

Surmounting the Trade Union Act 2016: A case study of using local branch data and communication systems to 'get the vote out' in the UK higher education sector

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Behind Closed Circuits: Data, Digitalisation and Trade Union Tactics

#ClosedCircuits

The proposed paper/presentation engages with how trade unions can mobilise membership data and communication systems to organise workers into getting the vote out (GTVO) for industrial action ballots. The proposed paper/presentation hinges on a case study from the UK higher education (HE) sector where turnout for industrial action ballots has historically been much lower than what is required of the Trade Union Act 2016. The specific focus of the paper is one HE branch of the University and College Union (UCU) that twice managed to clearly surmount the 50 per cent voting threshold of the Trade Union Act 2016 in one year (2018). In both instances the branch that forms the basis of the case (UKHEI) 'topped' the voter turnout rate in ballots related to pension scheme reforms and more lately on pay/equality. In the first ballot the wider turnout was 58 per cent and at UKHEI it was 77 per cent. In the second ballot the wider turnout was 42 per cent and at UKHEI it was 64 per cent. The proposed paper/presentation is based on an analysis of UKHEI's UCU activities surrounding the two ballots, focusing specifically on how GTVO was mobilised via member data and a range of communication systems. The findings have the potential to provide a GTVO model for HE and wider public sector trade unions, but may also be of wider and more general value to trade unions organising in non-traditional settings.

For a full version of this GTVO document (containing example emails, exhibits, etc.) email j.richards@hw.ac.uk

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1 Summary of UKHEI GTVO strategy

Stage one: What were we aiming to do?

Convert everyday staff dissatisfaction into staff dissatisfaction at the ballot box

Repeat the success of USS ballot

Surpass the 50 per cent threshold as set out by the TU Act 2016

On reaching 50 per cent, consider how much to push beyond 50 per cent turnout

Work with/alongside the national GTVO campaign

Stage two: What did we know?

A consultative ballot showing a clear appetite for industrial action over pay/equality – reflecting the key issues that form the basis of the ballot as well as wider, local and recent historical discontent

An indication that the turnout may not reach the 50 per cent without some pressure/incentive to GTVO – i.e. we needed to mobilise discontent in the workplace into the members registering that discontent by voting in the ballot

A membership base that is characterised by:

- Very busy, especially with start of new academic year
- Fragmented and based largely in individual offices – no or limited common areas
- Based on multiple campuses
- Working remotely
- High levels of domestic and overseas travel
- Highly engaged/dedicated to job/strong occupational identity (generally stronger than TU identity)
- More widely disgruntled/relatively engaged in UCU/TU matters
- Distracted by other UCU ballots/surveys
- Many new members, many with no previous experience of strike ballots
- Often works outside of regular Monday-Friday 9-5 regime
- Most effectively contacted by email, phone or via internal mail, i.e. social media reach low/door knocking highly resource intensive
- More broadly needs harassing to do almost anything that is not their speciality/reason to be academic or work in professional services!

Stage three: What did we have?

Membership lists (mostly up-to-date) – e.g. email addresses and building/campus location

An all members' email list

Internal telephone/voicemail numbers (acquired week 4 of GTVO campaign from UKHEI Outlook system and external University website)

Location of all main staff mailrooms (acquired during USS GTVO)

Limited resources as a branch, but an earlier GTVO plan was very successful and probably could be replicated with few if any changes – i.e. minimal effort/no committee needed as with USS GTVO

One person – who had at least some facilities time to draw upon, willing to use some personal time, and be flexible in terms of working and in personal life

Wider branch activists could be called upon if turnout expected to be problematic

What would also have been useful to have: mail merge skills?

Stage four: What did we do?

See table below and email/voicemail/paper-based communications

The strategy overall was based on expecting approximately 20 per cent to vote without any prompting and from then on to send a range of varying (respectful and polite) messages, using a variety of methods, and wherever possible, linking messages to current events, e.g. news announcement on inflation and a campaign to highlight the salaries of our students.

It was a case of gently and respectfully nudging staff into doing what they had already indicated they were willing to do in consultative ballot.

Known members were asked in passing if they had voted, e.g. corridors, dining areas, etc.

Stage five: What we concluded from GTVO

With counting votes (see examples below) we knew that come what may, with about two weeks to go, we would have very good information about who had not voted so far/who we needed to specifically target to GTVO. It turned out we were over the 50 per cent about this time and if we had then adopted door-knocking methods and personal phone calls, turnout would probably have been over 70 per cent.

In short, there is evidence from our campaign to suggest there are three types of member when it comes to such votes:

- **Low hanging fruit** (20 per cent) – will vote come what may
- Those variously **needing to be nudged** into voting (representing a further 40-50 per cent) and the main target of the GTVO campaign
- **Hard nuts** (20-30 per cent) – who really need individualised attention and even then may never vote

2 GTVO timetable and activities

Week starting	Communication	Purpose of communication
Pre-GTVO		
20 August	UCU posters up all over campus	Create awareness of upcoming ballot and key issues
	UCU flyers to main staff mail rooms	Create awareness of upcoming ballot and key issues
27 August	Pre-ballot general member email (EM1)	Create awareness of upcoming ballot
GTVO		
3 September	General member email (EM2)	Remind ballot opened Explain voting process (graphic) Lost/no ballot paper information Remind of key issues Notice of individual GTVO emails
10 September	Business cards on doors and main staff mail rooms	Remind of key issues Voting recommendations Information on joining UCU Branch Twitter information
	Individual (BCC) member email (all members) (EM3)	Explain branch GTVO vote counting process Lost/no ballot paper information
17 September		
24 September	Individual (BCC) member email (known non-voters) (EM4)	Follow up individual GTVO message Allay fears about industrial action and student experience Lost/no ballot paper information Inflation news story
	General member email (EM5)	5 key reasons to vote Lost/no ballot paper information
	Voicemails (known non-voters) ¹	Reminder to vote Lost/no ballot paper information Thank you for support
1 October	Voicemails (known non-voters)	Reminder to vote Lost/no ballot paper information Thank you for support
	General member email (EM6)	Follow up individual GTVO message
	Individual email (known non-voters) (EM7)	Thank members for engagement so far Reminder of individual GTVO process Vote regardless Explain voting process (graphic) Lost/no ballot paper information

¹ The local branch did not have a record of member telephone numbers. During week 4 of the GTVO campaign, internal work numbers were gathered from the internal email system. A very small percentage of the members did not have a work voicemail and about 10 per cent had a full voicemail, i.e. no message could be left in both instances, but around 120 messages were left over two sessions of about 2 hours each.

		Remind of USS successes
8 October	<p>General member email (EM8)</p> <p>Individual (BCC) member email (known non-voters) (EM9)</p> <p>Postcards (known non-voters) via internal mail (member database had such information)</p>	<p>Apologise for emails Ballot closing date soon Lost/no ballot paper information Remind of individual GTVO process Notice of how many more emails until ballot closes</p> <p>Thank members for engagement so far Apologise for emails Lost/no ballot paper information Reminder of 50 per cent turnout required Vote regardless</p> <p>Importance of voting Importance of high turnout Local branch web/social media information</p>
15 October	<p>Individual (BCC) member email (known non-voters) (EM10)</p> <p>Individual (BCC) member email (known non-voters) (EM11)</p> <p>General member email (EM12)</p>	<p>Ballot closing date soon Lost/no ballot paper information Draw attention to University posters on student salaries (graphic) Thank members for engagement so far</p> <p>Last chance to cast vote Reminder of importance of pay (graphic)</p> <p>Post-ballot email thanking for engagement with GTVO Details of when ballot result known</p>
Demobilise GTVO		
22 October	<p>General member email (EM13)</p> <p>General member email (EM14)</p> <p>General member email (EM15)</p>	<p>Details and reflection on national and branch ballot results Consult members on outcome of ballot</p> <p>Details of next stages after ballot Reminder or consultation on outcome of ballot</p> <p>Last reminder about consultation on outcome of ballot</p>
29 October		
5 November	<p>Email to known non-voters (EM16)</p> <p>Email to known non-voters (EM17)</p> <p>Email to known non-voters (EM18)</p>	<p>Reasons for not voting in the pay/equality ballot</p> <p>Follow up email on reasons for not voting in the pay/equality ballot</p> <p>Final follow up email on reasons for not voting in the pay/equality ballot</p>

Votes cast as a percentage of membership - from start to end of ballot



