

Council
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Durham Students' Union: President's 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 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

2.1 Online education

Council will be aware of the considerable effort required from staff across the institution to deliver online teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. A major concern of Durham students at this time has been the continuity, credibility and accessibility of their educational experience. Durham SU Officers have been integral to the development of policies relating to online education, working collaboratively with the Executive to ensure that every student's educational experience is protected. This includes developing a scheme to ensure students are supported by the University to purchase equipment necessary to complete learning and assessment from home, and securing a commitment to waive fees for postgraduate research students who are forced to extend their studies.

It is the view of Durham SU that the time, resources and expertise invested in online education should not be lost when we return to business as usual. There are clear advantages of including a diversity of learning and teaching methods within a world class educational experience, especially for disabled students, student carers and students who work. Moreover, we know that students in their generality benefit from the introduction of some forms of online learning.

Durham is already on a path to implementing new learning and teaching methods, and an evaluation of the success and durability of online teaching should inform future plans. Students and staff should be part of this evaluation to ensure that changes do not jeopardise the integrity of the teaching and learning experience. Importantly, we believe it is imperative that Council also has a view about how the quality of a Durham education be ensured in the future, as we adapt to difficult circumstances, without undermining academic communities, student experience, or diversity in the curriculum.

Our approach throughout this process has been to prioritise students' access to resources, to ensure that new assessments do not place any students at a disadvantage. As well as successfully lobbying for the scheme to provide students with funds to buy laptops to complete exams to be extended, we continue to work towards ensuring the University's hardship fund is set up for these unique circumstances, prioritising speed and ease of access. This work is evidence that including student representatives in a collaborative decision making process is a substantial advantage in shaping the University's educational offer.

2.2 Assessment delivery

Along with the delivery of teaching, all remaining assessments have been moved online for 2019/20. In responding to these changes, Durham SU's work focussed on refining and adapting the mechanisms for online assessment to be held, and on ensuring that the impacts of Covid-19 and government regulations on student performance are effectively and fairly mitigated.

Working within the Covid-19 Education sub-group, the SU Academic Officers Sam and David have shaped a hugely impactful mitigation for students, in the form of the 'no-detriment' assessment policy. Durham SU believes that the policy, which will apply to all assessments affected by Covid-19, is fair and effective. You can see Undergraduate Academic Officer Sam Johnson-Audini explaining the policy to students in under a minute [here](#). The decision to adopt this policy mirrors equivalent or similar policies adopted elsewhere, including at [Bristol](#), [Exeter](#), [Edinburgh](#), and [Cambridge](#).

2.3 Student housing

Following the decision to move all teaching and assessment online, the majority of students moved out of Durham indefinitely. Many of the students who remain in Durham City are living in Purpose Built Accommodation (PSBA) blocks which have been forced to end many of the extra services they offer to tenants, who in turn pay a higher than average fee.

The circumstances around Covid-19 have particular implications for students' financial security. Students are more likely than other demographics to be precarious work, and on zero-hours contracts. [Durham students are more reliant on funding from their families than the national average](#). The culmination of these factors is that students are at risk of being exploited by landlords and letting agents, trapped in tenancy agreements and rent plans they cannot leave whilst they do not occupy their rooms. Many who rely on wages to pay rent are unable to work, as well as being reliant on family members who may also have a reduced income.

Durham SU welcomes the University's decision to waive third term tuition fees for students who vacated their rooms in College, and welcomes further work on fee reductions for students

who continue to live in college with reduced services. Unite Students have also announced a similar policy.

The SU President, alongside Mary Foy MP, [recently wrote to PBSAs in Durham City](#) requesting that they allow students who have vacated their rooms to end their tenancy agreement and rent payments for the remainder of the year. At the time of writing multiple providers have replied positively, and with continued success this work represents a huge cumulative saving and improved financial security for students.

In addition to this work, Durham SU has launched [the Student-Landlord Pledge](#), which encourages letting agents and landlords to commit to fair, decent treatment of tenants throughout this crisis. Working with student leaders across student groups and Common Rooms we are promoting the scheme and publicising those who sign up, to put pressure on those who don't to adhere to the expectations. Given the size of Durham, students collectively have the power to incentivise landlords and letting agents to treat tenants with compassion and flexibility throughout the crisis.

2.4 Student representation

Student representatives have now been invited to sit on the Covid-19 planning group and associated sub-groups. Durham SU, as the umbrella organisation for student representation in Durham, is successfully supporting students to sit on the Education, Wider Student Experience and Colleges, and Planning groups.

Student representatives should be an integral part of decision-making, especially in times of crisis. Students are now working within these groups, but early decisions in the response to Covid-19 shut student representatives out. This is an inevitable effect of corporate governance where students are always the last addition to a group or committee, and student consultation is about communicating information and little else. Durham SU Officers and other student representatives supported by Durham SU have made significant, impactful contributions to Durham's response to Covid-19 and it is a shame that they were not able to start this work earlier.

3. Strategic student sector developments

3.1 National Union of Students conference

Durham SU delegates recently attended the first ever digital NUS National Conference. In the current context, and at the end of a transition year designed to ensure NUS's future financial sustainability, this conference was an exceptional one. Durham SU's motion on healthcare parity for students was voted into the top eight proposals to national conference by delegates from across the UK and subsequently passed into national policy. Durham SU also proposed a successful amendment to the NUS priority policy, on postgraduate education.

4. Durham SU developments

4.1 Covid-19 six month strategy

As well as coordinating the immediate response to the University's decisions surrounding Covid-19, Durham SU has been preparing for the next six months, to ensure that the mission of Durham SU is applicable and achievable within this new context.

Exceptional circumstances require a revision of the Annual Plan to end of year 2019/2020. The Durham SU Board has met and agreed new objectives for the rest of the academic year, to give Durham SU the best chance of being the champion of every Durham student.

Durham SU plans to reach the year-end with confident student leadership in place, without financial remodelling despite significant disruption to the business and democratic model of Durham SU. We will secure for students the conditions and resources required to complete the 2019/20 academic year to the best of their ability. We will champion students' rights as tenants, and we will pursue good student welfare. We will also prepare and safeguard student organisations, including Durham SU student groups, and Durham Student Organisations, for the next six months, and plan ahead for 2020/21 induction.

4.2 Durham SU organisational sustainability

The Durham SU Chief Executive has been in communication with the Chief Financial Officer to confirm that the Durham SU trustees have considered the organisation's sustainability in some depth, and are of the view that the financial health of the Students' Union is sound and able to withstand medium-term disruption without any immediate support from the University. The good choices made in recent years have ensured that Durham SU has appropriate cash reserves, and can take responsibility for its own management of its sustainability.

4.3 Advocacy

Durham SU anticipated, and has seen, significant increase in demand for its independent, confidential, advice service. Strategic investment in this service before lockdown has ensured that students receive the support they need. As of 17th April, 339 students have been supported by the SU Advice Service in this academic year, with a 100 per cent increase in March compared to March last year.

At this time, much of the demand has been in housing rights advice, as students seek to understand the legal situation with their landlords. The sector would anticipate this demand shifting to academic and consumer advice in the coming weeks as students seek to ensure that their academic and contractual rights are respected by the University.

4.4 Student communities support

Durham SU's hundreds of students groups are currently being supported to overcome disruption, adapt their usual democratic processes, and reframe their community-based activity so that it can continue and thrive online. Common Rooms continue to be supported by Durham SU, through the work of the Volunteer Development Coordinator, and through collaborative work on the development of Wider Student Experience online. Durham SU has also championed local volunteering initiatives, begun work on keeping international student communities connected, and provided support and guidance to student leaders in this area. If Durham's world-education is matched by world-class Wider Student Experience, then Council could have a view as to how student communities as an asset to the University ought to be protected and developed throughout this period.

4.5 Staff satisfaction

Durham SU was very proud to record sector leading staff engagement for the second year in a row; 90% of staff (including career staff team and student staff team) would recommend Durham SU as a good place to work. This is testament to the hard work of many years of Officers and staff, and positions the students' union as an employer of choice in the University community and region.

4.6 Durham SU elections

The Durham SU elections were held in February 2020. Council will want to know that the successful candidates were President Seun Twins, Undergraduate Academic Officer Nailah Haque, Postgraduate Academic Officer Sarah McAllister, Welfare and Liberation Officer Ewan Swift, and Opportunities Officer Anna Marshall.

There has been considerable comment about controversial regulatory decisions relating to the election, as the Returning Officer withdrew a candidate who is not a natural person (RON), which had a campaign platform highly critical of Durham SU, due to a breach of the campaign rules.

Complaints made by students have been considered by the Durham SU supervising trustee, acting on behalf of Council under the Durham SU Statutory Complaints Procedure, and she has confirmed that all decisions were made properly, and confidence can be placed in the actions of the elections officials. She was clear that popular campaigns are still subject to the rules, and a breach of the rules was properly investigated and an appropriate sanction made. Further, the Chief Executive has asked the University Secretary to use her powers under the Code of Practice to review Durham SU's effective democratic practices and she has agreed to do so.

The Officers-elect are, unfortunately, now being subjected to sustained, racist, online bullying. Student leaders who have no regulatory way to reverse their election are attempting to achieve their campaign goals whilst experiencing horrific personal attacks. These attacks are hosted on public online platforms informally associated with the University. Durham SU is working with the University to make clear the responsibilities that students have to each other and to institutional behaviour policies, and also with the University to make clear its responsibilities to enforce these policies without hesitation or fear.

A statement about online conduct within the DU community has been sent to all students from Jeremy Cook (Pro-Vice-Chancellor Colleges & Student Experience), Kate McIntosh (President, Durham Students' Union) and Caragh Evans (Chair, Junior Common Room Presidents' Committee) <https://www.dur.ac.uk/notices/onlineconduct/>