BCUSU

The Leadership Elections of 2019 aimed to elect five, full-time, Executive Officers of Birmingham City University Students' Union. Simultaneously, elections for our 6 NUS delegate positions occurred.   The following are the positions and winners:

President – Ivona Hadzhiyska

Vice President Academic Experience – Liam Miles

Vice President Equity & Inclusion – Kathy-Zoe Baira

Vice President Opportunities & Community – Selina Aishia Jahangir

Vice President Student Voice – Laura Wonnacott

NUS Delegates – George West, Amro Hizam, Kathy-Zoe Baira, Liam Miles, Victoria Bennet-Salvador, Fiona Wild

The voting turnout for this year's elections was 4060 voters casting 16314 votes. This gave us a voter turnout of around 17.6%. The elections saw 32 candidates across 5 full time positions and NUS Delegate.

Overview

The elections, as a whole, ran in a fair and transparent manner. The training was compiled using an MSL survey (see appendix) which explained each aspect of the Code of Conduct and prompted candidates to agree to each of these aspects, along with the overall document.

The first day of voting raised a brief issue with eligibility to vote, but this was addressed by the Marketing Team before midday on the first day. Additionally, staff with MSL access were given guidance on how to support any student who was struggling to vote. This meant that the majority of students who made us aware of issues, were given the opportunity to vote immediately.

Voting remained steady throughout the period, with a large opening day of voting. Overall, the ballot stations were steady but only 14% of the total number of votes were cast at ballot stations.

Candidate Conduct

The conduct of the majority of candidates was in keeping with the values of BCUSU elections and the organisation. However, the majority of complaints were about a select few number of candidates. Where appropriate conduct lacked most, was the way in which some

candidates (outlined further in the complaint section of this report) and their campaign teams interacted with voters. On Thursday 21st Feb (opening day), this was described by students as being a 'mob' in the Atrium of Curzon. As no ballot station was in place for this day to oversee the behaviour, I walked round as DRO to assess the behaviour. There was a large group of students, interfering with entrance to Curzon, who were in my opinion as DRO, harassing students to vote. It was apparent that some candidates were in attendance in a more orderly fashion, however the majority of students there were campaign team members and not candidates. I prompted two separate students not to hold posters for multiple candidates as this would constitute as a slate.

Candidates were warned of their behaviour multiple times throughout the week. However, harassing behaviour continued amongst a few candidates, documented within this report.

In one instance, I myself was talking to A candidate outside of Parkside. At this time, a friend of another candidate started filming the interaction. I approached the student and asked him what he was doing. He told me that I was campaigning for a candidate and I was too close to the ballot station. He said that he was going to report me to another candidate. At this point, the student was completely unaware of my role as both DRO and a staff member of BCUSU. I told the student that this was provocative harassment of candidates and it was myself who oversees the elections. This interaction was witnessed by a large amount of students and candidates. The student then left in a hurry. I immediately went to talk to the candidate involved to discuss this behaviour. They initially denied any awareness of the individual. Eventually the candidate involved agreed to go and talk to the student to make sure it didn't happen again.

Complaints

A total of 12 complaints (some complaining of multiple candidates) were submitted using the online complaint form, along with supporting and continued emails documenting these complaints. The details of the complaints all follow a similar vein (appendix 1), featuring two main parts:

1. Bullying and harassment of students or other candidates
2. Forcing or intimidating students into voting

From these complaints, candidates involved in serious breaches were invited to meet with myself and Michael Gale on 26/02/19. The initial meeting with one candidate led to a ban on campaigning for the remainder of the day. In this meeting, the candidate was shown two videos. One video showed a member of his campaign team, holding a poster for his campaign, reaching over to a student to touch their phone whilst voting. Another showed a student who was friends with this candidate, doing a similar thing whilst having a friend hide the action by standing in front of her. After a discussion with this student, they highlighted that they were just talking about the elections. This instance wasn't taken into account during the decision. Both students in these videos attended the meeting and confirmed that it was themselves. The candidate showed no acknowledgement of the breach of conduct and spent the meeting insisting he had done nothing wrong.

A meeting with a second candidate was conducted after having a statement from a member of the Student Voice Team outlining how the candidate was standing over students whilst voting and interfering. The statement also includes acknowledgement that the staff member highlighted that this was a breach of the rules and the candidate indicated that they were unaware that this was a rule, despite having completed the online training and confirming

their understanding of the rules. In this meeting, the candidate acknowledged that this was inappropriate behaviour and would not happen again.

Investigation Survey

After the number of complaints submitted around forced voting, a survey was conducted for students who had voted for the Position of president which asked two questions:

1. Did you feel pressurized into voting for a particular candidate
2. Would you have rather voted for a different candidate.

Within the first 3 hours of this survey, 540 students had responded. In total, 805 students have completed the survey. This makes this survey one of the most engaged surveys we have conducted as a Union, highlighting the extent of the problem. From this survey, 160 students said that they were pressurized into voting. From this, 88 students highlighted that they would have rather voted for a different candidate. The elections committee contacted all students who had indicated that they would have rather voted for a different candidate to get statements about their experience.   This included candidates or campaign team members standing near students until they had finished voting, interfering with devices or simply harassing them until they voted. Any instances that were considered to be 'unwanted conversations' which didn't necessarily lead to voting, were ignored. Within these statements, 4 names came out as having forced students to vote. Here are some extracts of behaviour:

I was stopped out side of millennium point by a female student who was with 2 males. I was on my phone sitting down alone and they came up to me shouting please vote please vote. I was literally forced into voting and it was actually very intimidating furthering this they was touching the screen of my phone themselves without my permission.

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I've just read your email the person that pressured me to vote was (name removed). They disturbed me while I was working and made me vote for Them and other people running for other aspects in this election. I wasn't left alone and others alongside me on the bridge in parkside until I voted.

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(name removed) approached me and my friend while we were sitting and asked if we had voted. Me and my friend replied and said we hadn't. (Name removed) was with their friend who told us to "vote now please". They said "open the BCUSU app" and gave us instructions. They said open the BSUSU app and specifically select (name removed) on the list. They waited until we had done so and watched us select their name. After which they left and said tell your friends to do the same. I did not like the way they stood very close to us and waited until we clicked their name. They did tell us about their campaign but I did not like the manner they approached us at the time and my friend felt quite intimidated.

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(Name removed) approached me in millennium point outside the Bhangra society event. I went to see what the event was about and while I was standing with a friend (Name removed) walked to us and said "Vote for me, I'm running for president". They stood very

close to me and didn't mention anything from their manifesto or what they wanted to change/campaign for. Again, they told us to select his face off the BCUSU page and said they are running for another role and we should select their name for that too. As soon as we had voted they said "thanks" and left. Again, I did not like the manner in which this happened and felt pressured.

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There was some aggressive campaigning that I saw from one individual that came up to us and several other groups while we were having lunch asking us if we had voted yet and telling us we should vote for a certain candidate because "they were the best candidate and we had to vote for them" I asked why and what were they going to do if they one. They were pushy but their efforts only made me want to check out the poling station myself and didn't influence my vote as after reading all the goals and manifestos of all the candidates i made my own decision.

Response R.E – do you mind me asking which candidate they asked you to vote for?

Reply Student – (Name removed) for President Position

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I may have selected the wrong option, but I had already voted online once the elections opened in the morning, but when I came into uni, a group of people came up to me and my group of friends pressuring them to vote for (name removed) and telling them to do it there and then on their phones. I said I'd already voted and they where asking me who I'd voted for but I wouldn't tell them. The pressure wasn't very nice and I don't think the way they got people to vote for them was fair. I believe I had already voted for them (I can't remember) but this behaviour changed my view of the candidate.

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The elections committee then undertook some due diligence to make sure that these students had in fact voted for the students they had said they were forced to vote for. In every instance, this was the case, which has been confirmed by the MSL Vote log. These students came from all over the University. From this, a decision was made by the Elections Committee to disqualify the 4 candidates. This decision was not taken lightly and was concluded to be the fairest outcome for all candidates involved. Due to the reach of the survey, along with the range of statements, voting logs, videos and witnessed behaviour by myself, this was the correct decision and the Elections Committee stand by it. All 4 of these students appealed to our Returning Officer, NUS, and in each instance the Returning Officer supported the decision of the Elections Committee.

Conclusion

Overall, the outcome of this election is to be considered Returned in a fair and transparent manner. Whilst it included some difficult decisions, poor behaviour and challenges, we achieved a good voter turnout and can conclude that candidates who campaigned fairly have been elected.