The effect of online voting on turnout in Students’ Union elections
University of Sheffield Students’ Union May 2014

Sheffield Students’ Union
Sheffield Students' Union exists to provide support, representation, facilities, services, entertainment and activities to students studying at the University of Sheffield. The organisation is run for students by students, with eight Students' Union Officers elected annually to direct it and represent its students. It has been rated the best Students’ Union in the UK in the Times Higher Education's Student Experience Survey for the past 6 years.

Summary
- Participation in SU elections has doubled since the introduction of online voting
- 89% of students said they would be less likely to vote in the SU elections if they were not able to vote online
- 18% of those who don’t vote in local, parliamentary or European elections (“governmental elections”) said one of the reasons they don’t vote is that it’s too much trouble to go to a polling station
- 85% of Sheffield students said they would be more likely to vote in British elections if they could do so online

E-voting at Sheffield SU
Online voting was introduced in Sheffield SU elections in 2009. At first, both paper and online voting ran concurrently during elections, though students took to e-voting very quickly. In the first year alone 4600 students voted online while 1495 students voted in person. Indeed, 25% of the total student body voted – up from between 4000 and 5000 the previous five years - with 6095 votes making it (at the time) the highest ever voter turnout in SU elections. Since then, voter participation has increased year-on year as this table showing the number of voters each year illustrates:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Before online voting</th>
<th>With online voting</th>
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<td>4729</td>
<td>4281</td>
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Online voting has proved so popular that in 2010 only 511 votes were cast on paper and paper voting was abandoned completely in 2011.

Other factors
There are other factors which have helped us maintain turnout in recent years. All students are automatically registered to vote making it a simpler process than in governmental elections. We also benefit from the ability to send mass emails to all students, and being able to publicise voting on the University’s online learning system (MUSE).

For more information please contact:
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The student view
During April 2014 we polled students on online voting and how much they felt it influenced their participation in elections at the SU. Of the 2054 students that took part in the survey, 89% said they would be less likely to vote in the SU elections if they could not vote online.

Students were also asked about their voting habits in governmental elections. Of those who said they did not vote in governmental elections, 18% said they did not vote because “It's too much trouble to go to a polling station”. However, disengagement also appears to be an issue among this audience, with 34% saying they weren’t interested in politics and 20% saying politicians don’t represent them. Interestingly, a lack of confidence in their own knowledge appears to be putting young people off voting, with substantial numbers of non-voters saying they chose not to vote because they were not well-informed enough about policy.

Students were overwhelmingly positive about the potential introduction of online voting in governmental elections with 85% saying they would be more likely to vote if they could do it online. There were some concerns about fraud or hacking in an online system, but overall students felt that with the proper precautions it would be a positive change which would increase participation:

I think it’s a good idea as it could be more convenient for people with busy timetables and also for those who want to be able to take their time to grasp an understanding of the packages each representative offers.

I love the idea, I have been wanting this to happen for a long time as I believe more people will vote, particularly young people, which could really change the face of British politics/society (policies etc seem to be aimed at older people)

Long overdue! This is needed to allow more people to have the chance to have their say without queuing or finding polling stations in unfamiliar areas (particularly students who are new to Sheffield). Also having the candidates' manifestos to read when voting, as seen in the layout for the SU elections, helps people make an educated choice.

Definitely should do it! It would appeal to young people who don’t vote much. As a non voter I would participate as it would be easier as it requires less effort (I don’t even know how to vote at the moment, you have to register to vote or something?)

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1 2054 students took part in the poll, full results available on request
2 89% of students said they “completely” agreed or “agreed a little” with the statement “I would be less likely to vote in the SU elections if I could not vote online”

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