

Council
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Durham Students' Union Report to 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 matter of student interest.

1.1.3 Durham SU developments.

2. Priorities for Durham students

2.1 Delays to building work in Colleges

Council will have noted [national press reports](#) about the avoidable delays in building works which led to 108 Durham students not being able to join their College communities along with their peers at the start of the term. The delays were clearly regrettable, and swift action by the Executive to mitigate the problems has been appreciated.

Notwithstanding the practical steps to bring the building works to spec as soon as possible, the significant efforts of student volunteers were fundamental to the affected students having any sort of welcome to Durham. The introduction to our community was, once again, reliant on unpaid labour. The University would not have been able to meet the standards we all expect of a 'Durham' welcome on the strength of any corporate plan or contingency. Students had to

sacrifice part of their own start of year to mitigate the significant impact of delayed building work on their peers.

This is not reasonable, or sustainable, or consistent with University values. Council must have a broader concern as to the extent to which the maintenance of the 'goodwill' of volunteers is coercive: could any student have said 'no' to the expectations of welcoming students? And what would have happened if they had done so? A volunteer retention or recognition strategy (although a necessary project) would presume that it is right that the University expects students to work for free. The 'love of College' must never extend to any pressure to have to clean accommodation to make it passable for new students by the start of term. This is exploitative and Council must make clear that it is unacceptable.

University leaders must make clear that it was their responsibility to have ensured those rooms were cleaned. The casual working task-and-finish group must reflect on the lessons learnt from the delays to building work in College as the latest example of poor working standards at the University.

2.2 South College community development

The whole University has an interest in making sure that South College is a vibrant community, where students are welcome and celebrated. Students continue to be concerned that the identity they create together in the early years of their College will be subject to upheaval as soon as a rich enough person decides to buy the naming rights to their community. Council has not clearly communicated its longer term intentions in this matter, and the continued knowledge that the community is out to auction ought to be resolved. Council should share the success of this endeavour more frequently and transparently.

The first steps into creating this community, however, are necessary now. There is a clear signal that the University is seeking more unpaid student labour to make 'selling' the benefits of South College to prospective students viable. The emergent Common Room will need support to be successful, and the burden should not fall on the other, already pressured, JCR leaders. Durham SU is ready to support the University and College in developing a student-led community, or to advise on any other proposal. The Executive should be clear about how it intends to support the purposeful development of a successful community. This plan should be informed by students, have clear success indicators for students to hold College leaders accountable, and must not be not reliant on unpaid labour.

2.3 International uncertainty

Durham SU was pleased to accept an invitation to join the University Brexit Steering Group, and has had productive conversations with the Executive as to supportive communications to students and in particular EU nationals.

The complexities of general uncertainty about the national environment for international/EU students, a strategic priority to increase the number and proportion of such students at Durham University, and the interest in strengthening the Collegiate experience are clearly a high priority for the Executive. There seems to be an urgent need to explore the interrelationships between these policy drivers and build on a limited understanding of how the Durham experience makes sense for international students, and how this will be developed and progressed over the medium term.

2.4 University Executive Committee Boards

Durham SU Officers have joined UEC Boards, and the experience is positive. Officers warmly appreciate the welcome from the Executive, the quality of material, and the briefing and support available to engage students with different experiences to longer term members.

3. Strategic student sector developments

3.1 Government focus on student housing

Council may also have seen that the (returned) Minister for Higher Education continues his interest in the student housing sector, and [recently called for a summit](#) to discuss the many delays in term-ready accommodation. This builds on other recent ministerial interventions on the broken market in student housing and rent costs.

Durham SU continues conversations with the Executive on the response to national and local policy pressures, and to demonstrate how well the market in student housing at Durham works for University tenants. There is a real opportunity to [build on successful campaigns at institutions like Liverpool](#), and show that the University is not immune to student concerns.

4. Durham SU developments

4.1 Quality SUs

Immediate-past President George Walker was delighted to receive Durham SU's Quality Students' Union award with new Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Colleges and Student Experience) Jeremy Cook, in Parliament over the summer. The award came at the end of a year of many awards won by student groups and volunteers.

4.2 Investment in student media

A number of reports from Durham SU to Council have shared the success of our award-winning student media. This success continues – Purple Radio has already been nominated for two awards at the 2019 Student Radio Awards: Best Journalistic Programming for its Housing Crisis Investigation, and Sportsfeed has been nominated for Best Sport Programming.

Durham SU has initiated a conversation about how to sustain and build on the success of student journalism, particularly given that the University has no academic programme in journalism or similar disciplines. The relative investment request is not believed to be significant, but no strategic thought has gone into how to secure the future of this crucial aspect of the wider student experience.

4.3 Common Room support

Council will remember at its last meeting a presentation from Common Room leaders who asked members to reflect on who exactly was responsible for the continued development and success of Common Rooms, an integral part of the Durham Collegiate community environment and the wider student experience.

Durham SU has now taken practical steps to meet this challenge, and has welcomed Caragh Evans (Collingwood College), the Chair of the JCR Presidents' Committee, into the SU leadership team meeting for the first time. This is an attempt to address an historic lack of support for a student in a leadership position, and an investment in the Durham SU 'Owned by Students' strategy. Durham SU has also designated £100k of its own funds over two years in a Common Room leadership support project.

4.4 Officer focus

The Durham SU Officers have completed their summer induction programme, and are now active in University spaces, sharing student priorities for the institution's work. Council may wish to know that the strategic focuses are:

- The Internationalisation of Durham, and the international student experience.

- A response to the challenge of [decolonising the University](#).
- Access to Durham and its services, particularly for postgraduate students and to student support services.
- The cost of access to the wider student experience.
- Students' rights in work.