Imperial College Union
Board of Trustees / 27 May 2026

Deputy Returning Officer Leadership Elections 2026 (LE26) Report

Author(s): Annie Willmot (Interim Director of Membership Services)

Purpose: To provide the Trustee Board with a summary of the ICU Leadership and Clubs & Society Elections 2026, including the Returning Officer's confirmation of a fair election, and the Deputy Returning Officer's lessons learned and recommendations to inform planning for LE27.

Decision(s): Board is asked to **recommend** the report to University Council - the body that is required by the Education Act 1994 to satisfy itself that the Union's elections for major union offices have been fairly and properly conducted.

1. **Background and Context**
   The ICU Leadership and Clubs & Society Elections 2026 (LE26) were conducted in accordance with the requirements of the 1994 Education Act. The Returning Officer has confirmed that the elections were run in a fair and democratic manner. This report provides the Trustee Board with an overview of the election outcomes and the key recommendations arising from the Deputy Returning Officer's review.

2. **Returning Officer's Summary**
   Complaints were handled promptly by the Deputy Returning Officer. From the Returning Officer's perspective, the elections operated without significant incident. Results were communicated to students following the close of voting, and the results night was well delivered. The Returning Officer declared the election fair and democratic, satisfying the stipulations of the 1994 Education Act.

3. **Election Outcomes**
   A total of 8,237 students voted across both elections, giving an aggregate turnout of 32.42%. Leadership Elections turnout was 24.38% and Clubs & Society Elections turnout was 28.79%. Postgraduate engagement improved, with PGR turnout rising from 6.1% to 7.9% and PGT from 11.8% to 13%.

4. **Lessons Learned and Recommendations**
   The Elections Working Group gathered feedback from staff and students following the conclusion of LE26 to conduct a comprehensive review. The key recommendations arising from that review are set out in the attached DRO report, covering: the migration to SUMS, nominations and candidate eligibility, candidate briefings and support, elections promotion and communications, and voting, campaigning and turnout.

5. **Returning Officer Tender**
   No action required at this stage but for note, appointment of Returning Officer and Deputy Returning Officer for the LE27 will come back to the Board of Trustees for ratification at a future meeting.

Imperial College Union (ICU) Leadership and Clubs & Society Elections | Returning Officer's Report 2026

Returning Officer (RO): Lucy Gill

(Director of Membership Services, Nottingham SU)

Deputy Returning Officer (DRO): Annie Willmot

(Interim Director of Membership Services, ICU)

ELECTION DETAILS	
Date of Nominations	February 9 - February 27, 2026
Number of Candidates (excluding withdrawn candidates)	Leadership positions (including departmental reps): **279** Clubs and Society Committee positions: **3,139**
Dates of Voting	March 9 - March 12, 2026
Number of Voters	**8,237**
Number of Complaints/Appeals	**35**
Number of Complaints/Appeals Upheld	**18**

Returning Officer Comments/Recommendations

Complaints were handled promptly by the Deputy Returning Officer. From the Returning Officer's perspective, the elections operated without significant incident. Results were communicated to students following the close of voting and the results night was well delivered.

Confirmation of Fair Election
The Returning Officer declared the election was run in a fair and democratic manner which satisfies the stipulations as laid out within the 1994 Education Act and approved results being run.

The results of the elections can be found online on the ICU website.

ICU Leadership Elections 2026: DRO Lessons Learned and Recommendations

ICU's Leadership Elections 2026 (LE26) were managed well by the team. From a DRO's perspective, I was grateful for how confidently and capably they led the operations; issues were resolved quickly, there was a keenness to reflect and learn, and the result was a very successful election. Particular recognition should go to Helena Schofield (Representation Manager) for her leadership and management of the delivery, and to the rest of the team for all their hard work.

Following the completion of the election, the Elections Working Group gathered feedback from both staff and students to conduct a comprehensive review of the process. The following is a summary of the key recommendations arising from that review.

Website & Voting Platform

Student-facing election information was available via the ICU website and eVoting platform. The platform met requirements overall, but a few technical issues arose that demanded more hands-on support than anticipated, putting unplanned pressure on the team and pulling specific resource away from other work. The team worked proactively to resolve issues as they arose, keeping the DRO informed throughout.

Recommendations:

- Migrating the elections setup to SUMS ahead of LE27 is required to minimise risk, ease pressure on the systems team during peak periods, and improve overall election management through improved functionality and by enabling a wider range of staff to use the system. Planning with SUMS should continue to ensure outstanding issues are resolved in advance of the next cycle and so a clear timeline for implementation can be established.

Nominations

Nominations were open to all eligible students via the online platform on the website and targeted outreach was undertaken in advance to underrepresented student groups.

Recommendations:

- To improve the diversity of candidates standing, increase targeted outreach to underrepresented communities, including postgraduate students and those affiliated with Clubs & Societies and Liberation & Community Networks (LCNs) throughout the year.
- Membership eligibility deadlines for Clubs & Societies nominations should be communicated more clearly and earlier in the year.
- Develop a rep team communications plan and resources to equip academics and departmental contacts to promote the elections.
- The LCN section of the election handbook should be updated to provide a clearer outline of changes to LCN structures and the positions available (this may be less relevant next year as

the changes won't be new, but an effort should be made to review based on current student understanding).

Candidate Eligibility

A small number of candidate eligibility issues were raised by candidates and resolved promptly by the DRO.

Recommendations:

- As part of the SUMS migration, it is important to determine whether this will help resolve certain candidate eligibility issues, such as a student on a one-year course putting themselves forward for a role, and to ensure that these issues do not have to be addressed solely through manual checks.

Candidate Briefings & Support

The candidate briefing was improved based on recommendations from the previous year. It was thorough, well-attended, and well-received. There were considerably fewer candidate complaints this year, which has been anecdotally linked to the increased clarity of the briefing process. Candidates who provided feedback reported feeling supported throughout the process, and no formal complaints were received about this.

Candidate breakfasts were offered across the campaign period as an additional touchpoint for support. Success is not measured on attendance; those who did attend responded positively and expressed appreciation for the opportunity.

Recommendations:

- Maintain the candidate breakfast offer and review feedback to explore whether any additional support could be provided.

Elections Promotion & Communications

Promotional communications were delivered across in-person and online channels. Segmented emails were sent to postgraduate and undergraduate students, tailored to explain what elected officers do for each cohort.

Recommendations:

- Elections should be embedded in ICU's year-round communications, not treated as a standalone campaign. This means being more deliberate about how staff are kept informed beyond the pre-briefing and consistently helping students understand what ICU and elected student volunteers do so that familiarity is built and carries into the election season.

- Ahead of next year's election, the representation and marketing teams should work together on a shared communications plan, with clear sign-off processes, defined responsibilities, and earlier planning across printed resources, digital content, candidate materials, and turnout strategy.

- All candidate-facing and student-facing materials should be reviewed to ensure they are clear to someone with no prior knowledge of elections or the roles available.
- Clear guidance on slates should be included in the elections rules and communicated in the Elections Working Group ahead of campaigning.
- The candidate pack and website should include specific time commitments for each role, and a clear explanation of how ties are resolved. This generated a high volume of queries this cycle and should be addressed proactively, including in the candidate briefing.

Voting, Campaigning and Turnout

Voting stalls were staffed across campuses throughout voting week and were well received. Manifesto booklets were a particular highlight, noted positively by both staff and students.

Election / Cohort	This year	Last year	Change
Overall			
Leadership Elections	24.38%	~25.0%	▼ 0.6%
Club & Society Elections	28.79%	~33.6%	▼ 4.8%
Aggregate (both elections)	32.42%	—	—
Total voters	8,237	—	—
Postgraduate breakdown (Leadership Elections)			
PGR turnout	7.9%	6.1%	▲ 1.8%
PGT turnout	13.0%	11.8%	▲ 1.2%

Note on Club & Society turnout: The 4.8% decrease is likely a positive indicator rather than a concern. The introduction of a new nominations deadline is believed to have reduced mass nominations in culture societies, which are thought to have artificially inflated turnout figures in previous cycles by generating large volumes of low-engagement votes.

Recommendations:

- Facilitate stalls to promote elections on all campuses.
- Campus roadshows during voting week are recommended as an alternative or supplement to voting stalls, creating fairer access across campuses and supporting voter engagement. Candidate fatigue should be managed carefully, and participation should not be compulsory.

- Maintain a strong presence on the final day of voting, with dedicated staff resource to focus on driving last-minute turnout.
- Move towards more sustainable promotional items.
- Efforts should be made to go to where students are, including at sports nights and other student-facing spaces, rather than relying solely on stalls.

Summary of Strategic Recommendations Following LE26

The migration to SUMS ahead of LE27 remains a priority and should be planned with sufficient lead time to resolve outstanding issues before the next cycle.

Elections should be treated as a year-round project rather than just a peak-period activity concentrated in February and March. The Elections Working Group should collectively own a formal comms plan that tracks and shares what elected students are doing and achieving across the year, feeding directly into LE27 campaign communications.

LE27 should have fewer, SMART objectives with clear co-ownership across the team. A dedicated Working Group meeting early in the academic year should agree metrics for tracking elected student activity and a content calendar should be produced and shared with the group well in advance of the campaign period.

Wider staff engagement remains important. The all-staff briefing should be developed further, extended in length, with a dedicated section on impartiality, and backed by SMT messaging that reinforces the significance of elections across the organisation.

If elections are to form part of the organisation's balanced scorecard, the data underpinning them must also be fit for purpose. Currently, the voter data we have access to is limited to what students choose to share, which makes robust reporting and trend analysis difficult. Ahead of LE27, a review of what data is collected, how it is stored, and how it is reported should be undertaken, with the necessary changes implemented in time for the next election cycle.

Report prepared by the Deputy Returning Officer following the conclusion of the ICU Leadership and Clubs & Society Elections 2026.