

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 Durham's response to Black Lives Matter

The murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, and the resulting increase in Black Lives Matter protests across the world, has caused many of us to critically engage with our own power, our own institutions, and the ways in which anti-black racism persists. Students and staff at Durham University are increasingly expecting action from the institution, and it is right that we act.

[Durham SU is committed to being actively anti-racist](#), and making this the case in the University too. We should not shy away from the scale and persistence of the problem, but we should also not pretend that taking the first step is hard. Students of colour at Durham have been speaking for years about their experiences here, identifying the problems and pointing to

solutions. The institution may have been listening, but it has not been acting on what it hears from these students. We could have an inquiry or a survey, or we could act on what we have already been told about why and how racism persists at Durham University.

Crucial to becoming an anti-racist university is the process of decolonisation. Council will know that Durham SU Undergraduate Academic Officer, Sam Johnson-Audini has been leading this work, recently launching the Decolonise Durham Network (see 4.1). Related to this, we need to consider our institutional tolerance for racist behaviours, and whether current policies support a culture where racists are removed, not allowed to hide, and where staff and students of colour feel safe and confident to speak about their experiences.

We know that racism, particularly anti-black racism, is a systemic problem that does not end with Durham. [In UK universities, around one quarter of students from ethnic minority backgrounds have experienced racial harassment, rising to 29 per cent for black students.](#) However, we should also be mindful of the conditions specific to Durham that enable racist behaviours and stall attempts to end racism. Tradition is vital to Durham, but who has the power to revise those traditions when students of colour tell us they are discriminatory or alienating? Collegiately and community are fundamental to Durham, but what happens when racism and racists are allowed to hide, protected by their small communities? Academic rigour and debate are central to a Durham education, but are we confident enough to draw the line between what is up for debate, and what is not? And ultimately, who do we believe is responsible for making the necessary changes?

Student concerns will not go away until racism in Durham is tackled with definite action. In recent months, and preceding the increase in Black Lives Matter protests, students of colour have been talking publicly about their experiences of racism in Durham. This is partly in response to the torrent of abuse directed at SU President-Elect Seun Twins, who will soon take office and become the first black women President of Durham SU. As ever, Durham SU is ready to work with University to tackle racism, remembering that, whilst students and staff of colour should be centred in this work, this is not a substitute for a structured, clear plan to tackle racism from the top of institution.

2.2 Protecting student interests after Covid-19

Durham SU Assembly recently passed a [Core Position](#) on student interests and Covid-19, which sets out student priorities in relation to the immediate crisis and Durham's longer-term response. As the University amends budgets to safeguard future financial sustainability, it is imperative that student interests are high on the agenda. Students are experiencing financial hardship more severely than before, and facing more strained contractual relationships with their landlords, employers, and the University. Students also need teaching quality to be prioritised, which necessarily requires investment of time and resources to ensure that teaching staff are able to deliver quality education to students, whether they are in person, socially distanced, or online. Moreover, students need the institution to take forward lessons learnt during the crisis, particularly in relation to online education and assessment.

Durham SU hopes that student priorities will shape the way the University responds in the long term to Covid-19. The Core Position states 'Students MUST hold power in decisions made by the University – not just the decisions that directly affect students, but the processes and mechanisms that shape the character and values of the institution. This has never been more true than in a time of crisis.' Does Council believe that the culture of the University currently is one where student interests can be 'prioritised, protected, and championed'?

2.3 Expectations of online education

Durham SU Officers have worked collaboratively with the Executive to find good solutions to the problems presented by teaching in Michaelmas term if, as we expect, some restrictions

remain in place. We held a series of focus groups with elected student academic representatives to draw up principles for teaching and learning that offer the best solutions for all students. These principles were then [communicated to all Durham students](#), who were asked by Durham SU to offer their feedback, ideas and concerns.

It is clear that the student priority is for the quality of academic experience to be protected. This entails no reduction in taught material, maximisation of face-to face learning when in small groups, and the ability for students to choose if they access teaching online or in person, excepting that all large group teaching will happen exclusively online due to space considerations. A clear majority of students oppose extending the teaching day to 8pm, with many also concerned about teaching until 7pm.

Another clear worry for students is the impact that the shape and character of teaching delivery next year will have on their day-to-day lives; their time in the library, their walks home on dark evenings, their ability to do paid evening work and access Wider Student Experience, and their relationships with academic staff. These considerations showcase the strength and value of collaborative, deliberative decision-making where students have power to shape the end results. This type of decision-making should be used as a model moving forward, with the University's support and resources behind it, because the University has a responsibility to ensure students are consulted effectively.

2.4 Responsibility for student safety

Council will be aware that a considerable amount of time and energy has gone into preparations to ensure that all members of the University community are as safe as possible in the coming months. Durham SU Officers have been part of some of these conversations, and we are pleased that steps have been taken to minimise the risk to students in University spaces.

Council will also be aware that Universities like Durham face a specific challenge when it comes to ensuring student safety during Covid-19. We are a small city, with a high proportion of students living in houses of multiple occupancy. Durham SU is concerned that the University does not have a clear understanding of its responsibility for student safety off campus, or whether it has a responsibility at all. It is undeniable that most of the safety-related conversations Durham SU Officers have access to revolve around staff, with students sometimes featuring as an after-thought, or even as a potential risk to the safety of staff to other residents of Durham City.

Students want to live in a city that is safe, and where non-student residents and students alike are able to feel confident that their community is cohesive and respectful. Durham SU believes that this is also what the University, and non-student residents want. This remains true during the current health crisis, so it is disappointing that the approach of the University so far has been to treat students more like children than as members of a community of adults. The safety of all in our community should be a priority, but we do not need to undermine the rights and wellbeing of students to achieve this.

The University seems unclear on its responsibility to intervene in circumstances where student health may be at risk because of actions in private homes, apart from when non-students feel unsafe. Do we accept that the University will continue to use its disciplinary procedures against students reported to the police for breaching Covid-19 restrictions come October? The concerns of non-student residents are completely legitimate, but they should not supersede student concerns when it comes to writing guidelines on student safety. Is Council willing to accept that, acting on reports received by the police, will likely mean [a disproportionate number of students of colour are subject to disciplinary procedures?](#) Durham SU is not prepared to accept that the University should use pre-existing procedures in this way, and is ready to work

with the University to find comprehensive and fair ways to minimise risk to students whilst they are off campus.

2.5 Meeting incoming student expectations

Council will be aware that there has been [concern](#) at a national and international level about what students' day-to-day lives will look like come the new academic year. At Durham, the questions about what students are supposed to do with their time are more pressing and the problems harder to resolve. This is because education is built on access (predominantly in person) to academics, and wider student experience is student-led, intensive and conducted in a relatively small city where students are each part of a high number of different networks.

Durham SU believes that returning students' expectations for the coming term and the expectations of the University Executive do not align. Even allowing for there to be a reasonable degree of uncertainty about what restrictions may be in October, it is clear to the SU Officers that there is significant distance between current student expectations, and the institution's planning for the most likely scenarios. Harder to gauge are incoming student expectations, a group who will likely be hardest hit by continuing restrictions, particularly in terms of their wellbeing, sense of belonging and mental health. There is a risk of substantially lower retention rates than usual. Whilst we consider ideas like a DU track and trace system, face masks and socially distanced seminars, many incoming students are thinking about a freshers' week that resembles the norm, being advertised club nights, looking up societies and sports teams they want to join, and expecting standard face-to-face teaching. We can say with relative certainty that life in Durham next term will not be normal, but do we expect incoming students to know this already?

We have a responsibility to be as honest with incoming students as is possible and reasonable. Does Council have a view about what is possible and reasonable and right for students to expect about their lives come October? There is not a quick or simple way of determining what the right level of certainty and clarity is, but there is a highly likely possible scenario where we deliver considerably less than students believed we were able to, with the resulting effects on student satisfaction, wellbeing and attainment. Durham SU therefore believes it is in the student interest for the University to have an institutional understanding of what it is right and reasonable that students know, and communicate that information promptly.

3. Strategic student sector developments

- 3.1 The National Union of Students has launched [a campaign](#) aiming to relieve students of tuition fee debt whose study has been impacted Covid-19, and for institutions to allow students to continue studies that may have been disrupted to continue at no extra cost. There is a clear incentive for Universities to ensure teaching quality remains high. It would be useful for Council to have a view as to whether this University is reasonably protected from claims by students.

4. Durham SU developments

4.1 Decolonise Durham Network

Council will be aware that a substantial piece of work has been underway this year to Decolonise the University, led by Undergraduate Academic Officer Sam Johnson-Audini and [endorsed by SU Assembly](#). The [recent launch](#) of the Durham Decolonise Network and [Decolonise Durham Manifesto](#) has been met with support across the University, from students and staff members.

The work of decolonising the University is that of years. It is not a tick-box exercise, or sub-heading under a broader project. Durham SU is pleased that the University is open to

conversations about decolonisation. We also want to note the work that some departments or academics already do in this space. [Some Higher Education Institutions have started the process of decolonisation](#), and given the expertise within the academic community at Durham is scope for us to be sector-leading. Council members could keep up to date with this work [on social media](#).

4.2 Student leadership

Durham SU Officers and staff have joined Junior and Middle Common Room Presidents at two mediation meetings arranged by the Colleges and WSE division. The outcomes of the mediation meeting have been [agreed and acted on by all parties](#), and student leaders are now planning ahead to the induction of incoming SU Officers and Common Room Presidents.

Durham SU Officers and staff share the values of Durham SU; we champion students, we're proud of Durham, and we make the future better. Each with our own mandate, Durham SU Officers work collaboratively to advance the education of all Durham students in line with these values, and we do this with professional support from a staff team who also work toward that aim. We have a shared purpose that enables us to succeed. It is unclear that other student leaders and organisations in Durham benefit from a shared purpose and values, and Durham SU is ready to work with University to achieve this, to the benefit of all students. We would welcome Council's view as to how this may be achieved.

4.3 Student group re-registration

Durham SU's student groups are currently running elections for their new executive committees, overcoming technical challenges to bring students from all over the world together. Currently, 180 have applied to be re-registered for the next academic year, compared to 38 at this time in 2019. This is encouraging, because there is much uncertainty about the delivery context for Michaelmas term, and early registration allows Durham SU support to focus on delivery rather than regulation.

Student group activity has continued throughout the lockdown, with groups finding ingenious ways to keep people connected. Just some of the events include Aerobics Society's regular online fitness sessions, Doctor Who's Society's watch-alongs, and Purple Radio's live sessions. Palatinate has also published numerous online 'print' editions.

4.4 Furlough update

Durham SU has been accessing the UK Government Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. We are in a relatively strong financial position, due to good management and decision-making but, due to loss of commercial income, raising money from furloughing staff is necessary. Most staff members have been furloughed for a three-week period, so Durham SU can benefit from accessing the flexible furlough scheme in the new academic year. Student representation has been protected, as all five student Officers continue to work full-time with policy and delivery support. The Advice service also continues to run with increased capacity. The Durham SU trustees believe that this is an appropriate balance while delivery expectation is reduced over the summer.