

**Council**
**03 March 2020**
**Sponsor:** Kate McIntosh

**Author:** Kate McIntosh

**Durham Students' Union Report**
**Proposed Resolution**

Council is asked to note the contents of this report.

<b>Communication Status: Paper</b>	Open		Open Internal	x	Confidential Restricted/External	
<b>Communication Status: Appendices</b>	Open		Open Internal		Confidential Restricted/External	
<b>Freedom of Information Exemption</b>	Paper:					
	Appendices:					

**Previous Consideration by this or other Committee**

N/A

**Further Committee approval required**

N/A

**Appendices**

None

**1. Executive Summary**

1.1 The Durham SU President's report provides Council with insight into

1.1.1 Significant local matters of student interest.

1.1.2 National matters of student interest.

1.1.3 Durham SU developments.

**2. Priorities for Durham students**
**Decolonising the curriculum**

2.1 Council will be aware that [decolonising the curriculum](#) is a priority of current SU Undergraduate Academic Officer, Sam Johnson-Audini. At its last meeting SU Assembly, the highest student democratic body in Durham, voted to adopt a [Core Position on Decolonising the Curriculum](#). This project is expansive, and the work of decolonising is necessarily introspective, challenging and thorough.

2.2 As the University community responds to the findings of the Respect Commission, which emphasises the need for further work beyond the stated recommendations, the ongoing process of decolonisation must form an integral part of how we address the experiences of racism identified by the Commission. The Core Position states that 'What we learn is inherently



political. From what we are taught to how we are taught, certain values and voices are prioritised, and others marginalised. Decolonisation centres the impact of colonialism, both historic and ongoing, in how we understand the world in which we live and the information that we teach.' The culture described in the Report includes BAME students and staff feeling 'unrepresented and isolated', with 'micro-aggressions by non-BAME peers are also seen to contribute to, in places, a culture of fear'. Behaviours identified include 'mocking international accents and names, presuming BAME staff are assistants, and making underhanded comments.'

- 2.3 Universities propagate a common understanding of what constitutes knowledge, and who has power. We cannot 'do' culture change unless we challenge the underlying assumptions that govern our curriculum. Fundamentally however, this work is about the material experiences of people of colour in our community. Decolonisation at Durham cannot be a box-ticking exercise, or a sub-project of any wider strategy. Decolonising the curriculum is ultimately an existential challenge, and there is a clear moral imperative to rise to that challenge.
- 2.4 The SU Core Position expects the University to review the material we teach, and how we teach it, in line with an understanding of the colonial power dynamics. Decolonisation cannot be a sub-heading under a broader review process. Staff and students of colour who participate and lead this work should be treated as fully equal partners, paid for their labour, with staff actively recruited to support this process. This work is a necessity; not a branding tool, not a small-scale project, and not to be co-opted by an institution unwilling to engage with its own colonial past and that legacy for people of colour today. In accepting the necessity of this work, Council can take decisive action to ensure the challenge of decolonising is met and engaged with appropriately.

### 3. Strategic student sector developments

#### UCU industrial action

- 3.1 Durham SU continues to work closely with the Executive to mitigate the impacts of industrial action by UCU on student education and experience. The timing of industrial action – closer to many students' examinations and assessment deadlines – is a source of extreme stress and disruption. Students expect the University to recognise and minimise the damage caused to students.
- 3.2 As the union of all Durham students, [we are working to support students through the period of disruption](#), particularly equipping student leaders to share clear information and signpost students to relevant sources of information and guidance. Moreover, Durham SU Officers have worked closely with the UCU to enable students to meaningfully engage in the context of strike action.

### 4. Durham SU developments

#### Common room support

- 4.1 Durham SU continues work to support and strengthen common rooms, and has designated funding for a Volunteer Development Coordinator who is leading much of this ongoing work. Durham SU now offers Campaigns and Collaboration grants to Common Rooms, to support college or cross-campaign projects and events. We have also launched social and professional networking events to strengthen networks of Common Room leaders, as well as initiating and supporting the creation of development and strategy plans by Common Room Presidents to improve goal-setting and institutional memory in Common Rooms. Excitingly, Durham SU will also run and host the first ever Common Room Awards Night this summer, which will recognise the huge significance of Common Room activity and volunteers to the student experience in Durham.

- 4.2 This work builds on the two residential programmes that student leaders have created for themselves, focussing on sabbatical Common Room Presidents as lead representatives, and Common Room Welfare Officers as campaigners and peer leaders. Durham SU will host the third year of these events in 2020.
- 4.3 Durham SU understands this work as complementary to the work of the Colleges and Student Experience division, and not a competitive move. This is student-led activity, defined and run on terms that students have agreed between themselves. The University induction offer rightly focusses on professional and delivery aspects of these student leaders' roles, where they are also University employees (in DSO Common Rooms). It hasn't and shouldn't focus on their development as representatives and campaigners. The University is the body that students are giving representations to and campaign at – the conflict of interest is clear. The students' union is the correct place to provide this leadership support.
- 4.4 The years of benign neglect in the collective effectiveness of Common Rooms has been discussed at Council recently, with a presentation from student leaders providing the truth of their reality. As much as individual Colleges has cared for their own Common Rooms, no strategic leadership has focussed on mutual support for these student leaders, in increasingly challenging circumstances. Durham SU has offered leadership in this space, but is unclear of the extent to which Council and the Executive supports these efforts, or indeed has any other plans. It is clear however that Common Rooms would welcome clarity on the extent to which Council and the Executive are supportive of this development activity, or have any alternative proposals to support the representative side of Common Rooms (mindful that the DSO framework, existing or revised, is a regulatory framework and not a development model).

### **Durham's Got Talent**

- 4.5 Durham SU is running Durham's first 'Durham's Got Talent' event on Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> March. Ten acts will compete to win the talent competition, and showcase the very best of Durham's student talent. Audience members will determine the winner of a cash prize. Council members would be more than welcome at [the event](#).