

Flying pigs and student politics

By [Sarah Foster](#)

Wednesday 20 February 2008

The UGM results represent a campus minority, but how can we challenge student apathy?

The general consensus appears to be that the recent UGM proved, once again, that democracy was alive and well at York. That once again the voice of the student was being heard, thanks to a voting turnout higher than any UGM in York memory. While we need not get into the reasons as to why the numbers voting were so much higher than the usual, because there's enough to be said on the Fletcher-Hackwood affair to fill the entire comment section, what does interest me is how low a high voting turnout is at York.

Around about ten percent of the students voted in the UGM. Ten percent isn't democracy. While the assumption seems to be that those too apathetic or hungover to make it to a computer to place their votes don't deserve a say, I certainly don't think that the results can be tenable when the numbers voting for them are so low. Take the most controversial motion; the vote of no confidence against Grace Fletcher-Hackwood, which was won by eight votes. Meaning that in total around about five percent of the student population believed that Fletcher-Hackwood ought to have been removed from her position. This is not to say that the decision was wrong, what it does mean is that ninety-five percent of the student population of York are not getting a say in what they want. I'm not saying that we force the silence majority into voting, but I do wish that the university as whole were willing to admit that there is a problem when it comes to claims of democracy within York.

Let's put this into context a little bit. More people voted on the motion for York Students to graduate in the Minster than voted in November to decide if York Union ought to remain affiliated with the NUS. That's right, 1855 people voted on the Minster motion, a motion which honestly will have no effect on where we graduate, as the Vice-Chancellor himself has stated that graduation will never take place in the Minster. While a mere 1389 voted on the issue of the NUS. That's 466 more people voting towards a motion that really isn't going to do a great deal to change anything than were voting for a motion that was probably going to change quite a lot indeed.

So why were people so impressed by the turnout for the UGM? Vanburgh chair Matt Oliver went as far to report it as "enormous" and Nouse's own online coverage called the turnout "unprecedented". But then again, the precedent for UGM turnout is that many motions can't pass, because the votes don't reach quoracy. You may be wondering exactly how low quoracy is in a university where you'd think there were a fair few politically minded people. Surely it has to be quite high for so many motions to not be able to meet it. But alas, no. In order for a motion to reach quoracy 2.25 percent of the student population need to vote on it. That's about 350 students who need to spend approximately two minutes voting. And who frequently don't.

It was obviously the controversial nature of certain motions that got people voting this time round, but the university shouldn't have to wait until a sabbatical officer hits someone for a host of other motions to pass. Even motions which are considered contentious don't always rally people to vote. Laura Payne's divisive motion to allow men to attend women's committee meetings had been proposed before. But you guessed it, not enough people voted for it to make quoracy the first time round.

But what can be done to improve voting turnout? Will this “unprecedented” turnout lead to improvements in the way democracy works within YUSU? I predict not. People voted this time round because the Fletcher-Hackwood debate was something that a lot of people felt very strongly about. It seems unlikely that any other UGM will have a similar voting turnout. But what can be done? Strangely enough I don't think that there is that much that can be done to change things. The clichés of apathetic students seems, in this case at least, to be ridiculously true.

It's partially a question of publicity. Currently things are left in the hands of those proposing the motion, whose publicity of their motion is very likely to be biased. It's true that if posters are plastered all across campus making ridiculous statements, that people might feel inclined to try and get their voice heard by voting. But is this really the way we want to go about it? This UGM was highly publicised, but not by YUSU. I don't remember seeing a single poster with the YUSU logo urging me to vote. Nor do I remember the fanfare when the results were announced. At least when the results for the NUS affiliation were announced Anne-Marie Canning went and stood on Vanburgh paradise. What happened when the results of this UGM were announced? They announced it on the website. The very same website that ninety percent of the students at York didn't log onto in the previous week to vote. Something there just doesn't seem right does it?

YUSU need to take some action to improve voting turnout. They can't just sit in their office and hope that Dan Taylor will publicise all their UGMs for them. Democracy needs people. And without people we'll be stuck with a student union that can't do very much at all. The voice of the students needs to be heard, even if it means that we have to inform the masses that they really ought to be shouting louder.



9 comments

Jason

1 Mar '08 at 2:46 pm

It is a real shame that apathy is so high at this university – a lot of people that I've talked to just feel that it doesn't impact their lives, which is frankly ridiculous. Politics on-campus determines whether the library has a renovation or not, whether our future Fresher's Ball has a potential cheaper home on Heslington East, whether we have to pay more on the buses or not. It impacts all students directly.

I, personally, thoroughly enjoy reading York news and getting involved politically – but even if I didn't I'd see it as a duty to vote. And with York being a top-ten university full of majority-fluent English-speakers, I don't think that anybody could come with an excuse of being unable to understand policies.

But how can we get them to vote? No idea, and unfortunately Australia's fine-if-you-don't-vote trick can't be applied to the university! :p

[Report](#)

Anne-Marie

5 Mar '08 at 11:04 am

I've been meaning to comment on this article for a while but not got round to doing so.

Turn out is HIGHER than ever and the same criticism comes again and again.

Posters went in every kitchen! Electronic mailshot to every student! Facebook events! What more can we do?!

What do you suggest we do to improve voting turn out as you suggest Sarah? We appreciate all suggestions!

[▲ Report](#)

Josh

5 Mar '08 at 12:23 pm

I believe that if students thought YUSU would make a difference then they'd bother voting and pay a bigger interest in student politics.

From my observations over the last three years the majority of UGM votes have been for petty or stupid things; or just things I really, really do not care about. A huge majority of ethical votes, which, selfish to say, I don't care about. Others are for things that will never change.

The things that matter YUSU can't do anything about. Course related issues I'd send to the course rep or the head of department or whatever, not get YUSU involved.

I'm not saying YUSU is useless as for some people it's a good thing. But for the *majority* of students it's just something for students with low contact hours to do to keep them occupied, so we pay no interest.

[▲ Report](#)

Sarah Foster

5 Mar '08 at 11:31 pm

Anne-Marie,

Part of me wishes that there was some super obvious answer to why only 10% of the student population voted in this UGM. But there isn't. And while I accept, without a doubt, that it's amazing how many people voted in comparison to previous UGMs, the crux of my article is that when a 10% turnout is seen as a high turnout, it is obvious that student apathy as a whole needs to be examined. Personally I think postering needs to be much more wide-spread, as a second year, I'm not going to see posters in kitchens. I also think that the student body as a whole needs to realise exactly how important student politics really is, and how much of a difference YUSU makes to life on campus. Obviously, that's not an easy task, nor do I expect you to be able to find an easy answer to the problem. If I knew how to solve the problem of student apathy I'd be a genius. And while I think YUSU deserves praise for such a high turnout, I think it needs to be realised that there is still improvements to be made to the democratic system.

Josh,

If you'd read my article you would see that it's not that people aren't voting because the only things coming up in UGM are considered 'petty'. More people voted on the farcical 'graduate in the Minister' motion than they did on the NUS issue. If we had chosen to leave the NUS that would have completely changed how certain aspects of the university are run. I think to say that people don't vote because they think motions are petty is just misinformed. If anything, it seems that it's these 'petty' motions (in the case of the current UGM, the replacement of Trevor the golden duck) that get people voting.

Sarah Foster

[▲ Report](#)

Anonymously Disgruntled

6 Mar '08 at 1:47 am

I'd firstly suggest that people voted on the Minster issue simply because it was on the same page as the Grace issue, and people saw it and thought 'oooh, that'd be nice, I hate central hall, I've had exams in there'. I seriously doubt whether any of the issues up for consideration that week would have received anything like the number of votes they did had it not been for the soap opera of the Taylor/Grace debacle.

Secondly, I have to say it is only now in my third year that I have bothered to vote on anything. This is for a number of reasons.

First year, I was just here to have a good time, do a bit of work here and there and maybe play some

sports and get a bit lashed. I wasn't interested in what I hazily perceived to be somewhat petty politics which went on over near Goodricke somewhere. I never really had a clear idea of what YUSU did, and I am pretty sure that it wasn't made especially clear when I first arrived at uni.

I think the ONLY thing which I properly associated with YUSU was the barcott against closing campus bars, which didn't impress me that much, because as far as I made out, the protesting of some suddenly alcoholically challenged students wasn't going to have much effect on the universities plans anyway (If I remember rightly, we postponed the closures pending a review, and then the bar opening hours were going to be cut back anyway in the beginning of the next year). Also, I was too busy really having a good time to really say anything more than - "Well that's a bit crap...but Langwith and Alcuin bars are rubbish anyway, what's the problem with shutting them midweek anyway?"

So essentially I really don't remember YUSU having ANY impact on me personally in first year, and much the same can be said for second year. I remember being disgruntled with certain things, but never really perceived that YUSU might have the power to attempt to change anything. I am still not sure how much YUSU can ACTUALLY influence things. However, now I am in the third year and maybe slightly more politically and socially aware than I was 2 and a half years ago, I now have the attitude that there's no harm trying whatever the odds, and if I don't vote on things then quite frankly i've no right to complain or have an opinion anyway!

My point then, is the fact that I really don't feel YUSU has enough 'presence' on the campus, and especially outside of campus. More could be done to emphasise the students role in the decision making at uni. One email or two a week and posters in kitchens isn't really enough.

The trouble is I can't really see a way of improving people's awareness without becoming more 'militant' or doing things that stand out. I guess maybe that's the answer then. (Tom Scott's recent antics spring to mind - people do KNOW about him, simply because he stands out - however, everybody dressing as pirates maybe isn't an ideal solution). I think one way would be to make YUSU much more of a presence during freshers week, and also within the colleges and around the campus throughout the year. Gathering interest during first year is of vital importance if you want people to continue to take an interest in second year, once they've moved out of the campus bubble.

Actually have representatives of YUSU going round the colleges, and showing a PERSONAL interest in students who otherwise might not have any contact with student bodies. Maybe this could be done in close cooperation with the JCRCs of the colleges. People like to be taken an interest in, somebody enthusiastic and easy to talk to who comes round listening to whatever issues or even positive points students have is much more likely to make people feel involved and more importantly willing to GET INVOLVED than an email prompting you to look at some website and fill in an online form. This could be done in conjunction with college events, such as bar quizzes, or Planet Vs and Club Ds and Goodricke whatever they have. Again, I don't really know if any of that would be feasible, but I don't remember ANYTHING like that happening during my first year.

I think if YUSU wants more participation it simply boils down to becoming more popular, accessible and eye-catching to the general student community. Do silly things to gain attention if necessary. Organise shameless publicity stunts, make massive weekly banners that hang from central hall with catchy stupid slogans etc... Once people have noticed, laughed at you and commented on how silly such and such was, you are in their consciousness, and you may just stay there long enough for them to take note of the more serious issues that you deal with. Remain a slightly inaccessible (Yes, I know technically anyone can access the offices to talk to you, but it's just the vibe I am on about here) cloud in a boring square office block down in Goodricke, and you simply wont.

Feel free to comment on, deride and pick apart what I've said. It's just my thoughts and impressions.

 [Report](#)

Anonymously Disgruntled

6 Mar '08 at 1:57 am

Oh yes...and I forgot Facebook. It's all very well having massive amounts of invites and messages going out during election times, but how about a constant and approachable presence there ALL the time, without being as irritating as the current spate of messages telling me to support everyone under the sun. I don't know how this might be implemented succesfully, but that's what you guys are for right...thinking up bring ideas?

[▲ Report](#)

Lewis

6 Mar '08 at 3:01 am

"Anonymously Disgruntled" Do you mean something like this? -
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Heslington-United-Kingdom/University-of-York-Students-Union-YUSU/8607598739>

Lewis

[▲ Report](#)

Josh

6 Mar '08 at 9:47 am

That's pretty much my opinions on YUSU as well. In my first 2 years I didn't notice them do anything that affected me. Like you said, the bar closure was only a problem for those people who liked to go to the bars often. Plus they were only cutting back on the hours of the less used bars, it made sense to me.

I agree that the only reason the UGM voting was so high this year was because of the GFH situation.

[▲ Report](#)

Anonymously Disgruntled

6 Mar '08 at 5:28 pm

I guess I do ;-).

[▲ Report](#)

Most Read **Discussed**

1. [World AIDS day - how you can help wipe AIDS out](#)
2. [First, go fix your bad service](#)
3. [The breakup beard](#)
4. [The world of Yorfess: An Ode to Shitposting](#)
5. [CLASH OF COMMENTS: Should those responsible for the Grenfell effigy bonfire be prosecuted?](#)
6. [I'm sick of all these Harry Potter shops on the Shambles](#)

Write for Nouse Comment

[Get in touch with the editors](#)

[Join the Facebook group](#)

More in Comment

[World AIDS day - how you can help wipe AIDS out](#)

[Why the #MeToo Campaign Must Include Men Too](#)

[CLASH OF COMMENTS: Should those responsible for the Grenfell effigy bonfire be prosecuted?](#)

[Indifference to JCRCs evident](#)

[Slurring champagne socialists is unfair](#)

[Don't dismiss the white poppy: it serves an important purpose](#)

- [About Nouse](#)
- [Who's Nouse](#)
- [Website Credits](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Advertising](#)
- [Archives](#)
- [Student Discounts](#)
- [Print Editions](#)
- [Mini-Sites](#)
- [Nouse on Twitter](#)
- [Nouse on Facebook](#)
- [Nouse on Google+](#)

