
DURHAM SU

All Student Survey

Report for Student Leaders



coole insight ltd

Getting the right thing done

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INTRODUCTION

This report is aimed to support Durham SU student leaders in your induction to, and delivery of your roles. It includes insight from our All Student Survey 23/24 run and analysed with Coole Insight LTD, an external research partners, as well as advice and interpretation from the Durham SU staff team. We know your time is valuable, and you want to spend as much of it as you can talking to students not SU staff – so we've tried to give you snapshots of our thoughts and knowledge of staff, alongside and complimentary to, these survey results. Please use it as a basis to challenge, ask questions, and learn better with students about issues that matter to them.

“Durham SU’s strategy is clear that being democratic is about acting in the interests of Durham students, not performing bureaucratic rituals for the sake of it. Good, frequent, trusted insight is fundamental to our work, bringing the lives and ambitions of every student to the centre of our thinking.”

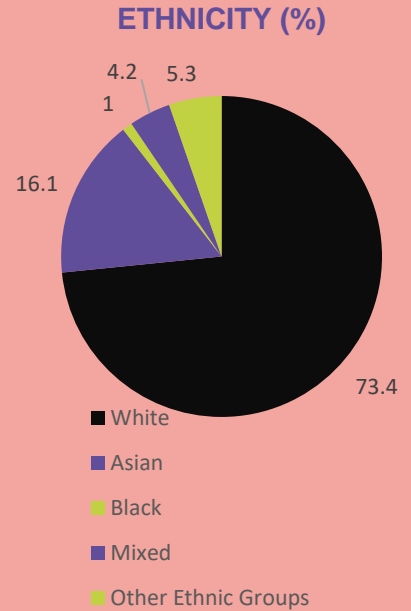
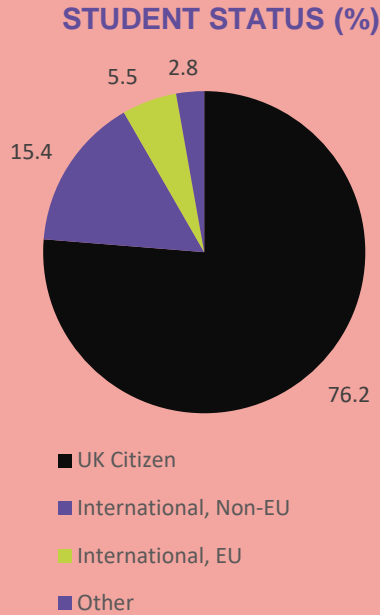
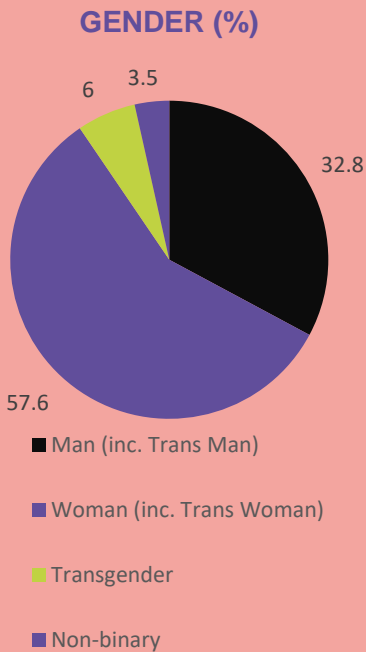
– Gareth Hughes, Chief Executive

This research captures student views on a range of issues - from how your students' union campaigns on important issues, to how student groups help build a sense of belonging, whilst touching on our student 'big issue' areas of housing, barriers to access and quality induction to Durham. A huge thankyou must be given to the 500 students who participated in this survey, for their willingness to give their perspective and experiences to help build your knowledge of the varied tapestry of Durham student life.

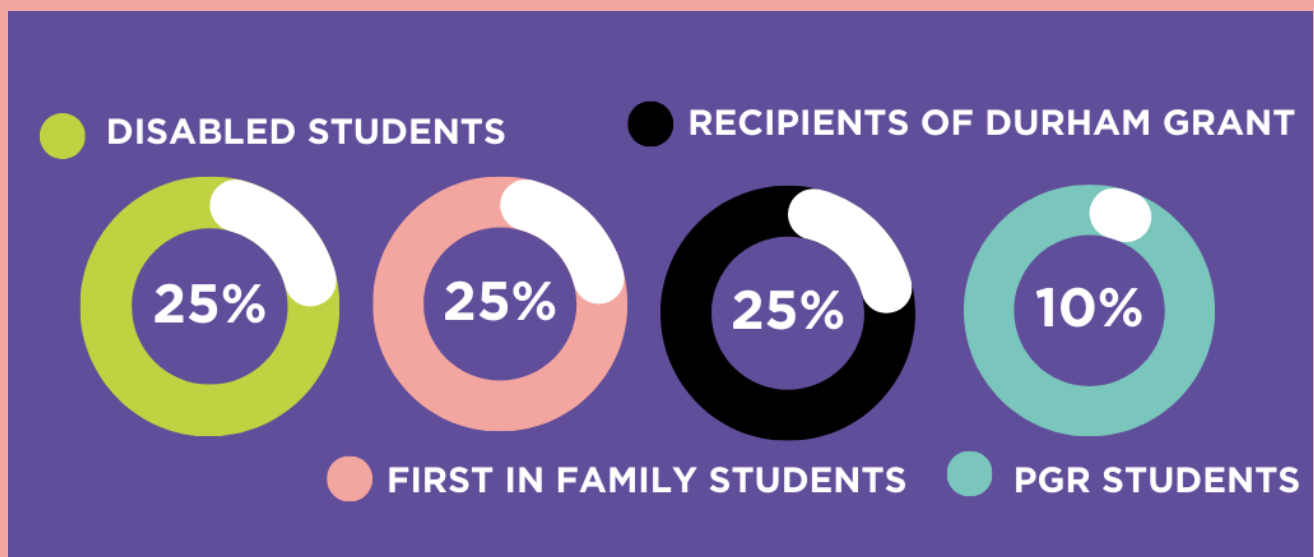
Our research isn't perfect – we'd planned to run two pulses of the survey, one in first and one in third term, aiming to reach over 1000 students – but due to a general election and the opportunities to both elect a team of part-time student officers and run a housing survey on student housing (one the of the big issues that we know impact student's lives), we scrapped the second pulse to prioritise other work. Yet we can see clear trends from the students who did participate, many of which are already augmented by other insight gathered by student leaders through research, democracy and talking with students – you are key to contextualising, questioning and deciding which insights align with and evidence issues and opportunities that you will act on in the student interest. While student time and attention is clearly being stretched thin, we're pleased to have obtained a diverse range of opinions, and have learnt things, positive and negative about both student life and the student experience of the students' union.

PARTICIPANTS

450 students submitted responses to our survey. The demographics of the respondents within our survey reasonably match the demographic of the institution. In some key groups of underrepresented groups, including first-generation students, we actually saw an overrepresentation of several percentage points.



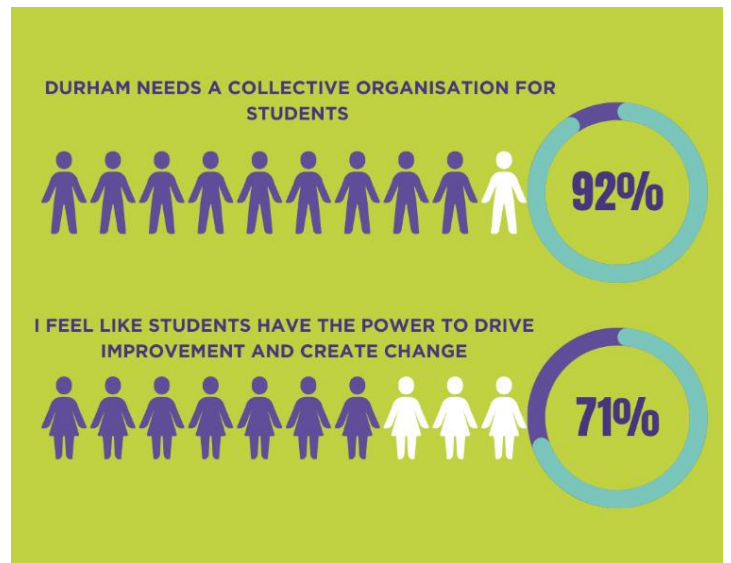
Black students are underrepresented at Durham, and in our research as well, making up only 1.8% of the student population and 1% of our research. As such it is important we more to ensure they are represented on issues, and included in the understanding we have of student issues and experiences. While they are far from the only group for which this is true, they stand out most clearly in this research.



STUDENT VOICE

Durham SU and Student Voice

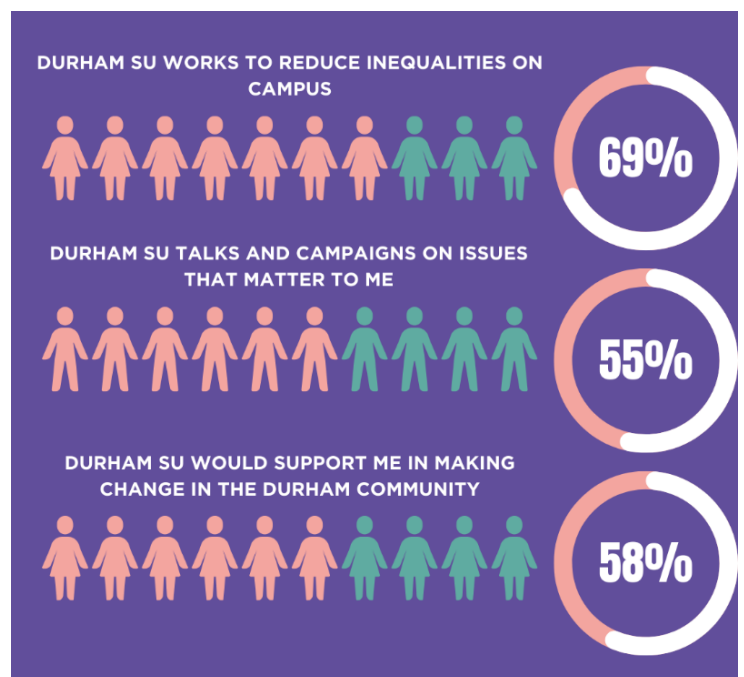
Most respondents felt that students have the power to change things and that a collective organisation for students is needed. However, it's notable that 29% of respondents didn't feel they had this power, with this holding steady across most demographic groups. However, students who work in term time, students receiving the Durham Grant and first in family students had less confidence in this.



For student leaders, it's important to understand how students engage with Durham SU, and if the issues and campaigns that the Students' Union works on are perceived as relevant and impactful for current students. When surveyed most of our respondents last year did appear to see Durham SU as working to uplift student equity and student voice on student issues, but there was less confidence in this than there was in the need for a collective organisation, or the belief in student power.

We should feel confident that most recipients inclined to credit the students' union with good intentions – a sign of student trust. This is evident through the free text responses when asked what they thought Durham SU cares about. 94% of the 360 students who responded to this question listed attributes we would consider positive, 5% more expressed uncertainty about what the SU does, with only 1% saying we cared about negative things.

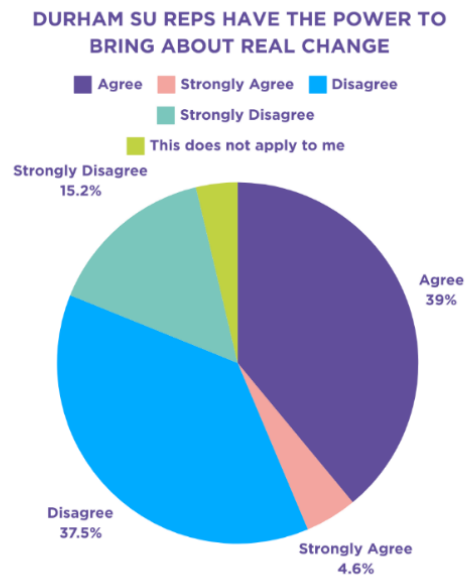
It is positive that respondents saw the largest priority as 'students' alongside several of the key topics we will raise in this report. As shown



throughout this report, including the above, there was much positivity from students about the nature of the SU's work, the power of students within the SU to make change, and the value to them of key areas of the students' unions work – particularly housing and student groups.

However, there is a challenging contradiction to this, and questions that received a less positive response.

- Only 36% of respondents agreed that they find it easy to tell Durham SU what issues are important to them.
- Only 37% of respondents said they had a good understanding of what Durham SU does for students.
- Mirroring our National Student Survey (NSS) Q25 result (representing academic interests) only 43% respondents agreed Durham SU reps have the power to bring about real change.



It is useful to reflect on the connection between 1) respondents' desire for a collective organisation and belief that they can make change, 2) the belief respondents expressed in the SU to do relevant and equality focused work, and 3) lower levels of confidence respondents seem to express in the about the positive outcome of this work both in the NSS and the measure of rep power above. The survey did not explicitly explore the relationship between these.

“To me this suggests that these respondents did either know, or assumed, Durham SU cares about good things. But that perhaps less of them had seen, felt or engaged with direct impacts that they credited to the Students’ Union. When students benefit from things the SU does, like academic policy changes or student groups, they don’t often associate it with ‘the SU’. I think that’s ok. But understanding how students can touch, feel and experience tangible positive outcomes directly from the SU as well is still something student officers need to be focused on in each of your areas of work. Our services, our face-to-face interactions with students, and how these overlap with representation work and campaigning – student leaders can really benefit by using all of these as avenues to engage students in their priority work.”

- Georgina Lambert, Communications and Strategy

Culturally, it is important that students feel respected by the staff at their university. Overall, over 88% of respondents felt respected and accepted by their academics and over 80% felt respected and accepted by other members of staff. These rates were lower for members of specific liberation groups – particularly disabled students. The sample size within our research was not large enough to build a clear picture behind this so it may be a good avenue for you as student leaders to continue to explore.

MY OPINIONS ARE VALUED
BY UNIVERSITY STAFF



IF I HAD AN IDEA FOR
POSITIVE CHANGE THE
UNIVERSITY WOULD
DEAL WITH IT
APPROPRIATELY



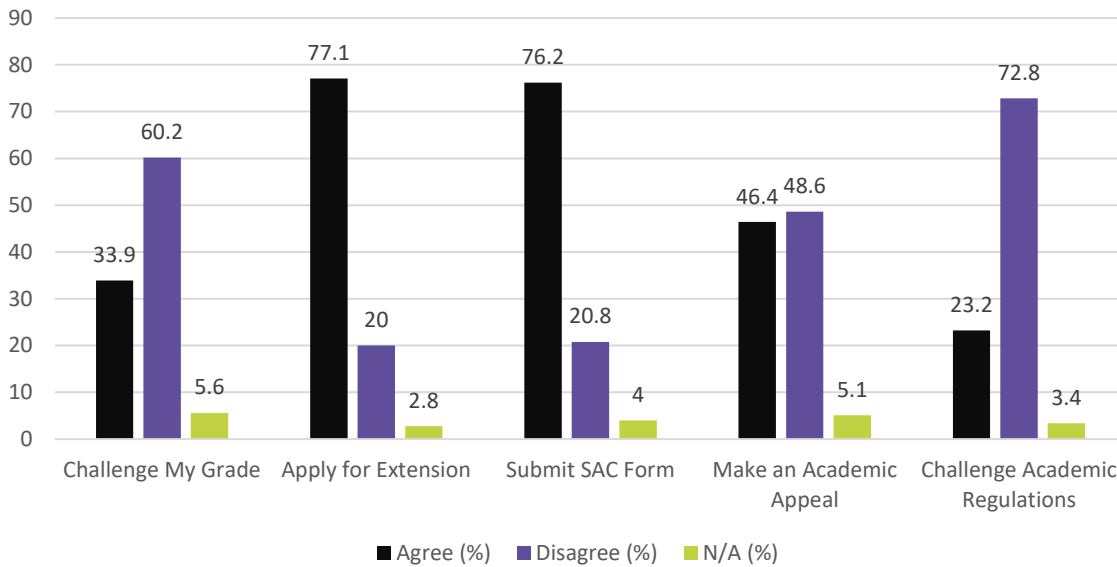
From the insight gained through our research, it is clear that there is a disconnect in terms of academic student voice. 75% of respondents felt that their opinions were valued by staff, and 70% of respondents felt that it was easy for them to feedback about their academic experience. Yet 38% of respondents felt that ideas for positive change would be appropriately dealt with at the University. This survey did not explore *why* students felt that feedback on changes that they would like to see at an academic level would not translate into meaningful progress, despite them feeling that their opinions are respected by staff.

“Students answered differently when asked about staff, rather than about ‘the University’. This indicates a distinction in how the institution is perceived versus teaching staff. I think many students can see certain staff working hard on the ground to improve their experience, but don't feel that way about the institution to the same degree.”

– Olivia Flavell, Education Programme Coordinator

When it comes to accessing support, most respondents felt they could access deadline extensions, if necessary, and that they could submit for Serious Adverse Circumstances Forms if required. Difficulties around support emerged when discussing grades, appeals, and regulations. Less than 35% of respondents felt they could challenge an assessment grade, 45% felt they could make an academic appeal if necessary, and only 22% of respondents felt they could confidently challenge academic regulations.

"Do you feel confident doing the following..."

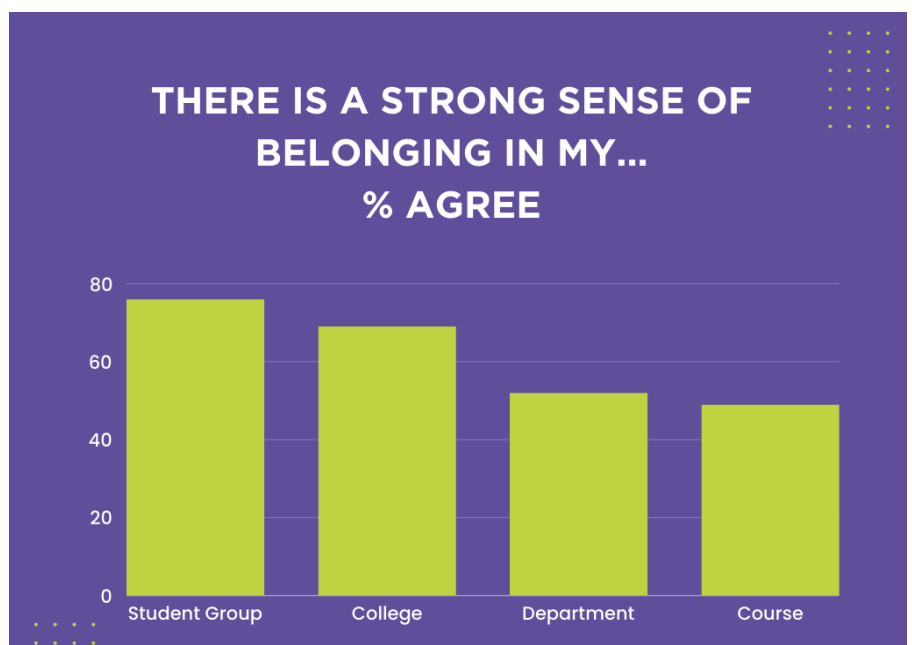


"With a low proportion of students feeling confident in appealing or challenging their grades, it is worth thinking about what might help students feel more able to do so. Potential barriers could be a lack of understanding of their rights and the process, stigma associated with challenging their teachers, or a belief that it is not worth doing so. A greater understanding of these or other barriers would help create a more open system around grading."

- Ellie Scolah. Student Voice Manager

When asked who they would go to for support students overwhelmingly identified their departmental advisor (or other departmental staff) as their first priority, over the ASK Service at Durham SU or College support. We did not ask qualitative questions about support.

While we talk about students' sense of belonging within their student group, a sense of belonging within academic life is equally important. Our survey shows that only around half of students feel there is a strong sense of belonging in their academic spaces. The University asked different questions in its own Wider Student Experience Survey in 2023/24, and while we haven't yet seen this report, we'd expect it



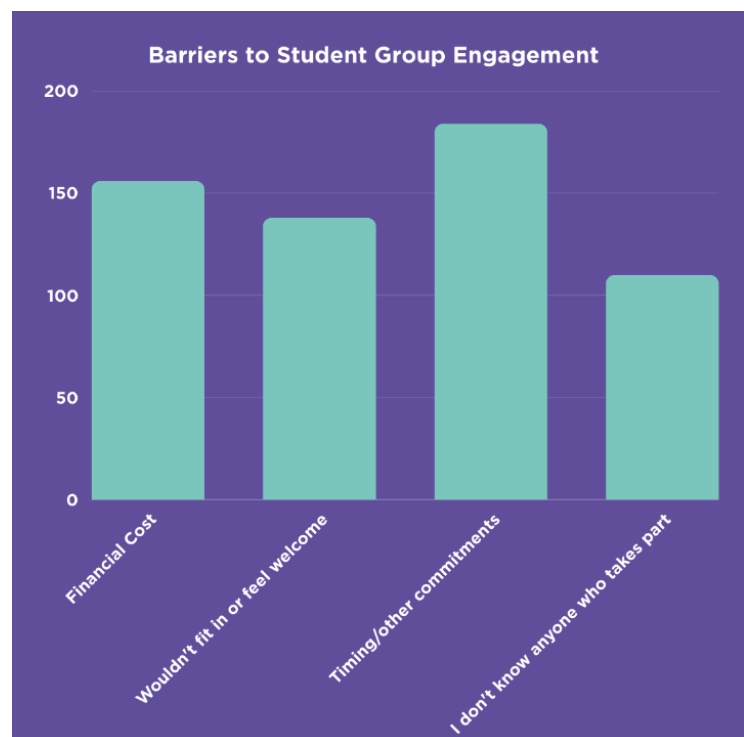
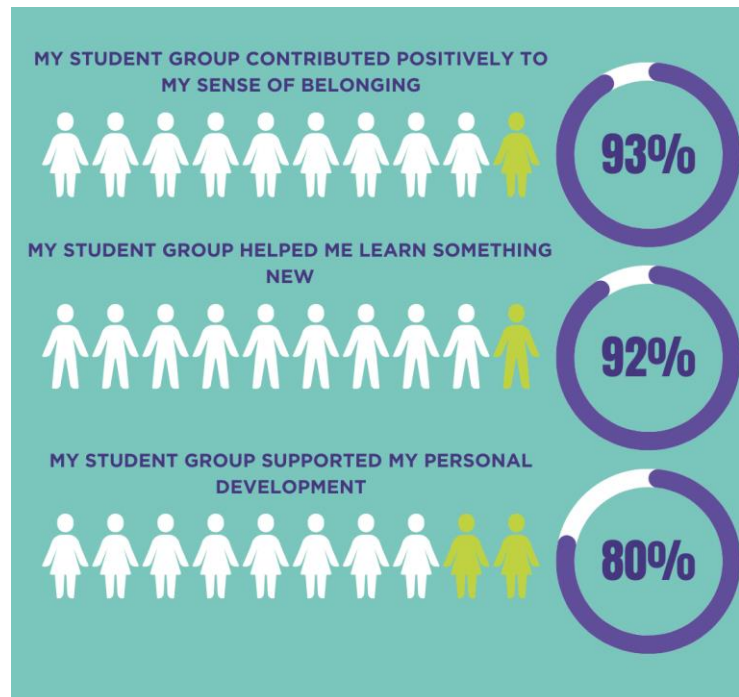
to be a useful for resource for student leaders wanting to understand student belonging in different settings.

BUILDING BELONGING AND STUDENT GROUPS

Feeling a sense of belonging at university is vital. It impacts both academic performance and students' mental health, as found by a collaborative report by Wonkhe and Pearson in 2022¹.

Our research found that 85% of respondents identified a sense of belonging as an important factor in their learning experience. This is important for student leaders, particularly, academic officers, to note, although it will likely not surprise them. There are a number of ways in which students build a sense of belonging during their time at university. Those which are facilitated by different student groups or organisations across campus are the ones where student leaders can most easily and effectively make improvements for students, and there are many of them at Durham!

80% of respondents in our research were involved in student groups across their college, within university, or as part of Durham SU, with SU and college student groups being the most common. Being a part of student groups allows students to develop in a number of ways, and students were



¹ <https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2022/10/Building-Belonging-October-2022.pdf>

consistently positive about the value of their student group involvement.

Student groups provide an avenue for students to meet new people, to experience new things, and to grow and flourish as individuals. There are, however, a number of barriers which stop students from fully engaging in these opportunities.

The cost of transport meant that commuter students, or those in out of college accommodation could not travel to events – especially those which ran later into the evening. Student workers often had to choose working over attending events, as the majority of events occurred outside of core university hours. In terms of sports clubs, the hidden costs of kits, uniforms, or equipment was a barrier for participation.

“It’s really interesting to see that practical barriers to getting involved with student groups, such as cost and student free time, are nearly matched by social barriers – concerns about fitting in, and unwillingness to join without a friend. We know that among groups there is some really good practice at helping overcome these barriers – we see this in the groups that succeed. They’re the ones that prioritise socials and relaxed spaces for people to meet, act as welcoming and inclusive hosts who strike up conversations with new members and introduce them to others and/or engage with our Give It A Go branding / taster sessions to give interested students a chance to trail their activity without pressure. We’re improving our student group grants and pricing advice to student groups, which will hopefully help tackle costs as a barrier – but we also need to support groups in sharing good practice around inclusive activities and hosting.”

– Gemma McClure, ASK Manager

Postgraduate students were less likely to engage with student groups due to a sense that they were not welcome. Mature students also identified that student groups catering towards more sober events would encourage them to engage further. Although not explored in the survey, it would be interesting and easy to test if, when offered an event or group more focused on postgraduates or mature students, these students took up these opportunities at a high rate.

BIG ISSUES THAT HOLD STUDENTS BACK

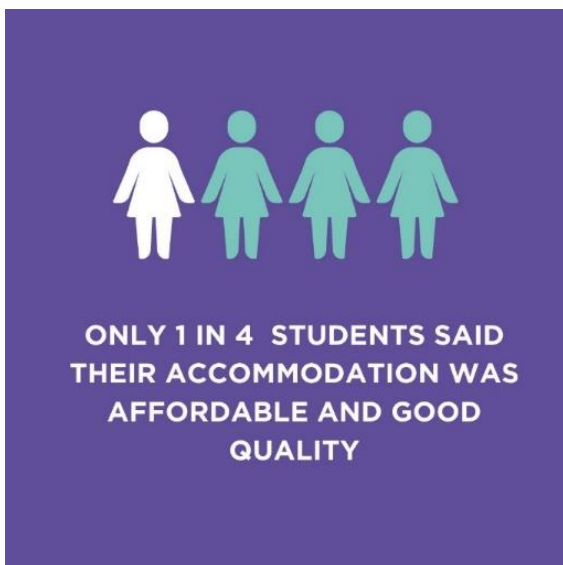
Academic success, by most measures, is high at Durham for most students who get in here when compared to other institutions. However, students often don't feel they're thriving and that's often the space where student officers want to make change. Respondents to our survey said anxiety and stress (85%) and had a significant negative impact on their wellbeing.

Durham SU believes that many students are stressed and anxious with good reason – their homes aren't affordable and good quality, the cost of living and other barriers prevent them fully engaging in student and academic life or they and their peers aren't set up for academic success and community belonging by their induction. Of course, we don't think improving these will "fix" students mental health, or mean University is never hard – but we do think they're making student life harder than it needs to be for many. And these are areas where student leaders have the power to bring about real change, and with that, make a real impact so more students feel they are thriving. Here is what we have learnt from our All Student Survey in these areas.

Quality, Affordable Housing

Housing was identified as the single biggest issue by respondents with over 100 students identifying it as the top priority the Students' Union cares about.

The issues identified tended to be around affordability, quality and the availability of housing. 57% of respondents believed their accommodation was unaffordable. In addition to this, 44% of students felt unconfident in their ability to secure term-time accommodation.



In terms of renting culture, the picture is more positive. Most respondents felt that they had a good relationship with their landlord, that they could raise issues and that they would be dealt with appropriately and timely. As this survey was conducted in first term, it will be interesting to compare these results with the third term housing survey conducted by the SU and Durham University, to see if this is maintained.

Our research did not dive into the lived experiences of BAME students within their accommodation, and should be aware of this as a blind spot. From a surface level, when we look at responses specifically from BAME students, there is no large deviation from their white peers in terms of comments around affordability, availability, or their experiences within accommodation. To build on this and to ensure we are not missing vital experiences, it would be useful to further research how living at university is experienced through the lens of Durham's diverse student community.

Whilst challenges relating to accommodation specifically impacting on international students have been reported nationally, we did not explore this within our survey. Durham SU is undertaking a comprehensive set of work around housing which will investigate how issues around housing may impact different student groups – including if the current international student experience differed from the home student population significantly.

“Student housing in Durham is complex, but student leaders can do achieve improvements here. Getting landlords, agents, Durham County Council and Durham University to come to the table and try things that go beyond sticking plaster solution is a huge challenge for student leaders, and its long-term work. But students have already had successes, and your predecessors have passed onto you a toolkit of tactics – from ways to influence the market, evidence of issues, strong student narrative and policy change proposals. You’re inheriting a strong student campaign.”

– Vicky Bathrelou, Housing Programme Coordinator

Barriers to access and participation

The cost-of-living crisis affects many students both locally and nationally. Our survey identified that, as a barrier, respondents felt this was second only to stress and anxiety. Nationally, the Office for National Statistics² found that **9 in 10** students were worried about their finances and half of students felt they were struggling with financial difficulties. We know financial hardship contributes to stress and anxiety, amplifying the barrier effect.

COST OF LIVING LIMITED
MY EXTRA CURRICULAR
ENGAGEMENT



COST LIVING LIMITED
MY ACADEMIC
ENGAGEMENT



High cost-of-living impacts on student engagement by adding the need to work to supplement income

into the demands on student time. This impacts on both studies and extra-curriculars. Our research found that 46% of respondents worked part-time during term-time, on average working 12 hours a week – with more extreme cases working well over the full time equivalent of 35 hours a week.

“Students working alongside their degree is not a new phenomenon. It is, however, becoming more prevalent and risks being normalised or accepted as an expectation of student life. If we’re serious about breaking down barriers to access and participation that students face, we need to understand the nature of those barriers and challenge that harmful narrative of normalisation. This means understanding how part-time work affects other aspects of students’ lives in order to establish ways of mitigating the need for, and impact of, part-time work.”

– Dan Lonsdale, Durham SU President 2023-2025



Hidden expenses also posed an issue for students, causing them to not be able to fully engage in their curriculum but also in extra-curricular groups and activities. Mature students and commuter students were especially impacted by the hidden cost of transportation. In terms of academic

² Johnson C. and Westwood A. (2023) *Cost of living and higher education students, England: 30 January to 13 February 2023*, Office for National Statistics

experience, first-in-family respondents highlighted how the cost of field work meant they were unable to fully experience what their course had to offer.

The rising cost of everything surrounding student life put many students into a challenging position of being unable to afford housing and food without working a part-time job. When considering the average maintenance loan, and the average cost of PBSA, students are left with a deficit of over £400 in their budget before any other expenses are considered.

Beyond this, research by the National Union of Students³ found nationally that a third of students are living on less than £50 a month.

Specific cases of how this impacts student's academic life form in Durham's survey responses included:

- Having to get a part-time job which reduces hours available to attend lectures.
- Costs of textbooks impact on learning, in particular for disabled students.
- Cost of fieldwork meaning poorer students losing out on opportunities.
- Cost of travel to campus meaning respondents skipping classes.
- Inability to give up time for free – such as unpaid internships or research opportunities.
- Digital poverty – unable to afford suitable technology to study from home.
- Hunger is a distraction to studying due to inability to afford multiple meals a day.

Our research did not touch on the quality of teaching and learning, as well as on how factors such as EDI and sustainability act as barriers to academic success. However, these have repeatedly come up as priority issues for students to gaining a holistic understanding of how these form part of the curriculum would be good avenue for further insights.

Induction

Induction is the first experience of University for all students; however, every student has their own unique experience of induction. Induction serves multiple purposes: it allows students to meet each other; it gives students the opportunity to learn about the University, Colleges and the Students' Union; it gives students the chance to find groups and clubs which might interest them, and to make friends; and it allows students to gain a better understanding of their academic programme and how

³ https://www.nus.org.uk/cost_of_living_rise_sees_96_of_students_cutting_back

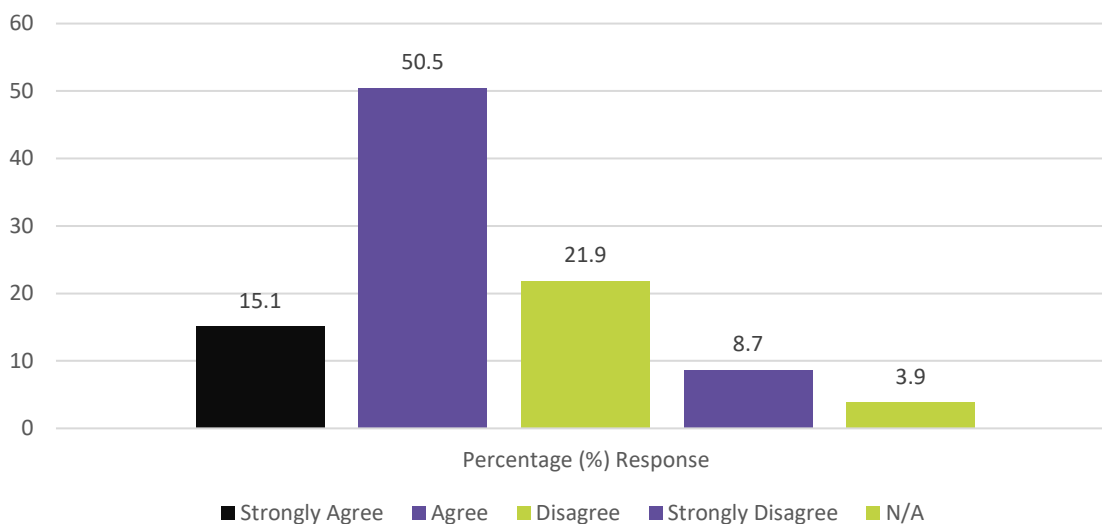
studying and learning will work. These experiences shape their understanding of what it is to be a member of the Durham University community – what’s acceptable, what’s expected how they can contribute, and how they’ll be supported. In this research we we’re interested to see how many students felt their induction had done all of these things well.

Only 20% of respondents agreed that their induction helped them do ALL of the below:

- Feel comfortable at Durham – 65%
- Have fun – 65%
- Prepared them to be a citizen – 57%
- Prepared them as a learner – 44%

It is clear from our insights that induction allows students to have enjoyable experiences and discover new things, as 65% of respondents said induction helped them to have fun. The same percentage of respondents also said that their induction helped them to feel more comfortable at Durham.

"My induction to Durham helped me to be more comfortable"



Induction at an academic level however does not seem to serve students in the same way. 44% of respondents disagreed that their induction helped to prepare them as a learner. Our insights did not explore in depth why this was the case, but Durham SU’s 2024 Orientation and Induction Report⁴ offers relevant qualitative insight. Free text responses within our survey included suggestions that

⁴ <https://www.durhamsu.com/resources/student-induction-and-orientation-report-2024>

induction could better prepare students through teaching core skills from academic writing or critical thinking and evaluation as well as more information around support that is available.

The biggest barrier to engaging with induction stems once again from strain on students' time. There were timetabling conflicts across academic activity, college activity, and Students' Union activity with 184 respondents agreeing that "the timetabling of events/activities conflicts with other commitments" with other comments including "I am too busy with my study" or "there is a significant workload combined with large amounts of contact hours". Respondents said that they would like more activities which go beyond what colleges have to offer, to allow them to meet individuals from other colleges. Postgraduate students identified that there was a lack of events which catered for them, and this caused them to be isolated throughout induction.

Respondents also raised how a series of induction-based events across Michaelmas term to ensure that those who are unable to attend induction week can get involved. This is particularly important for international students who may be delayed in attending university for a number of reasons.

"Induction is a crucial process and is not something that can be completed in a week, the responses to the survey show that. When students arrive, they are bombarded with so much information and it can feel overwhelming. We need induction to be longer and less intense to really give students this adjustment period whilst ensuring they feel adequately prepared. How would this look? And is it something the University will really commit to? The pilot this year will test this, led by student officers and student-staff, partnering with an academic department."

– Olivia Flavell, Education Programme Coordinator