

Council
04 February 2020
Sponsor: Kate McIntosh

Author: Kate McIntosh

Durham Students' Union Report
Proposed Resolution

Council is asked to note the contents of this report.

Communication Status: Paper	Open		Open Internal	x	Confidential Restricted/External	
Communication Status: Appendices	Open		Open Internal		Confidential Restricted/External	
Freedom of Information Exemption	Paper: Section 43, Commercial Interests					
	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 Institutional disablism

At its last meeting, SU Assembly passed [a motion declaring Durham University institutionally disablist](#). The motion refers to multiple examples of exclusionary and discriminatory practice which 'collectively reflect a deep-seated culture within Durham University that seeks to marginalise disabled students, and tolerates the provision of a substandard academic and wider student experience to them.'

There is currently an [ongoing national investigation](#) into the disparities in graduate outcomes between abled and disabled students, undertaken by Policy Connect's Higher Education Commission. It should not be a surprise that as a sector, we are faced with an ingrained culture of disablist attitudes and practice, and UK Universities are particularly to blame and particularly

at risk for perpetuating this culture. Institutions propagating academic exclusiveness and competition, reliant on classical notions of achievement and what the 'correct' student looks like, inevitably face a considerable challenge in addressing historical and present injustices.

Crucially, the motion passed at SU Assembly makes specific reference to the conditions unique to Durham that make life for disabled Durham students harder than it should be, because they are students of Durham University and not another institution. Physically inaccessible accommodation, consistent disregard for disabled students' needs from within academic departments when it comes to Lecture Capture, and insistence that traditions cannot be revised to make our social communities open to everyone all amount to unified sentiment from our student leaders that this institution is failing disabled students. In relation to use of Lecture Capture, there seems to be a misconception believed by some in the English Department, that academic freedom is the same as the freedom to limit disabled students' access to the education they are entitled to. SU Assembly is the highest democratic body in the Students' Union, with students from every College represented. This declaration should be treated as a sincere statement of deep concern and frustration, from students who believe our university should be better.

Durham SU is on mission to make the future better for every Durham student, and this includes a considerable amount of attention devoted to this issue by our Officers this year. Amelia the Welfare and Liberation Officer is [leading on the work to develop an Action Plan for the University](#), collaborating with the Students with Disabilities Association. In the context of the Respect Commission report, and Durham's commitment in the Access and Participation Plan to reduce the awarding gap between disabled and abled students, it is the expectation of students that the problem of institutional disablism is challenged by the leaders of our institution. Council should have a view as to how we might meet this expectation, and whether on our current course every part of this institution is prepared for the change necessary to end disablism.

2.2 Respect and student leadership

Durham SU welcomes the publication of the Report of the Durham Commission on Respect, Values, and Behaviour, a piece of work kickstarted by the testament of our former President Megan Croll, on her experiences as a woman student leader in Durham, and particularly how she was treated by senior members of the University. Inevitably the work of the Commission expanded to look broadly at cultural disrespect wherever it manifested, at every level of our institution, and the recommendations reflect this broad look at the problem of a culture of disrespect. The findings of the report speak to a culture of deep disrespect at Durham University, particularly targeted at groups that are already marginalised. The only reasonable response is one of deep regret and complete belief that a considerable, institution-wide effort is needed to change this culture for the better.

It is reassuring that the reaction to the report has initially been sincere, accepting and engaged. However, the recognition that the recommendations offered are only a suggested start to tackling a culture of disrespect should be at the front of our thinking about next steps. Would enacting all of the recommendations overnight fix the culture of disrespect that Megan identified two years ago, and that subsequent staff and students have pointed to in the process of compiling the report? Undoubtedly, the answer is no. That fact is acknowledged in the report and it cannot be lost as the institution reacts to the findings. It tasks us, and all the leaders within this community, to deliver solutions to the whole complexity of disrespect at Durham. Council should show that leadership by responding to the recommendations and the call to keep this conversation going, by ensuring that there is adequate space in the University for students and staff to engage in it.

Despite the fact that the Respect Commission originated in a student leaders' courage to call out disrespectful behaviours occurring at a senior level within the institution, findings relating

to the experiences of student leaders are first discussed on page thirty-seven. Whilst we know that the Report's scope widened, it is paramount that we do not let unacceptable, derogatory, and disrespectful behaviours directed at student leaders escape the focus they deserve. It should not need saying that senior members of the University should embody the value of respect in how they relate to every member of the community, but it is also important to recognise that when a student leader repeatedly faces unacceptable behaviour from individuals, student representation and democracy are jeopardised. With oversight of how we respond to the findings, Council should also have a view as to how we can move forward confident that the value we place on student representation is not tokenistic, but is instead evident in our ways of working and how we treat each other.

2.3 The cost of Durham

Financial barriers to accessing Durham University continue to shape many of the conversations students have with us about their lives in Durham. Durham SU believes that cost should never be a barrier to a student's full participation in education and wider student experience at Durham, and we believe that affordability must be a central part of an offer to students that represents value for money. Council will be aware that we have been campaigning for a reduction in accommodation fees for some years, as it is our view that the current cost of college accommodation is a barrier to full participation for many students and in addition, prevents students from lower economic backgrounds attending Durham.

Durham SU welcomes interest from the executive in differentiated fees and anticipates the establishment of a formal body in the University to oversee a change to the accommodation fee offer. A new accommodation fee offer would bring us in line with many other Universities offering differentiated fees, including [most recently at the University of York](#), where some rooms have been reduced to £99 a week.

Affordable accommodation fees must be defined proportionately to the money students have available to them. A recent NUS policy paper states that "affordability" as a concept has been misappropriated to either mean 'less than market average' or to mean 'an offer of lower quality'. In some cases, these false definitions of affordability have interlinked to the detriment of learners', (Affordability in Education, NUS, 2019).

Durham SU's paper on the [Funding Gap](#), which was presented to the University Executive Committee in November, identifies the difference between the money Durham students have available to them and [the overall cost of attending](#). In order to fund their time in Durham, students here rely more than the national average on contributions from their family. Students who rely on additional financial support from the University, including those from lower-income backgrounds, are othered and alienated by a system which expects learners to rely on considerable financial support from home, and treats them as abnormal. This research also suggests more of our students are engaged in precarious work because of the high cost of attendance, and research is ongoing to learn more about this. Importantly, the cost of attendance is higher than the money available to students in the majority of income brackets. Means tested financial support targeted at the lowest income brackets is not in isolation a comprehensive measure to make Durham affordable to all.

Durham SU is ready to engage meaningfully in a serious conversation about the cost of Durham, and how we can reduce the number of Durham students who currently cannot afford to attend or fully participate because of high costs. Council should note that there is strong support among students and student leaders that differentiating accommodation fees is a necessary and positive step, and one that students expect us to take if we claim to care about access or student wellbeing.



3. Strategic student sector developments

3.1 National Union of Students Strategic Conversation

NUS recently hosted its annual Strategic Conversation event, which the Durham SU Chief Executive and President attended. We heard about some of the biggest issues likely to demonise work across the sector and ongoing NUS reform.

Council will be aware that NUS is in a transition year, designed to safeguard NUS's finances to ensure future operation. As of July this year, the national union will reform into NUS UK, a campaigning and democracy organisation with a reduced number of Officers staff, and an NUS charity working to support Students' Unions.

3.2 OfS sexual violence

Council should be aware that the Office for Students has launched [a consultation on harassment and sexual misconduct in higher education](#), intended to produce a statement of expectations for Higher Education providers. It includes the proposed expectation that 'Governing bodies should ensure that the provider's approach to harassment and sexual misconduct is adequate and effective'.

It is Durham SU's [belief that we have a culture that normalises sexual harassment and violence](#), and tackling it is the responsibility of our whole community. Durham SU invests considerable effort into preventative measures, as well as support for effected student, relating to sexual harassment and violence, including delivering Active Bystander training to over 500 students in preparation for freshers' week this year alone. Council should have as to whether or not we would currently meet the proposed expectations set out by the Office for Students, particularly in the context the Respect Commission's findings on a culture of fear and gendered harassment. Durham SU is ready to work with the executive to meet these expectations.

4. Durham SU developments

4.1 Strategy refresh

Durham SU has begun the process of reviewing and refreshing our 2017 to 2022 strategy. This process has been collaborative, and we are pleased to have worked with colleagues in the University as we look at what we have achieved in the last two and half years, and how we achieve our strategic goals. Brexit, a new government, the Office for Students, and a changing student demographic are just some of the broader developments that have changed students, Students' Unions and higher education since we wrote our strategy, and will influence how we go about achieving our aims.

4.2 Democracy

Students' Unions are owned, led and shaped by students. Durham SU is at the start of review of our democracy that will ensure these things continue to be true in the future, and that our democratic processes work in the most effective way possible.

As part of that work we are improving how we recruit SU officers and Student Trustees, who will be elected in February. The exciting process of generating candidates, promoting the roles and planning for the elections period is underway. Whilst we strive to make democracy a year-round event, seeing student leaders campaign on the issues that matter most to them during elections is a highlight of the calendar.

4.3 Research trip to the Baltics and Finland



Recently, Durham SU Chief Executive Gareth Hughes and I took part in a [research trip to the Baltics](#) alongside staff and Officers from fourteen other SUs. The trip was organised by WonkHE, and included visits to student organisations and Universities in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Finland over five (very busy) days. We learnt about how SUs in Finland own and manage student accommodation, how student representatives in Lithuania must pass a test on student rights set by their SU, and how in Latvia by law students make up 20 per cent of University decision making bodies.

4.4 Code of Practice Review

The Education Act (1994) obliges Council to publish a Code of Practice further to the regulatory expectations in section 22, which should detail how higher education institutions will assure the good governance of its students' union. Governance and Nominations Committee (GNC) considered a paper at its last meeting and accepted that the Code published in relation to Durham SU had not been considered for some time, which presented a degree of risk to both organisations.

A review group was established, with membership of Camila Caiado, Kate Deeming (as nominee of the University Secretary), Kate McIntosh and Clare Powne (a lay trustee of Durham SU). The group met in November 2019 and produced a revised Code that was presented to Governance and Nominations Committee.

4.5 Refreshers' Week

At the start of Epiphany term Durham SU hosts a Refreshers' Fair, to allow students to showcase their student group activity and recruit new members. We hosted 120 groups at the fair on Wednesday 15th January, across a huge range of areas including volunteering, international and faith, academic, and professional development.

4.6 Academic representation

Durham SU continues to develop support for student academic representatives. Training has improved to help academic reps champion the student interest, with content disaggregated to suit experience, and we have developed the role and support given to Faculty reps. Our Academic Officers Sam and David met with every academic department to solidify collective understanding and expectations of student representation, and led discussions at Education Committee about clarifying the joint role of the University and Students' Union to ensure academic representation happens effectively.