



Select Committee on the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013

Corrected oral evidence: Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013

Tuesday 4 February 2020

3.35 pm

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Members present: Lord Shutt of Greetland (The Chair); Lord Campbell-Savours; Lord Dykes; Baroness Eaton; Lord Hayward; Lord Janvrin; Lord Lexden; Baroness Pidding; (Dr Stuart Wilks-Heeg, Adviser to the Select Committee).

Evidence Session No. 8

Heard in Public

Questions 92 - 100

Witnesses

I: Claire Sosienski Smith, Vice President for Higher Education, National Union of Students; Conor Ryan, Director of External Relations, Office for Students; Kira Lewis, Trustee, British Youth Council.

Examination of witnesses

Claire Sosienski Smith, Conor Ryan and Kira Lewis.

Q92 **The Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to this meeting of the Select Committee on the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013. The meeting is being broadcast live via the parliamentary website. A transcript of the meeting will be taken and published on the Committee website. You will have the opportunity to make corrections to that transcript where necessary. Only one of our Members has an interest to declare, which he will make before he speaks.

Thank you for the information you sent us some time ago. However, you are here now. What is your assessment of levels of registration, engagement and participation of young people and students at the recent election?

Claire Sosienski Smith: I am from the National Union of Students. We saw incredible turnout and engagement at the most recent election. When the election was called, and before the deadline, more than 3.1 million people registered to vote. We know that 1 million of them were under the age of 25. That is really incredible and speaks to how engaged young people are in politics. A lot of them were marching in climate strikes and were engaged in the anti-Brexit marches, but I caution against that optimism by saying that the turnout of students is lower than the national average, and that is a concern to us.

The Chair: On your excitement about the 1 million, how many of that million were registered but did not realise it and applied again? How many do you think were fresh applicants?

Claire Sosienski Smith: My understanding is that they were fresh applicants, but I do not have information on that right now.

Baroness Pidding: Do we know how many of the newly registered actually turned out to vote? Do we have those statistics yet?

Claire Sosienski Smith: Not with me.

Baroness Pidding: It would be interesting to see how many of those who registered actually voted.

Claire Sosienski Smith: I do not have the data behind it, but we have talked to our student unions that were so engaged in the voter registration drive. Because people had just registered, they knew why they were registering to vote; they knew it was for the upcoming election, so there is a link. People went out and voted, but I do not have statistics on that.

Baroness Pidding: Is there any way we can get that information?

The Chair: The whole business of how many of the 1 million voted will be an estimate. It may well be that somebody does that. Stuart, do you know whether anybody is doing that work?

Dr Stuart Wilks-Heeg: It could only be done on the basis of a large-scale survey; it could not be done otherwise.

Lord Janvrin: The last question of the second session is relevant.

The Chair: We might get something from that.

Kira Lewis: I am from the British Youth Council. We have had a look at some of the polling research. After the election, Ipsos MORI estimated that 47% of 18 to 24 year-olds voted in that election. Our principle at the British Youth Council is that although lots of people register, and voting may be low, it does not mean that people are disengaged. We have seen that through our programmes, where generally young people believe that only 8% of politicians know what is valuable to young people. There seems to be a huge discrepancy between people seeing electoral politics and what they believe in—for example, with the student climate strikes.

Voter turnout may be low and it may be one of the lowest of all age groups, but young people are not disengaged. We just do not know how to translate that into what is happening in Westminster, which we think is more the fault of people in Westminster not reaching out to young people during electoral periods. Good PSHE is the link between turnout and engagement. Getting people registered to vote is really important. We saw some amazing registration numbers before the election, but getting people to turn out on the day translates into why voting should be seen as important to young people, which we think is done through good PSHE programmes.

The Chair: Mr Ryan, do you have anything on this?

Conor Ryan: It is not really one for us, but what may be useful is that we have been in discussion with the Cabinet Office. It is doing an evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of the guidance we have given to universities and other providers on registration. The recent general election will be a useful check on that, and we expect to get something from the Cabinet Office reasonably soon.

Q93 **Lord Lexden:** I begin by declaring my interest as a trustee of the Hansard Society.

My question relates to reports and criticisms—severe criticism in some instances—of academic figures who drew attention in the election campaign to the fact that students can register both at their home and student address. What do you think should be done to combat misunderstandings, and what about the risk of fraud that can arise? Does it need to be addressed?

Claire Sosienski Smith: We recognised that as a problem in this election. Staff and students, even in our posts, got a lot of negative comments in that vein. It is down to poor understanding, which Kira outlined brilliantly. Political education needs to be done and the Government need to take a lead both for people in mandatory education

and for the general public, not just at election time but embedded all the way through. Misunderstanding led to that backlash.

Baroness Eaton: Misunderstanding by whom?

Claire Sosienski Smith: By the people targeting academics, saying you cannot tell students to register to vote at home and at their university address. We were really clear that you can, but you could vote only at one of those addresses.

I do not think fraud is a concern, because to vote at both your home address and your university address would be quite an undertaking. You would be very aware that you were doing that. Fraud does not come out as a risk. Far worse and of far greater concern is that we are not getting students voting, because they are confused; misinformation goes around making them insecure about voting. Already, young people do not see voting as a way of getting their political point across. The fraud concern is a minor one compared with the massive concern about students not voting.

Kira Lewis: Registering at two addresses is important to students who may not necessarily be able to plan ahead for where they will be during election time. They may be at home. I live in Somerset or in London. I would not be able to travel home for the day to vote. That means I would have to lose my vote. Anyone with two addresses can be registered at both addresses.

I think the problem of students being specifically targeted comes from wider scapegoating of students. We have had a look at some of the articles around election time. There was a specific article in the *Daily Mail* that said that in the 2017 election, students supporting Jeremy Corbyn were blamed for causing upsets, including at Canterbury and Lincoln where expected Tory wins turned to dust. The question is really about why students are blamed for exercising their democratic rights.

We believe it arises from the scapegoating of young people in politics and the belief that any unexpected wins during an election must be because of students voting en masse in halls, for example. We think it is because of good turnouts from student unions and good campaigns by the National Union of Students, among others, encouraging students to vote at addresses where votes may have more impact. Losing the ability to vote at both addresses means the chances of people casting their vote on that day will fall. Personally, I would probably register at my home address in Somerset, knowing that my address in London changes all the time. Therefore, having two addresses and being able to choose between them means greater involvement by students in our democratic process.

Conor Ryan: This is one of the areas where our guidance is quite specific. We have guidance related to the condition of registration and the importance of facilitating co-operation with electoral registration officers in the electoral registration of students. Within that guidance, we identify specifically a number of risks, one of which is ensuring that students have

an understanding of their entitlement to be registered at both addresses but that they do not have an entitlement to vote in a general election twice, at both addresses. We would expect good governance and a good system for complying with our electoral registration guidance to deal with that.

Lord Hayward: I do not dissent from your comments about Canterbury and the like, but you have made no reference to students at Keele University and other universities boasting that they voted twice.

Kira Lewis: As part of a supplementary question, we can look at the actual evidence of fraud; boasting is very different from people actually committing those acts. Some recent stats show that, of the 96 million people who cast votes in the 2015 and 2017 elections combined, there were only 53 allegations of fraud brought to the police and there was only one conviction. People might be boasting and creating that kind of atmosphere, but a brag is not the same as what would actually happen to cause a conviction, so we would not be concerned about that at all.

Lord Campbell-Savours: Are both of you saying that no allegations of double voting have been made to you as individuals? Personally, have you heard of cases of double voting?

Claire Sosienski Smith: I have heard of no cases of double voting.

Lord Campbell-Savours: Does the same go for your colleague?

Kira Lewis: Yes. I have not heard of cases of double voting. I have lived in large student halls and I have not heard of cases of that.

Lord Campbell-Savours: Do you believe it happened in the last election?

Kira Lewis: I do not believe anyone I know or would associate with would have done it. I do not believe that happened.

Lord Campbell-Savours: Do you believe it happened?

Claire Sosienski Smith: I do not believe there was any double voting in the last election.

The Chair: It is another issue, in one sense, but thinking about constituency boundaries and bearing in mind that no seat is more than 5% either way from a certain norm, it seems to me that student numbers—obviously, there will be different students at various times— affect that issue. I do not know by how many. Has anybody any clue as to how many students are registered in two places? Take, say, a university town. Do we have any clue how many are registered there and elsewhere? It may not affect elsewhere as much, but it will certainly affect the student population in a university town. Bearing in mind the keenness about getting it all within 5% of the norm, it seems to me that this could affect it.

Lord Hayward: Could I provide some guidance? It is not just student registration. In places such as Canterbury, to which reference has already been made, there are parts of three universities within the constituency. The real impact is not the passing students but the academic and administrative staff who boost the electoral rolls concentrated around universities, as well as the students.

The Chair: That may be, but at least they are only there. I suppose the other element is second home owners who could well be in two places, but it puts into question the whole business of a constituency average and the tightness of it. But there we are.

Q94 **Lord Dykes:** The Committee is trying to assess the impact of individual voter registration on students particularly and on young people in general. How can the negative impact of that system be redressed?

Claire Sosienski Smith: It has had a massive negative impact on students registering to vote, particularly because of the lack of communication and the publicity about students being dropped off the register and not immediately being carried over when it moved to individual electoral registration. That is the reason behind it.

When the BBC looked at voter registration in student areas, registered voters numbered nearly 4.49 million in 2012 and had dropped by almost 10,000 in 2013, and by a massive 181,000 in 2014, which was 19 times higher than the drop-off in the previous year. Overall, it was estimated that 800,000 people dropped off the electoral register as a result of those changes. We know that students are at the greatest risk of being disfranchised by that system because not enough is being done to get them on board. This relates to the previous comment about the parliamentary boundaries being reshaped after the electoral reform so that they are not the new boundaries and the new constituencies. We are using incomplete data, so there is inaccurate representation of the constituency boundary drawings.

Kira Lewis: At the British Youth Council we have not done specific research on this area, but actively encouraging people to register and reregister, especially at every address change, for example, is a massive challenge and requires a huge undertaking to get everyone registered to make sure no one drops off, given the stats we have just seen.

There is a strong link to the current lack of youth services. Localised youth services can be great in engaging young people in democracy, and obviously a big part of that is registering people to vote and encouraging them to turn out on the day. The drop in youth services is linked to areas where registration has fallen among the 16 to 18 year-old gap where people can start to register to vote, in preparation. There are links between youth services and getting people to be more engaged in democratic outputs such as voting. We would like to draw attention to that specific link.

Claire Sosienski Smith: That relates especially to voting becoming an habitual practice. That is a massive concern. If people are not on the register or getting registered to vote and voting, it will affect their democratic participation later in life.

Conor Ryan: We highlighted in our guidance some of the Cabinet Office best practice and good practice guidance. One example is the University of Sheffield, where they registered students straight after they had completed the first part of the enrolment process, so they went into registration and had the option of postal votes and so on as well. They did checks on national insurance numbers and all the requirements.

In the first year of doing that, as I understand it, they found that 65% of eligible students had registered. That compared with Sheffield Hallam, which is close by and had only 13% at the same stage of the process. I gather that Sheffield Hallam has adopted the same process now. There are practical things that universities can do. Although we do not require them to do it, we encourage them to look at practical ways in which they can facilitate the registration of students.

Lord Dykes: Is there anything else in your assessment of how the change to the new system was handled that you would like to point out and emphasise as evidence of what happened?

Conor Ryan: I do not think that is analysis we have done. We have been doing this since 2018, so it is not something for which we would have responsibility. I suspect the Cabinet Office would have more information about that.

Claire Sosienski Smith: Requiring a national insurance number is a barrier to students who might not have that information on them. Anything that makes it harder to register to vote depresses registration levels.

The Chair: I am going to have to be slightly tedious for a moment and ask Lord Hayward whether he would mind repeating some of the helpful comments he made in the manner of a question, in order that any answer may be received as evidence.

Lord Hayward: Sorry.

The Chair: No, it was fine. We keep learning. If you would like to ask questions about students, academic staff and second home owners and see whether there is any response, it would be helpful.

Lord Hayward: You may not have detail about this. In relation to the constituencies where universities are situated, do many of the registered population increases relate to academic and administrative staff in universities as much as to student registration? Do you have any details associated with that?

Kira Lewis: We do not have any details or stats relating to that.

Claire Sosienski Smith: They are not part of our membership.

Q95 **Baroness Eaton:** You have hinted on a number of occasions at what you perceive as lack of communication. Perhaps you could tell us how you would rate the effectiveness of the Cabinet Office's democratic engagement work, including National Democracy Week and other government-led or supported voter registration drives that have targeted young people.

Kira Lewis: The British Youth Council found that during our most recent National Democracy Week there was an expectation to run events with little support or structure given to us, which meant that the events the British Youth Council ran were not substantially different from the pre-planned programme; they were just given with National Democracy Week branding. We believe there needs to be clarity of purpose in what the Cabinet Office wants, with more focus on year-round democratic participation. We would move towards year-round participation.

The movement of the date last year was helpful; it helped to distinguish it from Parliament Week and the events going on around that. A distinction between National Democracy Week and Parliament Week is important to us. Recently, young people from the British Youth Council have engaged in some Cabinet Office round tables, especially on COP 26. We fed into the shaping and run-up to events in the Year of Climate Action, but we are now concerned that, following Claire Perry's departure, it will start to lose momentum, so we look forward to a new appointment. We would like to move more towards year-round events and ensure that we have a stronger link year-round, as opposed to just National Democracy Week and Parliament Week, although we support those initiatives.

During that week, the BYC ran one of the oral evidence sessions for the Youth Select Committee as a National Democracy Week event, as well as our Equality For Us event, which focuses on broadening our work and ensuring that young people from all marginalised groups in society can feed into our programmes.

Q96 **Lord Janvrin:** You have talked about the Cabinet Office and its democratic engagement work. Which other bodies could be doing more to encourage registration among young people and students, and how might they go about it? In one of your earlier answers, you touched on local youth services. Which other bodies might be involved?

Kira Lewis: For many years, the British Youth Council has always focused on what is happening in schools and the Department for Education. Since I joined the organisation in 2014, the council has had the principle of a curriculum for life, as we like to call it, which has been one of our main focuses year on year, as voted on by our members. Our Make Your Mark ballot goes out every year, and sometimes we hit 1 million voters. It has consistently come out as something that many young people are calling for. We believe that young people should be taught about politics in school and assisted in registering at school.

We have taken a few bits from the Scottish Youth Parliament, which carried out a workshop to learn from the experience of those in Scotland who had been voting from the age of 16. Following that, the Scottish Youth Parliament recommended that every young person should be taught about politics in school. It drew a big link between those who are taught about it in Scottish schools and voted at 16. It believes in teaching about political systems and voting. It is much like some of the old AS-level political curriculum, but we believe it should be taught before the age of 16. The Scottish Youth Parliament recommends that schools specifically should impartially assist pupils in registering to vote, encouraging registration at 16 across the country.

At the British Youth Council, we believe in dedicated citizenship teachers. The Youth Select Committee that looked at curriculum for life hoped that citizenship could be taught by dedicated citizenship teachers by this year. Although that deadline has passed, we still believe that resources should be made available to ensure that citizenship education is taken seriously and given the resource it requires, alongside other important parts of the curriculum, instead of being seen as a side programme, or something to be done on, say, crash days during the school curriculum. It should be fed in through the year and given importance and weight. We believe that, now that full-time education is mandatory to 18, it should be used impartially to assist voter registration and encourage it in schools, whereas it is not at the moment.

To go back to youth services and how young people want local engagement, young people involved in the British Youth Council have repeatedly highlighted that they want to see and feel change most at local level. The Youth Select Committee report on this area showed that visibility of local politicians and engagement with youth services led to greater levels of trust and engagement among young people across the country. It encouraged people to register to vote, especially to turn out in local elections. It encouraged strong links between MPs and their constituencies and reaching out to young people, going into schools and colleges. That is how we improve in this area. There has been much stronger work done on citizenship in schools, and that would be a strong link to increasing levels of participation.

Claire Sosienski Smith: At the NUS, we say that educational institutions should be doing a lot more to facilitate voter registration. Although it is a condition of registration with the OfS, we have not seen clear evidence that enough educational institutions across the board are doing it consistently. Sheffield's registration at enrolment is a great example, but it should be seen not as a great example but as the standard, and the OfS should be doing a lot more to help other institutions to be part of it. I agree with the idea of colleges getting students involved in registering to vote at 16.

Conor Ryan: One of the things we want to see evaluated with the Cabinet Office is the impact and effectiveness of the guidance. Any issues

there may have been in how universities and other providers responded will be an important part of that.

On the democratic engagement side and what institutions can do, some universities link registration drives very much to democratic events, inviting local candidates and giving students a sense of how their engagement in politics can have an impact that affects them personally. I understand that Manchester and East Anglia, for example, have done some very good work in that space. As regards the effect and impact of the guidance, we have said that we want to see the evaluation, and we are prepared to update the guidance if the evaluation suggests that we need to do so.

Claire Sosienski Smith: We must link this to mandatory events such as enrolment at university, so that we can get the people who are disengaged from politics involved. That is a concern we have about democracy weeks or holding events that are self-selecting. People going to those kinds of things are probably already registered.

Kira Lewis: I agree. Student unions across the country do amazing work registering people to vote and holding campaigns, but it should not just be up to student unions. There should be a strong link with universities and colleges themselves as an important part of their work to register students and get people involved in democratic processes through the important democracy week events that we hold. Just relying on student unions in universities and institutions, such as further education colleges, and assuming that the student union will do it does not provide a strong link. A sense of the importance of voting to daily life is something a college could give, for example.

Claire Sosienski Smith: There should be central guidance that reassures universities about data protection. A lot of them are unsure whether they can get people registered to vote, but we know that universities are able to do that successfully in some places.

The Chair: I have seen some evidence, in reading for today, that students are not doing too badly at registering. It is the non-students who have the worst record. Is there any help that students can give to their fellows in their age group who are not university students? Is there anything that can be done?

Claire Sosienski Smith: We see that in the poor link-up between local authorities, colleges and universities. It is definitely part of political education to go out and get people registered to vote and talk about it. Having events that are not just centred on universities or for university students but are held in universities and are open is part of the civic responsibility of an educational institution in the community.

Kira Lewis: It goes back to registering people before the age of 18 and having strong local youth services that can reach out to people and support those who are not in formal education. Moving on from that, we need to make sure that people who are in apprenticeships, who may have

a link with a college one day a week, for example, or through a personal tutor, can still get access to information. That should be encouraged as part of the programme that goes alongside a formal apprenticeship. It is about making sure that registration and PSHE links past the age of 16 are built into programmes, whether that be people doing A-levels, apprenticeships or the new T-levels. It should be built in as part of the curriculum.

Claire Sosienski Smith: Students can help in this arena, but it is not their duty to get people registered to vote in the local area. There needs to be resource centrally going to local authorities.

The Chair: Mr Ryan, do you have anything on this Cabinet Office-wise?

Conor Ryan: I am not speaking for the Cabinet Office. The OfS guidance makes clear the responsibility universities and other providers have to work with electoral registration officers. Electoral registration officers have the primary responsibility, but it is about encouraging them to look at ways of doing it, including links to enrolment as a way of facilitating registration. As far as the wider community is concerned, I do not think voter registration is part of our remit.

Q97 **Baroness Pidding:** You have touched on this already. What reforms do you think would help to boost registration rates for students and young people, and what examples are there of best practice in maximising youth and student registration?

Kira Lewis: At the British Youth Council, we believe that the best way to boost registration is not just being on the electoral register, but to vote. When 16 and 17 year-olds vote, they have a higher turnout rate than 18 to 24 year-olds, so starting people voting from 16, when people can register, leads to a higher turnout. When those people vote the first time, they are more likely to continue that through their lives. To put some statistics on that, 75% of 16 and 17 year-olds voted, especially in Scotland, and 97% of them say that they will vote again in future elections. That is a huge continuous turnout rate, so making voting habitual is really important. Our Youth Select Committee highlights evidence showing that those who vote at the first opportunity are more likely to continue.

We at the British Youth Council have called for government consultation on the impact of compulsory first-time voting, to see whether it would have an impact on voting in future. We believe that the opportunity to implement comprehensive youth engagement registration programmes in schools maximises the benefit of votes at 16. The British Youth Council has recommended that that, combined with a programme to equip 16 and 17 year-olds with the skills and knowledge to engage effectively, will lead to turnout and registration going forward.

The principle is that voting at 16 is wonderful. It has been shown to increase the democratic participation of young people, so to encourage registration and voting post 18, we say we should lower the age to 16. I

have a quote from a Scottish Youth Parliament workshop. A member who had the right to vote at age 16 said: "I think that at the age of 16 I may not have been politically aware enough to vote, but this has not been an issue with age as much as an issue with knowledge". Combining voting at 16 with a good programme in school will lead to good turnout in the future. Instead of focusing on maximising voter registration, we should be talking about how we can translate engagement into voting, and we think one of the ways to do that is through votes at 16.

Claire Sosienski Smith: Voter registration is still massively important, and automatic voter registration is what is needed in this realm. It will also do away with the need for the cyclical and resource-intensive registration campaigns at every election. It will embed democratic engagement as part of your life.

We at the NUS favour a mandatory scheme of automatic voter registration, where electoral registration office funds are utilised to ensure that all universities and colleges have the capacity to integrate voter registration with enrolment. That kind of full-scale integration is the best use of the funds, so that the data captured as part of the enrolment process is directly shared with the electoral registration office. A tick-box at the end of the form whereby the student agrees to have that data shared would do away with the kind of disfranchisement that has occurred with individual electoral registration.

Lord Campbell-Savours: I am having trouble hearing what you say, so if I ask you a question that you have already answered, I am sure you will correct me. Mr Ryan, can I take you to your brief and what happened at the University of Sheffield? That seems to me to answer many of the questions we are raising during the course of the inquiry today.

The National Union of Students' brief, with reference to the University of Sheffield, notes that "projects should have been further explored prior to the end of the implementation of IER being brought forward so that their use would have been more extensive". There is reference to the need for automatic voter registration systems and a comment that ever since the legislation was drafted, the NUS has favoured "a mandatory scheme, whereby ERO funds were utilised to ensure that all universities and colleges had the capacity to integrate voter registration with enrolment".

This is really a discussion about what can happen at enrolment, and Sheffield seems to be the model. Do you believe that, if Sheffield is the model, that is the way forward we should be recommending to get round many of the problems you are raising today? I would like all of you to answer but Mr Ryan in particular, because he raised it earlier in our questioning and it is obviously quite close to his thinking.

Claire Sosienski Smith: Do I need to speak closer to the mic to be heard?

Lord Campbell-Savours: I am having trouble hearing what you are saying.

Baroness Eaton: I think it is the volume.

The Chair: I think it is the room, but speak up if you can.

Conor Ryan: Parliament has given us certain powers, and the powers in relation to electoral registration are as I described them in terms of our expectations about facilitating co-operation with electoral registration officers. In our guidance we highlighted the Sheffield example as good practice. We highlighted a number of other examples as well, but certainly the Sheffield one looks particularly promising.

Lord Campbell-Savours: Why can we not roll it out everywhere?

Conor Ryan: We do not have the power to require everybody to use a particular system of electoral registration. We have the power to ask providers and universities to facilitate and co-operate with electoral registration officers. We encourage them to use good practice, and we have highlighted Sheffield as a particularly good example of something that is very effective and does the sort of auto-enrolment that Claire is talking about, but it would be for Parliament to decide if it wanted a particular system made mandatory; it is not something we can force on universities.

Lord Campbell-Savours: Do you think we could make it mandatory?

Conor Ryan: That would be for Parliament to decide.

Lord Campbell-Savours: To repeat the stats, in case anyone did not hear them earlier, the percentage of eligible students registered was 65% in Sheffield compared with 13% at Sheffield Hallam. It seems to me that that is the way forward. What do we do about it?

Conor Ryan: We highlighted it because we think it is a particularly promising example. It would be for Parliament to decide whether it wanted to make that mandatory because it would have to be made law; it is not within our powers at the moment to make that mandatory.

Lord Campbell-Savours: You think it would be good if we were to recommend it as a Committee.

Conor Ryan: What I have said is that it is an example of good practice that we have highlighted. We think it is one example of good practice that universities and other providers should look at.

Claire Sosienski Smith: I would say that you should recommend it.

Lord Campbell-Savours: I was going to ask you exactly the same question. You are a student?

Claire Sosienski Smith: I am the representative of the 7 million students in education in the UK.

Lord Campbell-Savours: Do you think that is what students want?

Claire Sosienski Smith: Yes.

Lord Campbell-Savours: Ms Lewis, is that what you think they want?

Kira Lewis: I am a student too and I would say yes.

Lord Campbell-Savours: Of all the options?

Kira Lewis: It should be a recommendation, yes.

The Chair: Could it not be done without legislation, as a recommendation to universities that they do this?

Conor Ryan: We have highlighted it as good practice. The Cabinet Office identified three or four different examples of good practice and we have shared those. We have certainly identified it as good practice and have shared it with all universities.

Lord Campbell-Savours: Can we ask our specialist adviser whether we are being practical in putting it in this way?

Dr Stuart Wilks-Heeg: Universities have lots of different systems for registering students, and that is the issue; they are not all compatible with the Sheffield approach. Something being developed by Jisc is potentially a way of doing it, but it is a very complex area, involving different software systems, which I think is the point; but certainly you could look at ways of making it work.

Conor Ryan: I am aware of what Jisc is doing. We cannot require a particular product to be used by universities, but we encourage universities to look at how they are doing this.

Claire Sosienski Smith: That encouragement has not been enough. We need something mandatory.

Lord Campbell-Savours: Are you aware of Jisc?

Conor Ryan: Yes.

Lord Campbell-Savours: How does it compare with this option that seems to work?

Conor Ryan: From what I understand, it seems to be a fair amount of that sort of auto-enrolment, and it is being used by an increasing number of universities.

Lord Campbell-Savours: We will follow that up. Thank you.

Q98 **Lord Hayward:** In relation to what we have just been discussing, can we turn specifically to the OfS? Can you explain what the registration requirements are, how they are communicated to universities and whether any progress has been made in evaluating the effectiveness of your guidance? Clearly, this follows from Lord Campbell-Savours's question.

Conor Ryan: The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 has some specific sections—5 and 13, I believe—on electoral registration. As a result, we have 24 conditions of registration. One of those conditions, E5, says: “The provider must comply with guidance published by the OfS to facilitate, in co-operation with electoral registration officers, the electoral registration of students”. If a university, a college or another provider of higher education wants a student to have access to student loans, for example, it must be registered with the OfS and it must be in compliance with all the conditions of registration. In essence, that is the power we have.

We issued guidance in September 2018 around all of that. It came into force on 1 August 2019. Towards the end of August, we made sure, with the Electoral Commission, that electoral registration officers were reminded that the guidance was there, so a couple of months before the general election that reminder was put in place.

If we are concerned about a potential risk or breach of our conditions—for example, if a student union or an electoral registration officer raises an issue that suggests a systemic problem with co-operation with the electoral registration officers by a university or college—we investigate it. Initially, we ask for evidence of compliance, and some of the initiatives we have been talking about may well be presented as evidence. We consider all the evidence, from the complainant and the provider, and decide whether we need to introduce a regulatory intervention that could mean some sort of sanction, including, potentially, a fine. Those are the powers we have.

The Cabinet Office is doing an evaluation at the moment. We have been following up with it. We have not yet had the details, but we understand that it is working on that evaluation. Given that the guidance has been in place only since August and we have just had a general election, that evaluation will be important. We have said that, in the light of any evaluation, we will review the guidance and see if we need to strengthen it.

Lord Hayward: Do you have any indication of when that evaluation will be available?

Conor Ryan: I do not know yet. It is in the hands of the Cabinet Office.

Q99 **Baroness Pidding:** Mr Ryan, has the OfS intervened to require any universities to take further measures to encourage registration? How helpful have universities been to election teams in general, and how do you respond to complaints in that respect?

Conor Ryan: The evaluation will identify some of those issues, and we want to wait for that. We have not received any complaints so far from electoral registration officers; we did not receive any complaints about it in the recent general election. The guidance has only been in effect since 1 August 2019, but if we received a complaint, as I said in the previous

response, we would investigate it, particularly if it suggested that there was a systemic problem.

It is important to note that it is not just about the condition related specifically to electoral registration. If there was a systemic problem, it might suggest that there were problems related to some of our other conditions, particularly around adequate and effective management and governance within the university or college. If we saw that there were problems, we would ask the provider, the university or college, to respond to those allegations. We would consider all the evidence and decide whether we needed to intervene. That intervention could be a requirement to do something differently or it could involve a fine.

The Chair: You said that the evaluation is to be published shortly. Will that be before we finish our inquiry?

Conor Ryan: I do not know the timing. I will see if I can get further information on that and let the Committee know. It is in the hands of the Cabinet Office rather than ours.

Q100 **The Chair:** The final question is this. You will be aware that for the last seven major elections in Northern Ireland, and certainly in pilot schemes in England, there has been the introduction of voter ID—in other words, people proving their identity when they turn up at a polling station. We are promised that there will be a Bill on this, maybe this autumn. What impact would that have on the electoral turnout of students and young people?

Claire Sosienski Smith: A significant one. It would bar thousands, possibly millions, of UK citizens from voting in elections. It will hit students and will hit hardest those from ethnic minority and LGBT+ backgrounds. There are 3.5 million citizens who do not have access to photo ID, and 11 million citizens do not have a passport or driving licence, which means that 7.5% of the electorate may not be able to vote at the next election. There is no evidence of widespread electoral fraud that would necessitate such extreme measures by the Government.

The Chair: Do I understand correctly that young people going to public houses often have to have some ID? Is it totally out of the question?

Claire Sosienski Smith: The reason I talk about people from ethnic minority backgrounds or from LGBT+ backgrounds is that they have less access to funds, and there is a significant cost entailed in having voter ID. If students are registering both at home and at university, their ID might be at home and not on them.

Baroness Eaton: You have extended your reply. We were asking about students. I think most students will have ID. The question to you is: what difference would it make to students registering and voting? It is not your opinion about the rest of the universe, but about students.

Claire Sosienski Smith: Students are citizens, and the student card would not count as official voter ID.

Baroness Eaton: Are they going into pubs?

Claire Sosienski Smith: They would require a photo ID.

Baroness Eaton: They have that for other things.

Claire Sosienski Smith: But not all students.

Lord Hayward: What proportion of students have driving licences? Have you checked the assertions you have just made with the likes of Queen's University Belfast?

Claire Sosienski Smith: I have not.

Lord Campbell-Savours: Can I ask all three of you a very simple question? Would a national identity card help in sorting out the problem?

Claire Sosienski Smith: If it was free of charge to all.

Lord Campbell-Savours: A national identity card as they have in Europe; all of Europe has them.

Kira Lewis: If I may address the question, the British Youth Council manifesto, which comes from our membership, highlights the risk of voter ID further marginalising groups.

Lord Campbell-Savours: Can you answer the question I asked, please? I asked you about a national identity card.

Kira Lewis: I will come on to mention a national ID as part of the damage it creates for some people in particular. To take driving licences, for example, I have never had one, but whereas 75% of white people over the age of 17 have driving licences, it falls to just 50% of black people.

There is an added burden with a national ID card for trans people. It would add to the administrative and financial burden placed on the trans community, many of whom are students, in order to exercise their democratic rights. If a trans or non-binary person's photo or gender mark on their ID does not reflect the gender expression presented at the polling station that day, it may encourage difficult questions or challenges from polling staff, and it may even encourage trans or non-binary people not even to approach polling stations, fearing that they might get questions.

Lord Campbell-Savours: I cannot understand. What people are you talking about?

Kira Lewis: Transgender people. If you have an ID that says you are female, for example, but you present yourself as a male at a polling station on that day, it may provoke difficult questions for that individual. Therefore, we completely discourage the use of voter ID on those grounds because it risks marginalising people who are turning out and

exercising their right to vote, through fear of being questioned and challenged at polling stations for that reason.

To go back to Northern Ireland, Electoral Commission research into the introduction of voter ID in Northern Ireland found that those without the right ID to vote were predominantly from particular social groups, including those aged 18 to 24, those in socioeconomic groups D and E and those with disability. The disabled, those on lower income and 18 to 24 year-olds were the most likely people in Northern Ireland to be unable to vote because of their lack of ID.

The Chair: Can I stop you there? We are going to Northern Ireland to take evidence. In this question, at the moment, our concern is about the student population.

Kira Lewis: Students can be disabled, trans or from the black minority ethnic population, which feeds directly into this.

Lord Campbell-Savours: Mr Ryan, do you believe that a national identity card would be helpful in solving the problem?

Conor Ryan: I am not sure I am in a position to give a personal view at these hearings. As a civil servant, it is not something I can comment on.

The Chair: I do not want to put you off, but it is the student issue that we are talking about today.

Claire Sosienski Smith: Kira answered very well on that. Although students are a transient population, they are not distinct from the entire population of the UK.

Kira Lewis: My student card, which says I am a student at King's College, has never been accepted as ID. Never. I have tried it a few times when I have forgotten my actual ID and said, "I'm a student", and no one has ever accepted it. Saying that students have photo ID with a student card does not mean it is true, because no one accepts it as ID.

Baroness Eaton: Most students have travel documents that have ID, such as railcards and bus passes.

Kira Lewis: My railcard and bus pass are also not accepted.

Claire Sosienski Smith: Railcards are not official forms of ID.

Kira Lewis: You cannot present a railcard, bus pass, NUS card or student ID card as ID.

Claire Sosienski Smith: That may be why I misunderstood your previous question to me. The forms of ID that a student is given by virtue of being a student would not be accepted.

Lord Campbell-Savours: Who said not?

Claire Sosienski Smith: They are not official passes.

Baroness Eaton: Are you suggesting that everybody who goes to a polling station will have to have an ID that is just for going to a polling station?

Claire Sosienski Smith: No, but it will have to be an official, recognised ID, such as a passport or driving licence.

Kira Lewis: Which costs a lot of money. For example, when I turned 18, I had no form of recognised ID such as a passport or driving licence. They cost a lot of money. Coming from a low-income background, that is something I had to struggle with when I turned 18. That was why I could not go out on my 18th. That kind of thing will discourage people who do not have that from voting in those situations.

Claire Sosienski Smith: That is why possibly millions of voters, or at least thousands of voters, would be barred.

Baroness Pidding: What did you do when you were 18?

Kira Lewis: I had to buy a passport.

Claire Sosienski Smith: If students lose their passport or driving licence, and they are from a low-income background, it is very unlikely they would get it replaced.

Baroness Eaton: Where do you stop? That applies to everybody. You have to be very careful with things like that; it is part of life.

Kira Lewis: If you are working and you have a more stable income, replacing, say, a driving licence would be much easier than if you already have a student loan that is not covering your living costs.

Claire Sosienski Smith: It is a barrier to democratic engagement.

Kira Lewis: We should be removing all those barriers where possible, not introducing ones that could cause further problems.

Claire Sosienski Smith: And not simply saying it is part of life.

Kira Lewis: Having elections during times when students may be going from home to university could be a problem. Having an election on, say, 12 December when people may be going home means they may leave their ID at home or at their university address. They may not be able to present it at a polling station on that day for that reason.

Claire Sosienski Smith: As a final note on changes requiring a form of official ID at a polling station to vote, we know there is widespread misinformation, and we are still trying to figure out how we can best get across your right to vote and how you vote in elections. The change would result in many people not being prepared to have ID at the polling station. Many people would be further disfranchised. If we lose young people from voting, if we lose students from voting, we may have lost them for their entire life, knowing that voting is a habit.

The Chair: Do you have evidence from the pilot that has been done in one or two authorities in England? Is that what you are telling us about?

Claire Sosienski Smith: I do not have the evidence from that pilot.

The Chair: Do you have evidence from Northern Ireland?

Claire Sosienski Smith: No.

Kira Lewis: I mentioned evidence from Northern Ireland in my statement. The people who did not have the right ID were predominantly from particular socioeconomic groups, including those aged 18 to 24. It included those in socioeconomic groups D and E and those with a disability.

Further to that, talking about the wider population, the Electoral Commission published research in 2015 showing that 7.5% of the electorate do not have photo ID. If it was further restricted to passports and driving licences, 24% of the electorate would not have the correct ID. A specific impact on young people, as shown by Electoral Reform Society research, is that driving licence applications have dropped substantially among younger citizens since the mid-1990s, due usually to financial cost. So, voter ID risks targeting young people and students in urban areas who do not necessarily need a car to get around, and it would disproportionately affect lower income groups.

IDs cost money, including the costs of running a car and so on, and there has been a shift regarding young people not wanting to use cars due to the climate impact it has anyway. Encouraging that is not something many young people would necessarily be on board with.

Claire Sosienski Smith: It is not going to be solved by bringing in a national voter identity card that would be accepted at the polling booth, as citizens would have to apply for that; students would have to apply for it before polling day.

The Chair: You have made your case on this. It has just been put to me that in Northern Ireland the Electoral Office issues a free ID card.

Lord Hayward: In relation to the National Union of Students—this may sound an aggressive question—I have sympathy with the arguments about certain sections of the youth population, but as to the comments concerning students having cards and passports, you are the educational elite of your generation.

Claire Sosienski Smith: Was that a question?

Lord Hayward: Yes. Are you the educational elite? You identify all the difficulties that you as students have in comparison with the young, the disabled and people who do not have qualifications. You have reeled off all these problems, but are you the educational elite of this generation?

Claire Sosienski Smith: A disabled person or someone from an ethnic minority background could never be a student?

Lord Hayward: I did not say that.

Claire Sosienski Smith: I am not following what you are saying, so do restate the question.

Lord Hayward: I think I have made my point. I am not going to pursue it further.

Lord Janvrin: Do you have any anecdotal evidence that there is an impersonation problem?

Claire Sosienski Smith: No.

Kira Lewis: No.

The Chair: We will conclude on that. Thank you very much indeed for coming along and sharing your evidence with us.