

Electoral Officer Decision

Complaint Regarding the 2026 Student Fee Restructure Referendum

Electoral Officer, Graduate Students' Society

2026-04-24

Matter

Complainant	World University Service of Canada (WUSC), UVic Chapter
Respondent	GSS Executive Board
Electoral Officer	<i>Samuel Fielder</i>
Date of Complaint	13 March 2026
Date of Decision	2026-04-24

Decision

Having considered the complaint submitted by WUSC and the evidence and governing documents before me, **I find that the grounds of the complaint are not upheld: the referendum results will continue to stand.** The grounds advanced do not, individually or collectively, establish the significant unfairness required to warrant overturning the results of the WUSC fee referendum question.

The central allegation is that the GSS Executive Board (hereafter Board) conducted the referendum process in a manner that was highly biased in favour of reducing the WUSC fee, and that this bias substantially affected the result. Having considered the evidence on a balance of probabilities, **I am not satisfied that the conduct of the referendum process crossed the threshold of significant misconduct or unfairness that undermines the integrity of the electoral process**, as required by [Governance Manual Policy 7.13.1](#). In reaching this conclusion, I have been informed by the finding that the FAQ published on the GSS website, the primary vehicle through which WUSC alleges bias, was produced by GSS staff independently of the Executive Board and was reviewed and approved by the previous Electoral Officer (2025-2026) before publication, and that the membership voted on each fee increase/decrease independently on the voting platform.

Board Participation in the Referendum

WUSC argues that the Executive Board's decision to take a "yes" stance on the fee restructure referendum constitutes an unfair extension of its power, on the basis that this is not explicitly addressed in the Governance Manual or Bylaws. I do not accept this ground.

There is no language in [Bylaw IV](#) or the [Governance Manual](#) that prohibits individual Board members from registering as members of a referendum side and campaigning accordingly. The only roles explicitly barred from referendum side membership are the Electoral Officer ([Bylaw 4.1\(b\)](#)) and members of the Electoral Appeals Committee ([Bylaw 4.3\(b\)](#)). These are roles whose function *demands* strict neutrality throughout the electoral process; the Executive Board is not a part of that list. Board members participating in a referendum side are doing so as members of the Society exercising rights available to any member, having been democratically elected to serve in the interests of the graduate student population.

The FAQ, the Referendum Process, and WUSC’s Communication

The remaining grounds in the complaint concern the content and framing of the FAQ published on the GSS website in connection with the fee restructure referendum. WUSC alleges that the FAQ gave the “yes” side a structural advantage, characterised WUSC unfairly, and framed the referendum questions as a cost-neutral package in a way that prevented members from considering each question independently.

The FAQ was drafted in full by GSS staff. This is a standard practice applied to all GSS referenda, undertaken primarily to address general member questions upon learning that a referendum is being held. The FAQ was submitted to and reviewed by the previous Electoral Officer on 28 January 2026, well in advance of the registration period and the campaign period. Therefore the FAQ is not campaign material produced by or on behalf of a referendum side, meaning [Policy 7.4.1](#) on maintaining equal provisions to referendum sides, do not apply.

On the allegation that the FAQ gave the “yes” side a structural advantage, I do not accept this ground. The standard under [Policy 7.13.1](#) is significant unfairness that undermines the integrity of the electoral process, not any incidental advantage that institutional communication may carry. WUSC has presented no evidence that the FAQ materially affected the result. The vote on the WUSC question was 217 in favour to 132 against, and I am not satisfied that the framing of the FAQ, in the context of that margin, rises to the level of significant unfairness required under [Policy 7.13.1](#).

For context, I note that the GSS Finance Committee made contact seeking financial information on 2 June 2025 and did not receive a response until 5 December 2025, a period of over six months. WUSC states that there were valid reasons for these delays, though no such reasons were provided in the complaint, in any detail. Earlier engagement would have opened avenues for constructive collaboration and potentially a different approach before the referendum was called.

The GSS made a deliberate decision to communicate the all-pass outcome rather than enumerate every possible combination of results. I acknowledge that the outcome of a “no” vote on the WUSC question combined with “yes” votes on all remaining questions was not explicitly communicated. However, the voting platform presented each referendum question as an independent fee change, and members cast their votes on each question separately. The questions were structured and presented as *distinct*, and each with a yes/no ballot. Members were not required, instructed, or invited to treat them as a package during the voting. The cost-neutral framing appears to be simple context about how the referendum was designed rather than telling members how they were expected to vote, therefore I am not satisfied that the omission of partial-failure scenarios in the FAQ constitutes significant unfairness that undermines the integrity of the referendum within the meaning of [Policy 7.13.1](#).

Right of Appeal

This decision may be appealed to the Electoral Appeals Committee. Any appeal must be submitted in writing within **seven (7) days** of the date of this decision, in accordance with [Governance Manual Policy 45.7](#), which governs appeals of Electoral Officer decisions. I note that [Policy 45.7](#) as currently published in the Governance Manual contains a typographical error; the correct reading of the provision is that appeals of Electoral Officer decisions must be filed within seven (7) days after the release of the decision.

Recommendation to the GSS

The 2025-2026 election and referendum cycle has identified a number of issues in the Society’s governing documents that warrant attention. In my view, the policies and bylaws governing elections and referenda would benefit from greater explicit language in key areas, and that clearer guidance would

better support the Electoral Officer in carrying out their role.

I also wish to echo the observations made by the previous Electoral Officer in his [end-of-year report](#). The Electoral Officer role carries significant responsibilities that are not adequately communicated to the membership at the time of election. Candidates for the role should be better informed of what it entails, and the membership should have a clearer picture of the qualifications and preparation the role requires. In addition, the incoming Electoral Officer should be provided with meaningful training before taking on their responsibilities.

A detailed set of recommendations will be presented to the Bylaw and Policy Committee in the coming months.

References

1. *GSS Governance Manual 2025–26*. Graduate Students' Society, University of Victoria.
<https://gss.uvic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/GSS-Governance-Manual-2025-26.pdf>
2. *GSS Bylaws* (approved 28 October 2025). Graduate Students' Society, University of Victoria.
<https://gss.uvic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/2025-10-28-GSS-Bylaws-APPROVED.pdf>
3. *Electoral Officer End-of-Year Report 2025–26*. Graduate Students' Society, University of Victoria.
<https://gss.uvic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Electoral-Officer-Final-Report-2026.pdf>



Samuel Fielder
Electoral Officer, Graduate Students' Society
University of Victoria
2026-04-24

CC:

- WUSC UVic Chapter;
- GSS Executive Board;
- GSS Executive Director.