

Council
21 May 2019
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Durham SU Report
Proposed Resolution

Council is asked to note the contents of this report.

Communication Status: Paper	Open	X	Open Internal		Confidential Restricted/External	
Communication Status: Appendices	Open		Open Internal		Confidential Restricted/External	
Freedom of Information Exemption	Paper:					
	Appendices:					

Previous Consideration by this or other Committee

N/A

Further Committee approval required

N/A

Appendices

None

1. Executive Summary

1.1 As the President of Durham SU, I present this report, which addresses:

- Priorities for Durham students.
- Strategic student sector development, for Council's consideration.
- Developments within Durham SU.

2. Priorities for Durham students

2.1 University Growth

Throughout this year, Students' Union Officers have heard a significant and growing number of concerns from students, and student leaders, regarding the University's planned growth in student numbers. Whilst often expressed as opposition to the University strategy as a whole, these concerns are clearly centred on increasing student numbers and the potential and perceived consequences of this. Regular concerns raised relate to access to study space, access to support services such as counselling, pressure on the local housing market and pressure on local services such as NHS providers. Whilst the University may wish to dispute whether all these consequences are or will become a reality, the concerns being expressed by the student body are both genuine and legitimate.

I'm pleased that the Vice Chancellor has agreed to attend a Town Hall meeting on 14th June, coordinated with assistance from Durham SU, to answer questions from students on this

issue. I hope that the event will provide an excellent forum to discuss concerns from the student body and a strong basis from which to conduct further conversations and follow-up with actions as necessary. I will report back to the next Council meeting regarding the key outcomes of this event.

2.2 Access & Participation Plan

Durham SU Officers have recently been engaged with the University regarding its Access & Participation Plan, which was presented to University Senate and will also be discussed at Council. Whilst at the time of writing we are unable to comment on any revisions that may have been made to the Plan following feedback from Senate, after a number of conversations with those leading this work, we would like to share our thoughts at present.

We have advocated strongly for the University to prioritise in its plan improving access and participation, as well as ultimately attainment, among a) Students from the local area who are also from Low-Participation Neighbourhoods (LPN) and b) Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students. We are pleased that following initial conversations the plan includes many promising aspects in relation to LPN students from the local area. However, there is less present in the plan that indicates a similar level of commitment to increasing the intake and achievement of BME students. Although we acknowledge that the Office for Students (OfS) is primarily focused on the gap in recruitment between POLAR 1 and 5 students, rather than BME students, we would still hope that the University is willing to display greater leadership in this area.

Furthermore, we have some concerns that despite this plan representing a positive step forward, the proposed actions are still not sufficient to meet the fundamental challenges faced by Durham. Notwithstanding revisions, the numbers of students the University is proposing to recruit from LPN backgrounds would still cause the University to fall short of the targets being demanded by the OfS, with the University appearing to choose to rely on an ability to negotiate leniency with the regulator. This presents a significant risk which Council should consider, given the powers of the OfS to impose specific conditions of registration on institutions, such as limiting their ability to charge tuition fees above £6,000. As well as any potential action from the OfS presenting both a financial and reputational risk to the University, we are concerned that by not showing greater ambition with this plan the University could be missing a vital opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to access & participation and to display moral leadership in this area.

2.3 Diversity in University Leadership

Council will remember that last year, the Durham SU President presented a report to Council expressing concern regarding the treatment of women student leaders within the University and the lack of women represented in senior positions. The report received widespread support from Council, with a clear request that the University Executive take urgent action on this issue. Whilst the Executive has given welcome assurances of its commitment to tackling this problem and has initiated important projects such as the University's Respect Commission, evidence of progress in this area has been lacking, with the number of women permanently on the University Executive Committee halving in the time since the report was presented. Durham University employs 235 men who it pays over £60,000. But it only employs 60 women in that same pay bracket. According to recently released HESA data, only Imperial College London has a bigger gap in this leadership pay bracket.

We hope that the University will soon be able to demonstrate more concrete improvement on this issue, and we would also ask Council to consider its own role in moving forward this agenda. Council plays a significant role not just in the recruitment of its own members, but in recruitment to senior positions within the University. It would appear that the University's recruitment practices for these positions, are at present, not delivering the desired results.

and this may be an appropriate time for Council to consider asking for these practices to be reviewed with the aim of ensuring that future recruitment processes deliver the more diverse and representative University leadership that Durham University needs.

2.4 Student Housing

At Durham SU we have highlighted issues around student housing as a key priority for Durham students. This year, our Welfare & Liberation Officer has been researching students' experiences of housing in Durham so that we can build a collective vision of how we can tackle problems in the private rental sector.

Following our housing survey, we have published a [short report](#) which presents the headline results and recommendations for further work in this area. Housing will also form a key strand of Durham SU's community strategy, which is currently being developed through conversations with stakeholders across the University and wider community. Improving the quality and value of private rented sector accommodation for students has been identified as a shared priority for both Durham SU and the University and we hope to be able to work in partnership to be able to continue to work together to ensure that all Durham students are able to live in a good home.

3. Strategic student sector development

3.1 National Union of Students (NUS)

NUS National Conference took place in Glasgow from 9-11 April, with the SU President leading a delegation including a further five delegates representing Durham SU. As well as electing NUS' leadership for the next year, Conference considered a series of reforms proposals intended to secure the future of NUS.

I am pleased to report that following a number of amendments, a reform proposal was passed, with an overwhelming majority of conference delegates voting in favour. We are confident that the proposals will secure NUS' financial position, whilst also ensuring the representation of the most marginalised students and giving member Students' Unions a greater say in NUS' corporate functions. Council members may wish to read this [article](#) from the SU President reflecting on the Conference.

3.2 NUS-UUK Black Attainment Gap Report

On Thursday 2nd May, NUS and Universities UK released their [report](#) on the BAME attainment gap. The report makes a number of key recommendations, making clear the importance of strong leadership from the top of institutions, the need for open and transparent conversations about race and the need for a radical plan for racially diverse and inclusive environments, including changes to the staff profile and decolonising the curriculum.

Durham SU are very pleased to note that the Vice-Chancellor has joined other VCs across the country in signing up to the recommendations of the report and we hope that the necessary resources will be made available to ensure that these commitments can be fulfilled. Enhancing BAME recruitment and attainment will be key to Durham efforts' around access & participation, and we hope to be able to work in partnership with the University on this, particularly in light of the ongoing Curriculum reform project.

4. Developments within Durham SU

4.1 Quality Students' Unions

As previously reported to Council, Durham has undertaken the Quality Students' Unions accreditation programme, which was developed by NUS with funding from HEFCE, and is endorsed by the Committee of University Chairs, Universities UK, Guild HE, and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. Durham SU has been assessed against the model (www.qualitystudentsunions.org.uk), with reviewers from Sheffield SU and Lancaster SU visiting campus and interviewing University colleagues as well as students and SU colleagues, before submitting a report to an independent verification team. We would like to express our thanks to all those colleagues who took part in the process.

I hope to be able to update Council with the outcome of the assessment, which we are expecting to receive imminently. Durham SU will receive the award at a Parliamentary Reception in June.

4.2 Preparing for next year

Durham SU is beginning to induct new Officers, preparing them to represent the student interest in the Durham SU strategy and University strategy. Officers will meet with UEC and Director colleagues and their teams to better understand how to progress our collective future. The addition of Officers to UEC Boards will be a fantastic opportunity to directly engage with the challenges and opportunities facing the University.

The increased strategic expectations of Officers, as well as other student leaders including College Presidents, will be challenging to meet in the short term. There is a marked risk that the new opportunities will not be taken to their best advantage due to the sudden unplanned increase in workload for Officers, and the complexity of business. Durham SU will prepare a paper for UEC making the case for short term investment to ensure that the new seats at the table are not tokenistic, and student leaders have advice and confidence to engage through professional policy support staff. Durham SU intends to invest its own reserves in a two year common room support programme (pending discussion with the Colleges and Student Experience office).