

Council
26 February 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 Students employed by the University

Durham SU ran an educational campaign on student worker rights during National Student Employment Week between 4 February and 8 February 2019. [Research by Endsleigh](#) showed that 77% of students work during their studies, and at Durham, many of these are employed by the University.

Students have been encouraged by the response from the University, led by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Provost, to the challenge of ensuring that students employed by the University are recognised and treated not just lawfully, but well. The immediate challenge is to actually understand how students are employed – in what roles and on what terms – as many students currently 'volunteering' or 'gaining experience' are actually working for the University, and should be given the rights and payment due to them.

Neither Council or the Executive will be in a position to state anything positive or absolute about the University staff condition until it fully accepts that students that work for the University are employees, just the same as academic or professional service colleagues. The University couldn't operate without their labour and must resolve this matter with urgency. The Executive's response has been positive so far, and Council's continued interest in the matter will ensure a swift and comprehensive resolution.

Students would also like to draw Council's attention to the great work of the Careers and Enterprise Centre which has been a source of real support in helping Durham SU promote our student rights at work campaign. We are both promoting the [National Student Employment Awards](#) – and all Council members are of course encouraged to consider nominating a student, as we are keen to demonstrate the commitment and excellence of Durham students.

2.2 Cost of attendance

The Financial Awards Committee has considered a paper from Durham SU which put forward a model that, in our view, more accurately reflects the cost of attendance at Durham University. It considers not just accommodation, but also course costs, travel, participation in the wider student experience and other costs incurred whilst living and studying in Durham. It was encouraging to see that the University's modelling resulted in a similar figure. Given that there is some consensus on the financial hurdle that students must clear to benefit from a Durham experience, students will expect the University to respond to the challenge and identify where efficiencies can be made, costs can be reduced, and support can be offered. These may all be useful matters for Council to see further detail on as part of the Access and Participation Plan.

There has been universally positive feedback on creative University programmes which have risen to the challenge; the Careers and Enterprise Centre's Student Employability Fund, for example, has provided resource for working class students who need help to purchase a suit, or travel to an interview, or similar barriers to success. Durham SU applauds this innovative thinking about student need.

3. Strategic student sector development

3.1 National Union of Students

Council may wish to note that the National Union of Students has produced a turnaround plan to resolve its governance and financial concerns. The proposal for change is being consulted on more widely before going to National Conference in April and then for final approval at a Company Law Meeting in May. Durham SU has every confidence that the proposals will address the strategic concerns but is concerned that the proposals must protect representation for the least powerful members of the student community.

3.2 Brexit

The student sector is, of course, distressed by the lack of clarity around the UK's exit from the European Union. The developing University Global Strategy is a welcome signal that Durham is an outward looking institution and is a very exciting commitment to being more ambitious in this space. It is, however, more focussed on student recruitment than the experience of students once here. Durham SU's student societies provide friends and family away from home to international students, and their contribution to a more progressive Durham will be important.

Students would welcome a commitment to advice from the University about not only the technical aspects of their time at Durham (fees, Erasmus+ etc) but also the quality of their

experience. Technical concerns can be addressed with advice from many other sources, but there are fears about whether students will be safe and happy, and they are looking to the institution for comfort. Further action in this space would be welcome.

4. Developments within Durham SU

4.1 Quality Students' Unions

The Quality Students' Unions accreditation programme 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 will be assessed against the model in March 2019; Council members can investigate the model further at www.qualitystudentsunions.org.uk. Reviewers from Sheffield SU and Lancaster SU will visit campus and interview University colleagues as well as students and SU colleagues before submitting a report to an independent verification team.

Durham SU's strategy commits the organisation to achieving a 'good' assessment but initial indications support an optimistic 'very good' assessment. This would be a significant achievement from being in turnaround only three years ago. Council will be informed of the result, of course, and Durham SU will receive the award at a Parliamentary Reception in June.

4.2 Durham SU elections

The Durham SU elections will take place between 17 February and 20 February 2019, and students will vote for the next Durham SU Officers and student trustees. A verbal update on winners will be available at the Council meeting.

Students will also vote in a referendum to agree proposed changes to the Durham SU Articles of Association following the review by Council's Governance and Nominations Committee. Again, a report on the outcome of the referendum will be available.

4.3 Common Room support

Durham SU is supporting a number of Common Room leaders who have concerns about the way in which University systems development has excluded their concerns and limited the success of their operations. Examples such as changes to invoice arrangements, data management, or wellbeing and support of employed JCR Presidents, all have rational bases but have been implemented by University managers with no consultation, or regard for then helping Common Rooms work through the regulatory requirements: the attitude has largely been 'there is no alternative and you will have to cope and we are not the right people to help because we are enforcers of rules not supporters of students'. A number of Common Room leaders are, for example, considering refusing to arrange and manage volunteers for open days; this would devastate the recruitment and induction exercises which the University relies on unpaid labour to make successful.

The Durham Student Organisation governance consultation may allow space for a number of grievances to be aired but is not the right vehicle for improvement of management systems. Council's attention is drawn to an area of emerging risk which the University appears to have little capacity to address at the present time.