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