

Council
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Durham Students' Union Report for Council
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 Pressure on student housing

Council may be aware that Michaelmas term involves a rush for students to sign contracts for houses for the next academic year. 'Panic season' has long been identified as a national issue, but in the Durham context there are factors at work which make this period and process more stressful, and more rushed, for students. Our [research on student housing](#) shows that 22% of Durham students begin their search in October, and a further 35.9% start in November. This compares to 15.8% of students searching before November and 23.7% during November nationally. Rushed housing searches leave students ill-prepared to make good decisions about their housing. Students report that housing concerns including quality, cost and relationship with landlord, negatively impact their mental and physical health, as well as limit their ability to participate in Wider Student Experience.

Council should be aware that considerable effort is invested by Durham SU, its student groups, and volunteers in Common Rooms, to equip students with the information and resources to make good decisions when searching for accommodation. Durham SU is also developing a Rate Your Landlord Scheme in line with our strategy. However, letting agents and landlords are in a position to benefit from 'panic season', and therefore regulation of housing and intervention in the market is urgently needed to improve housing quality, and subsequently, student well-being and achievement.

Other institutions, including [Exeter](#), [Lincoln](#), and [Northampton](#), have been proactive in addressing the need for intervention in the student housing market, specifically in offering accreditation to Landlords that meet good standards. As is reasonable, students expect that the University will show concern for their well-being. Council should have a view as to how we can reasonably meet this expectation. Durham SU is ready to work with the University to progress work in this area.

2.2 Climate crisis

Students continue to express deep concerns about the environmental impact of the University, and the lack of a clear strategic commitment to accepting institutional responsibility for the most significant public policy issue of the time. Most recently, students have expressed their anger and fear through a [student-led Climate Strike](#). Durham SU Assembly has adopted a [Core Position on The Environment](#), and our Opportunities Officer, Jess Dunning, is continuing work with the University to improve sustainability.

Leadership from the University is urgently needed to mitigate our impact on the climate crisis. Council must insist that the Executive come forward with practical steps towards limiting our environmental impact – for example, there is considerable desire from students to limit meat consumption on campus and in Colleges. Moreover, Council must re-evaluate the way our institutional culture facilitates behaviours that involve exploitation of natural resources and harm to the environment. Council may wish to consider examples of where other institutions have provided clear leadership in this area, such as [Northumbria](#), [Gloucestershire](#) and [Bristol](#).

As the Durham SU Core Position states, 'As a university, Durham is inextricably linked to the colonial past and present and has historically profited from exploitation of natural resources, particularly those in the Global South. Durham is centrally positioned to offer utilisation of brainpower and resources to develop answers to the problems at hand.' There is considerable potential for Durham University to lead on tackling the climate crisis across the sector and Council ought to have a view as to how this progresses.

2.3 The Living Wage

Durham SU recently celebrated the [Living Wage Foundation's Living Wage Week](#). It continues to be a matter of concern to students that the University's commitment to be an outstanding employer is regularly undermined by the way in which it treats student workers. Although a project on casual work is productive and positive, the pace of progress is disappointing. Across campus students are, right now, still paid at rates below acceptable salary levels, in beer tokens, or not at all, because management find it difficult to accept that students working to deliver Common Room or College activity are in fact employed by the University.

Newcastle University recently celebrated becoming a Living Wage Employer, joining other Russell Group institutions such as Queen Mary University of London, Cardiff University, the University of Bristol, the University of Glasgow, the University of Manchester, Edinburgh University, Liverpool University, the University of Oxford (as well as a number of Colleges at Oxford and Cambridge), and many other important universities – Aberystwyth, the Open University, Goldsmiths, Anglia Ruskin, Middlesex, UEA, Aberdeen, Bath, Strathclyde, SOAS to name only a few. The failure to pursue the ethical standard and competitive advantage of

Living Wage accreditation embarrasses the institution in the eyes of students, staff and competitors.

Council may wish to consider whether Durham could honestly meet the expectations of the Living Wage Foundation accreditation programme; given some of the inconsistencies in student employment it is less than certain. But it is a mark of quality consistent with where Durham wishes to be as a quality employer and the lack of interest in pursuing the award is baffling to students. Our current position seems to be that 'we pay the Living Wage but we don't want to get the award because we reserve the right to pay less well if we want to'. Students expect the institution to be braver than that. Council's leadership would be welcome.

3. Strategic student sector developments

3.1 EHRC Report

Last month, the Equality and Human Rights Commission published its report on racial harassment in publicly funded universities in Britain. The research found that for a wide range of students and staff at universities across Britain, racial harassment is a common experience which ranges from racist name-calling, insults and jokes to physical attacks. Such experiences were reported by 24% of students from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The report also found that experiences of racial harassment can have a significant impact upon wellbeing, leading to feelings of humiliation, exclusion, isolation and vulnerability as well as anger, upset, depression and anxiety.

Durham SU's view is that the findings of the report should not be treated as an isolated number of incidents, but rather the product of systematic oppression that persists within university culture. Durham SU continues work in this area, in the interests of students. We recently became a Hate Crime Reporting Centre, and have trained over 500 students in being an Active Bystander. Council may wish to draw its own conclusions from the report, but Durham SU is clear that students and staff deserve a response from the institution.

4. Durham SU developments

4.1 Provision during UCU strike action

Council will of course be aware that the University and College Union (UCU) called a period of strike action from 25 November to 4 December, and a subsequent period of Action Short of Strike. Given the disruption, a considerable part of the work of Durham SU throughout this period has been supporting affected students.

Our Officers continue to work with the University to mitigate the impacts of industrial action on students. We have resourced student leaders, including Common Room Presidents and Academic Reps, to share information, support and guidance to the students they represent. Moreover, Durham SU has worked closely with the UCU to enable students to meaningfully engage in the context of strike action.

4.2 General Election preparations

In the run up to the General Election Durham SU has been mobilising students, to register to vote and encourage their peers to do so. Council may have seen [Durham SU's appearance on ITV news](#), as we shared our voter registration campaign with a broader audience! We have also worked to engage students in the election and provide opportunities and resources for political education. Encouraging civic participation remains a core part of the work we do, and we look forward to the implementation of an automatic voter registration mechanism at Durham, to assist this work and further enfranchise our student community. The University's

conversations with Durham County Council have been good, but it is unfortunate that other work prevented as smooth a relationship with electoral registration as we might have wished.

4.3 Student media success

Purple Radio, Durham's student-run radio station, had considerable success at the National Student Radio Awards, including a Gold Award for Best Journalistic Programming for their programme 'The Housing Crisis Investigation'. The wealth of talent in Durham's student media groups is consistently impressive, especially for a University without a Journalism programme, and we continue to look for ways to further support and develop the opportunities available to these students.

4.4 Advice

Council will be aware that Durham SU has a free, impartial Advice Service that all students can access. We have expanded the reach of this service in recent years, through the use of digital resources and a different staffing model, such that far more students are now able to access the service. The service has seen a total of 579 cases from January 2019 to November 2019, compared to a total of 226 cases from January 2018 to December 2018.

By transferring a significant proportion of service provision online, we have been able to increase the number of individual contacts with students from 417, from September to October 2018, to 1490 from September to October 2019, which represents a capacity increase of over 200%. The majority of cases the Advice Service has dealt with so far this term have been in relation to the private housing sector.

The rise in cases over the past year indicates need for the service from students, and this is something the SU will take into consideration with regard to staffing and resource for the service going forward.