Culture
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THE COMMISSION

In 2020, Durham Students' Union President Seun Twins commissioned a report into Durham University's culture from the perspective of its student body. The purpose of the commission was twofold; firstly, to identify and locate positive and negative behaviours or attitudes in the Durham student experience and secondly, to offer sustainable and long-term recommendations to deconstruct and amend this culture.

The commission offers students a chance to recognise and name the deep-rooted problems present within the Durham University community and to commit to changes that will, we hope, ultimately make Durham a more welcoming place to all students.

Throughout 2021 the Commissioners interviewed students and staff from across the University to not just help them better understand Durham's 'Durhamness', but also its impact on different groups of students. The recommendations presented in the report come from those conversations and interviews in discussion with the Commissioners.

To ensure the student voice remains front and centre to the Culture Commission, throughout the report you will find anonymous quotes from students shared with the Commissioners during interviews and focus groups.

FOREWORD

I am delighted to present this report to assist the Students' Union and the University to improve the student experience and create a sense of belonging for all Durham students irrespective of their background. I am confident that this report will stimulate conversation and act as a catalyst for change.

The drivers for focussing on developing inclusive cultures within higher education are many, ranging from compliance issues such as equality legislation and duties of care through to sector drivers reflected in various policy steers from government, funder requirements, sector undertakings and commitments e.g. the UUK response to the EHRC reports on both racial harassment and sexual harassment in higher education, and a series of sector specific accreditations and charters.

Additionally, the marketisation of higher education has led to ever-increasing competition between similar institutions in their bid to attract home and international students and students are increasingly demanding more from their student experience. Universities can no longer rely on past reputation as student satisfaction reaches beyond the achievement of a degree albeit from a Russell Group institution.

Social justice drivers such as Black Lives Matter, #Metoo and decolonisation of curricula across the education sector have emerged from being the preserve of student activists to dominate much of the social narrative. The impacts of Brexit and the pandemic are known to have had a disproportionately negative impact on students and young people in general, manifesting in unprecedented wellbeing and mental ill health challenges.

All the above issues are known to have an even greater impact on students and staff who come from under-represented backgrounds including socio-economic class even though this is not a protected characteristic under the Equality Act. It is this broader definition of under-representation that requires organisations that aspire to being genuinely inclusive to think beyond legislative or sector drivers but to address these disparities of experience through a cultural lens.

Transforming cultures takes time and requires an intentional commitment from leaders to set clear direction, take action, establish impact measures and transparent systems of accountability.

"Culture changes a conversation at a time" and this report represents a seminal moment in the history of Durham University as the students and their university start the conversation and commit to cultural transformation.

SAM BUDD
Independent Commissioner

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INTRODUCTION

"A fish can't see the water it is in,
unless it jumps out of the fishbowl."

Chinese proverb

2020 was undoubtedly a year of cultural reckoning. Between a global pandemic and a litany of action from social justice movements, our institutions were forced to confront their civic responsibility in a new light. 2020 shifted our expectations, perspectives and standards for equality, diversity, and inclusion beyond rolling agenda points and tick box exercises. Being locked indoors meant we retreated to social media platforms to express our frustrations, at times which can be encapsulated by one word: toxic. It seemed like everyone was an authority on society and culture and were using the word toxic to say a whole lot without managing to really say much at all. And in Durham, it seemed more important for students and spectators to reduce Durham student culture to a myth and strip of it of all its nuances.

In 2020, Durham University published the final report of their Respect Commission [1], which was originally set up in 2018 in response to the misogyny experienced by former Durham Students' Union Officers. The Commission's aim was to "respond to concerns that the standards of behaviour expected from and towards all staff and students at the University are not always met." [2] Alongside some positive behaviours and values, the report uncovered a culture of elitism, bullying and discrimination. Whilst the Respect Commission and its recommendations represent positive steps in identifying and challenging the unacceptable behaviours that exist within our community, the emphasis on the experience of staff neglected to address the Durham student experience. Durham Students' Union felt the Commission could have gone further in exploring student culture as told by students themselves. Students observed that the language was overly conservative, for example, the word "racism" was mentioned only once in the entire document. Although a welcome start to changing the culture at Durham, the Respect Commission, did not go far enough to represent the views of Durham students who were looking for an authentic evaluation of their experiences.

The Culture Commission is a project of definition, a reference document that aims to create a collective narrative of the Durham student experience as authentically as it can possibly be portrayed. Much like the Respect Commission, it aims to embark on a journey of discovery about the values and behaviours within our community, but primarily from a student perspective. The Culture Commission seeks to articulate what "Durhamness" is, recognising its plurality as both criticised and celebrated, palpable yet elusive.

I first conceptualised the Culture Commission because I became tired of repeating the same talking points to university management, students and the media following every scandal that would happen.

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1 Durham University: Report of the Durham Commission on Respect, Values, and Behaviour, March 2020.
https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/respect.commission/5774_Respect_Report_Final_2020.pdf
2 Ibid, 9.

To be frank, I was tired of being shipped out at every agenda item or panel to talk about Durham culture, when at the time I was hardly an authority on it. My intention was to write it all down in one document and move on. But as I began to expand the research, talk to students and alumni, appoint more commissioners, host hours of focus groups and interviews, it became very clear that this work was bigger than me. I have the unique privilege of being an informed yet exhausted token. As President of Durham Students' Union, I have the complicated fortune of seeing Durham at its very best and at its very worst, and therefore I have a responsibility to leave the institution in a better place than when I joined it.

Though the Culture Commission may have started as a concept in my head, the objective is to delineate a collective narrative for students to own and take responsibility for as equal members of the student community. The Culture Commission acts as a mirror that is constructed by students themselves to reflect the nature of student life from multiple vantage points, experiences, and expectations. To Durham students, I hope you read this as something that contains a multitude of truths that may converge, or even contradict each other, but which are nonetheless true for members of our community. To the University, I hope you will regard the recommendations not as quick fixes, but instead as stepping stones toward helping student culture to evolve for the better. And to any external audience, I hope the Culture Commission demystifies what you think of Durham students by giving you a chance to look a little deeper.

SEUN TWINS
Durham Students' Union President,
2020-2022

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INITIAL FINDINGS

After the initial research phase of the Culture Commission, an interim report[3] was created and published on the Durham SU website. This report was the first step in the Culture Commission's aim to understand how students experience Durham University's culture, and how this culture is sustained and accepted. Through thematic analysis the report uncovered several recurring stands within the research. These strands later informed the basis of the second phase of research.

The interim report analysed the initial phase of research, which took place during Michaelmas term 2020. The research comprised:

- Three "initial contribution sessions" (with 37 sign-ups); two open sessions; one specifically for students in leadership roles across the institution
- An online anonymous feedback form (with 49 contributions)

It is worth noting that this research took place during the Covid-19 pandemic. First-year students would have had a particularly unique Durham University experience that may not speak to what is usual for Durham's culture.

The report provided a thematic analysis, which identified common and recurrent themes, influential to how culture is perceived and experienced by students. These were:

- **Identity and privilege.** Respondents often prefaced their responses with their identity. Amongst students from marginalised backgrounds there was a feeling of being an "outsider." There was also a strong understanding across respondents of the "typical" Durham student. Although this stereotype did not fully match up with the true average, participants reflected that this type of student remained the "loudest."
- **Physical and conceptual spaces.** Participants highlighted space as an important factor in shaping the culture, although with both positive and negative impacts. Some spaces (physical or conceptual) were identified as having distinct cultures. The spaces most frequently referenced were common rooms, Associations, societies, sports teams, and academic cohorts. There were also reflections on how online spaces allowed behaviours that are more explicit and less boundaried.
- **Reputation, expectations and traditions.** Reputation was seen as a significant contributing factor to culture's creation and preservation. Participants reflected on a "self-fulfilling prophecy" – those that do not see themselves reflected within the University's traditional reputation do not apply or accept offers, continuing this reputational cycle. Many commented on the prevalence of Durham's traditions, but these were seen as both positive (a unique aspect of the Durham experience) and negative (contributing to a culture of privilege and exclusion).

The report also identified the following themes, which described students' experiences of Durham's culture:

- **Sense of belonging or "fitting in."** Many participants identified with the feeling of not "fitting in," especially those from marginalised backgrounds. Some students identified behaviours in other students such as buying branded "stash," or having the right tech to achieve social acceptance. However, it was identified that discriminatory behaviours created barriers. Gender and ethnicity can contribute to the financial and cultural costs associated with "fitting in."
- **Experiences of harassment, bullying, and discrimination.** Many participants expressed an awareness or experience of bullying, harassment and discrimination. The most common forms identified were classism, racism, sexism and misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, antisemitism and xenophobia. Students expressed their distrust of or frustration with the University's available reporting mechanisms for these behaviours.[4]
- **Counterculture.** Particularly during the Initial Contribution Sessions, participants identified several active groups and projects which exist to challenge the negative aspects of Durham's culture whilst also promoting positive safe spaces. Some students referred to this growing movement as the "counterculture."

It is also important to note that many responses, particularly to the online feedback form, included positive descriptions of a culture that is "welcoming, friendly and supportive," which we will outline further in this report.

4 Nazia Parveen, *The Guardian,* "Students from Northern England facing 'Toxic Attitude' at Durham University," 19 October 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/oct/19/students-from-northern-england-facing-toxic-attitude-at-durham-university

LITERATURE REVIEW

Durham University is home to over 20,000 students, offering a distinctive collegiate experience within a World Top 100 institution. The University describes itself as "a globally outstanding centre of teaching and research excellence, a collegiate community of extraordinary people, a unique and historic setting – Durham is a university like no other." [5]

Recently retired Vice Chancellor Stuart Corbridge's ten-year strategy (2017-27) centred upon a vision to "combine innovation and leadership with a strong sense of community and heritage." To achieve this, Durham University would commit to "delivering excellence across the board in research, education, and the wider student experience." [6]

The institution claims a commitment to being an "active and positive presence" in the lives of students and alumni by establishing a "culture of affection that binds together past, present, and prospective members."[7] However, this is not felt by all within the Durham community. Negative aspects of Durham's culture have been exposed and scrutinised, in full view of the students, staff and the wider public over recent years.[8] This has led to an outcry from many students demanding that things must change, with groups of students mobilising to dismantle the culture and tackle the toxic behaviours and attitudes which underpin and sustain it.[9]

> ***"A University's culture is shaped by all of its members and building cultures of cohesion and respect is everyone's responsibility." [10]***

Durham's strong focus on the extraordinary, its collegiate experience and its centuries of history, provide the backdrop to the Culture Commission, which seeks to explore Durham University's culture specifically. But this culture must be understood within the wider context of UK Higher Education, as well as UK society more generally. It is also important to acknowledge that this work is not new, nor is the call for Durham to change. Student leaders, particularly from liberation backgrounds, have been leading this work for much longer, and have paved the way for this Commission.

Over the past five years, four Presidents of Durham Students' Union have been women. Each of them has spoken out about the treatment they have endured from students and staff during their time at Durham as a woman leader. One of Kate McIntosh's final articles as SU President, entitled "Durham's Problem with Respect," highlighted her experiences of misogyny at Durham: "I'm just the next in a line of women student leaders called bossy,

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5. Durham University website, "About Us." https://www.durham.ac.uk/about-us/
6 "Durham University Strategy, 2017-2027," 7. https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/strategy2027/DurhamUniversityStrategy2017-2027Summarydoc.pdf
7 Durham University, "Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 July 2020," 9. https://issuu.com/communicationsoffice/docs/2020_ar_digi__1_
8 Ibid., 16-17.
9 *BBC News,* "Durham University students claim culture of apathy over bullying," 28 September 2021. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-58717598
10 *Universities UK,* "Tackling racial harassment in higher education," Executive Summary, 8. https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-08/tackling-racial-harassment-in-higher-education.pdf

manipulative, overly opinionated or 'unsavoury.'" [11] McIntosh's experience was not unique – the University's own Respect Commission exists today because women SU Officers had the strength to speak out about a culture of belittlement, disrespect, and disregard for women in leadership roles. [12]

The Respect Commission in many ways confirmed what was already known by the many students who have experienced the toxic side of Durham's culture: deep-rooted classism, racism, and misogyny. The final report recognises the prevalence of microaggressions, bullying, and elitism, alongside a fear or unwillingness to speak out due to a lack of belief in reporting systems and a failure to take reports seriously. A lack of diversity within the Durham community was frequently identified as being at the root of many discriminatory and exclusionary behaviours exhibited by both staff and students. The Respect Commission report uncovered a variety of issues, all of which are discussed under the umbrella terms of 'respect' and 'disrespect' – palatable language, used in place of terms like racism, misogyny, and classism.

In addition to the Respect Commission, other research exists which has touched on Durham's culture and the ways in which it manifests in everyday life. For instance, Durham graduate Lauren White collected testimony from current and former students about their experiences at Durham as Northern students, highlighting a range of toxic behaviours and a culture of bullying and discrimination. [13] Designed by academic and EDI staff members at Durham, a survey of Religious and Race Hate Experience revealed that 27% of respondents had experienced negative unwanted behaviours during their time at Durham,[14] while the SU's 'Pincident' tool has, at present, recorded 193 submissions of hate, discrimination, or sexual misconduct and violence since launching in June 2018. [15]

It should be noted that not all discriminatory experiences raised by Durham students are unique to Durham University. Recent research from the EHRC found that ~a quarter (24%) of students from ethnic minority backgrounds had experienced racial harassment since starting their course,[16] and there has been a wave of evidence calling out sexual harassment and misconduct in UK universities. [17]

When we are immersed in a culture it can be difficult to step back, recognise what is wrong, and evaluate its constituent parts so we can rebuild and create an environment in which everybody can thrive. At the start of 2022, Durham University welcomed a new Vice Chancellor and a Pro-Vice Chancellor for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, providing the

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11 Kate McIntosh, "Update from Kate: Durham's Problem with Respect," Durham SU website, 27 January 2020. https://www.durhamsu.com/articles/update-from-kate-durham-s-problem-with-respect

12 "Report of the Durham Commission on Respect, Values, and Behaviour," March 2020. https://www.dur.ac.uk/respect/report/

13 Parveen, The Guardian, "Students from Northern England..."

14 Siddiqui, N., Towl, G., Matthewson, J., Stretesky, C., & Earnshaw, M. (2019), Durham University, Durham Research Online, "Religious and Race Hate Experience Survey: Report Findings." https://dro.dur.ac.uk/29061/1/29061.pdf?DDD29+DDD27

15 https://www.durhamsu.com/pincident

16 Equality and Human Rights Commission (2019), "Tackling Racial Harassment: Universities Challenged," 6. https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/tackling-racial-harassment-universities-challenged

17 Dandridge, Nicola (2021), "How we expect universities and colleges to tackle harassment and sexual misconduct," Office for Students, Blogs. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/blog/how-we-expect-universities-and-colleges-to-tackle-harassment-and-sexual-misconduct/

optimum time for Durham Students' Union to support students to take ownership of our 'Durhamness,' to recognise its deep-rooted problems while also committing to the change that will make Durham a more welcoming place.

The Culture Commission report, led by Durham SU President Seun Twins, will firstly identify positive and negative behaviours or attitudes in the Durham student experience, and secondly offer sustainable and long-term recommendations to deconstruct and amend this culture.

METHOD

The following chapters and recommendations in this report are drawn from interviews and focus groups conducted by the student commissioners and Students' Union President throughout 2021. Over two hundred students took part either via one-to-one interviews or in arranged focus groups for students and staff within different communities.

Although we reflected on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data to inform the initial report, for this main phase of the research we utilised qualitative data only to better reflect the nuances of student experiences and understanding in relation to culture. Seun Twins, as the lead researcher and author, in discussion with the Commissioners, highlights emergent and repeated themes from the participants through a process of thematic analysis.

The themes and experiences have been collected in the following four chapters, each one touching on an area of student life at Durham. The chapters articulate a collective narrative of the culture(s) at Durham University, both good and bad, and begin to address how we might change them. Although many students shared personal case studies with Commissioners, to protect people's anonymity, quotes in this report will remain unattributed.

Each chapter contains some reflections on what we should do to begin to change Durham's culture for the better. At the end of the chapters, we provide a list of specific recommendations for both the university community and the Students' Union in the hope that if implemented, they will begin to rebuild and redefine a more positive and inclusive Durham culture for students, staff, and the wider community.
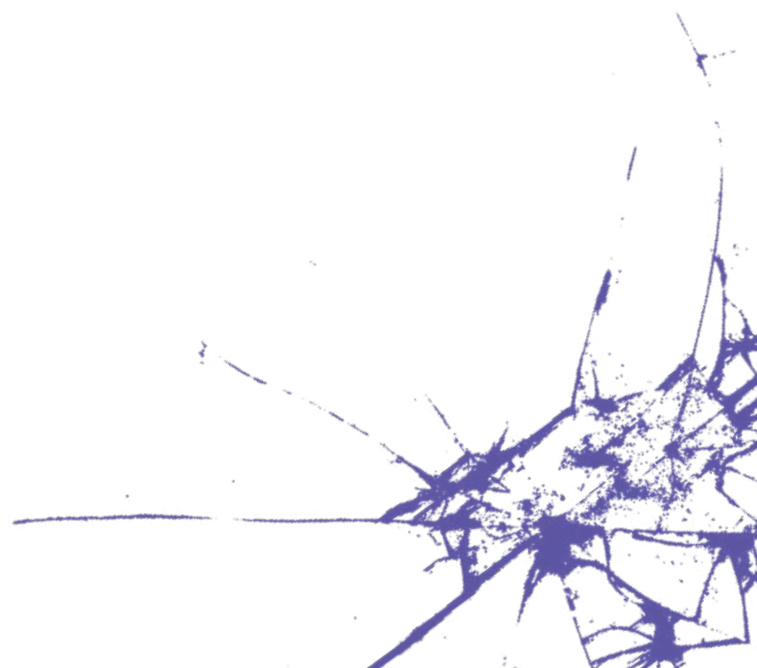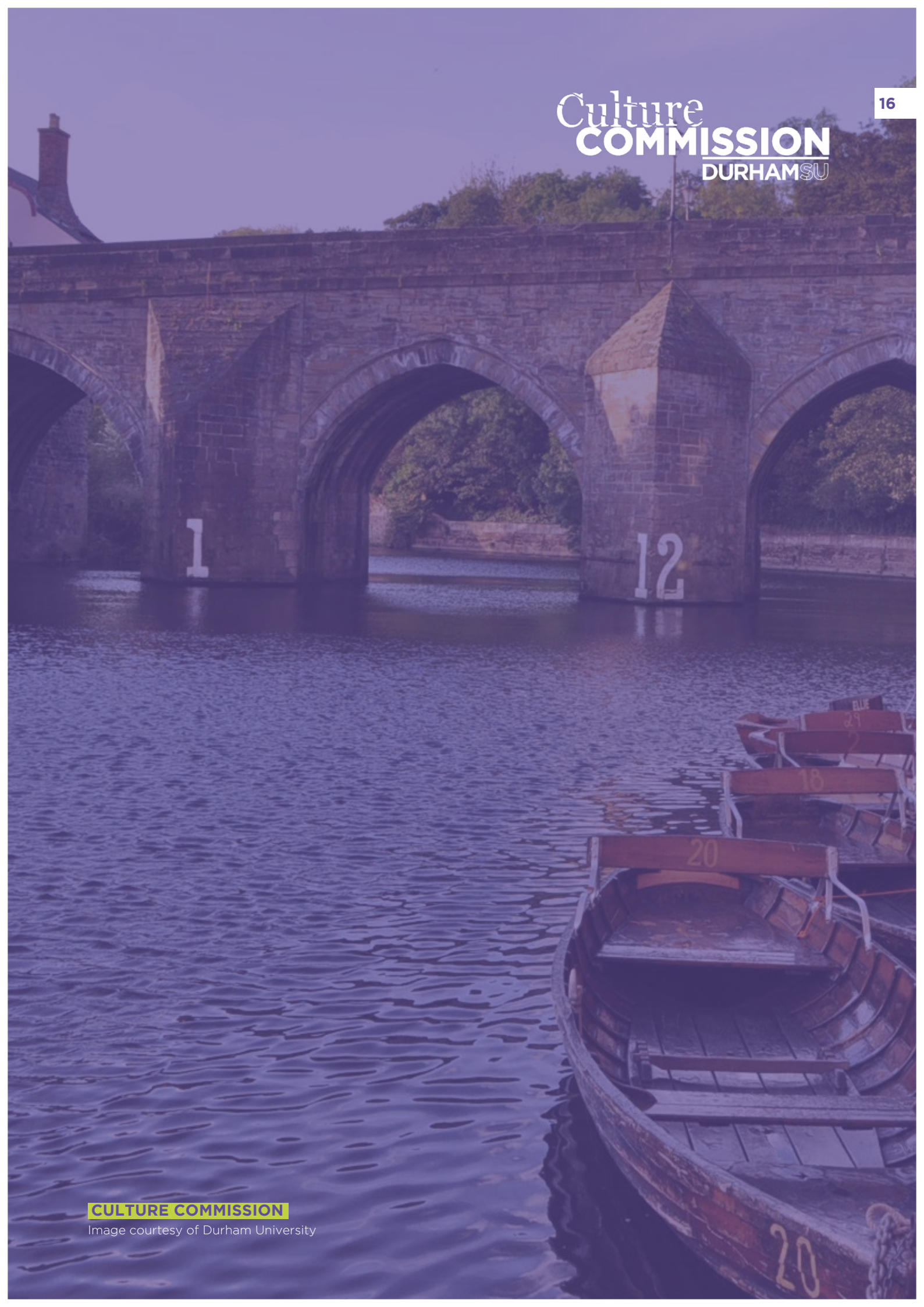
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"I am not an Oxbridge reject."

Durham is an attractive university, aesthetically. It is a traditionally English rendition of higher education, and its perceived likeness to Oxford, Cambridge and St Andrews creates expectations for a student experience similar in quality and most familiar to the core demographics of white, southern, typically privately educated students from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds. Much of the stereotype of the Durham student is begotten from an Oxford and Cambridge personality type or the "posh public schoolboy" character, already established in the collective imagination. Although the student body is more diverse than its depiction, the Durham stereotype makes the greatest impression on student life. The Durham stereotype acts as a powerful magnet for like-minded students from similar backgrounds, who see themselves in this trope or aspire to it and as a result, the demographic makeup of the student body sustains itself. Students then perceive Durham as a university that exclusively considers, preserves, and facilitates this one type of student.

"As far as I can tell, there is no single culture at Durham: the culture at my college is very different to the one within my course, is different to the ones within some societies, is different to whichever one newspapers keep talking about."

Durham is often benchmarked against Oxford and Cambridge. The comparisons are inescapable particularly because they are all collegiate universities. There are students who resent this comparison, particularly the misnomer of the 'Oxbridge reject,' since most students are not in fact unsuccessful candidates of Oxford or Cambridge.[18] Nevertheless, this mischaracterisation refers to the Durham student and their experience as an "imitation" or secondary to the supremacy of its competitors. For Durham's core demographic, there is in fact an intense desire to preserve student life as an accurate reflection of the "Durham University brand" and its likeness to its peer institutions because it confirms the Durham student as just as good. The comparison to other universities fosters a false and at times naïve sense of competition amongst Durham students. Students feel an overwhelming pressure to not only exist but to thrive within a co-opted version of an Oxbridge experience, which can create a heightened university environment. As a result, the students tend to become very protective over parts of Durham, particularly college and common room traditions, ways of working, and the ritualism of formals, to signal their proximity to this trope. They become very protective of the symbols and rituals of class identities commonly associated with Oxford and Cambridge.

"Sexual violence is so prevalent because the first time students have heard the word 'No' was from Oxford and Cambridge."

In the Summer of 2020, a series of leaked screenshots of a group chat led to the decision by Durham Students' Union to ban the

Durham University Conservative Association (DUCA) and the Durham University Free Market Association (DUFMA) from operating as Durham SU societies.[19] The following September, Durham University withdrew the place of an offer holder involved in a group chat for "posh lads" after screenshots of his misogynistic comments, including a competition among members "to have sex with poorest girl on campus," circulated on social media and in national press.[20] This ignited a dialogue amongst Durham students regarding a trend in problematic behaviours that continually go ignored, perpetuated by this posh public-school boy culture. Many students took to social media to convey their outrage and share similar personal anecdotes of belittlement, othering, and bullying. Although many of the problematic behaviours associated with student communities are not unique to Durham, there is something to be said about how these particularly toxic behaviours are linked to the "posh public-school boy" character. The student reaction to the leaked screenshots reveals that many students recognise the stereotype as a core component of the student culture. Although we cannot assume that toxic, problematic, and antisocial behaviours of Durham students are inherently linked to this singular gendered class identity of the core demographics, we would be remiss to ignore the sense of self-importance and superiority that is instantly recognisable to both current students and the wider public. Following the leaks of the "Posh Lad" group chat, many incoming freshers reported feelings of anxiety and trepidation towards entering a university defined by this posh public-school boy trope, which reveals how unsettling and damaging this character really is.[21]

"Being in a Bailey college I have never come across so many entitled people in my life who think they are better than you because they went to private or grammar schools…"

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

Durham University needs a radically ambitious Access and Participation plan that is framed around depicting a contemporary Durham student.
Durham needs recruitment and outreach programmes that expand the University's reach to schools and communities with little to no awareness of the institution. There is plenty of best practice in Team Durham, for example, utilising sports as a pathway into Durham, yet the collegiate experience remains at the forefront of Durham's branding. The Durham University Access and Engagement division needs to consider that colleges may not be the ultimate selling point for a diverse range of students and the aspiration to be a Durham student may also lie in the opportunities for growth that exist externally to the collegiate system. We need a diverse generation of students who want to come to Durham because they can see their authentic selves as potential Durham students, rather than aspiring to fit into a caricature from a bygone era.

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19 *Palatinate,* "Durham Conservative Association Split after Decision," 19 September 2020. https://www.palatinate.org.uk/durham-conservative-association-split-after-su-decision/
20 See for example, *Mail Online,* "'Posh Lads' at Durham University planned competition to have sex with poorest girl on campus and discussed date-rape drugs," 9 September 2020. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8713083/Posh-lads-Durham-University-planned-competition-sex-poorest-girl-campus.html See Also, *The Times,* "Durham University freshers 'Aimed to have sex with poorest student,'" 9 September 2020. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/durham-university-freshers-aimed-to-have-sex-with-poorest-student-ggsch723j
21 *Palatinate,* "Why aren't more working-class students at Durham?" 11 November 2021. https://www.palatinate.org.uk/why-arent-more-working-class-students-at-durham/

This goes beyond representation for representation's sake, and promoting both the images and stories of contemporary Durham students and alumni.

With diverse and 'culturally competent' recruiting staff, Durham can start to transform its reputation.

The premise that the geography of the University is a major barrier to having a diverse student body is both outdated and at times just false. Other universities in the North of England have been able to access pockets of diverse communities from all over the country and the world, despite their location.[22] Academic and professional service staff are underappreciated and underutilised assets of the Durham brand, particularly for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. What students want to learn, how they learn, and who they will be taught and mentored by are important drivers in their decision-making. Celebrating departments with a diverse range of staff and postgraduate research students can help project the University experience as being centred on training and education rather than the 'Wider Student Experience' (WSE).[23] Through department ambassadors, students, and staff alike, we can present a three-dimensional portrayal of teaching and learning at Durham. Diversity in departments positively informs how teaching and learning is delivered and how the University is perceived. To prioritise the extracurricular opportunities that are promoted under the WSE over the excellence of academic staff and postgraduate visibility in departments is to waste an opportunity to encourage more students to choose Durham.

Student leaders' and representatives' pledge on student culture.

It is important that the student community, led by its student leaders, collectively condemn problematic behaviours alongside the University because it signals to onlookers and potential students the standards and expectations we set for ourselves. There is a lack of collective and consistent outrage from student leaders, and on the rare occasions it does happen, it is often triggered by a scandal or a leak. Student leaders can set a precedent for what a contemporary Durham student is, divorced from damaging stereotypes, by speaking up and speaking out. The complex system of student representatives in Durham needs to draft a pledge that becomes integral to our work and that challenges the elitist culture at Durham.

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22 *Study International* "Where are the UK's most diverse universities? – rankings", 05 April 2018.
https://www.studyinternational.com/news/where-uks-most-diverse-universities-rankings/
23 "University Strategy 2017-2027." https://www.dur.ac.uk/strategy2027/student/

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Image courtesy of Durham University

CHAPTER TWO -
CULTURE BY BELONGING
BELONGING IN A BUBBLE

"There's a general feeling of wanting to belong."

To be at Durham is to be in a bubble. The 'Durham bubble' is an intimate university experience with ready-made student communities that provide current students and alumni with a remarkable sense of identity and belonging. Each college has its unique history and traditions; the Durham Union Society prides itself on being "the oldest and largest society of the University," [24] and through the University's website, prospective students can compare colleges based on the year they were founded and what values and traditions they uphold. The Durham bubble is as much about collegiality and comradery as it is history and tradition. Students are given college families, some are involved in secret societies and sports teams, and many develop lifelong friendships, relationships, and marriages. The Durham bubble is a culture of hyper-interactivity, interconnectivity, and an inescapable closeness. Durham's greatest strength is arguably its sense of community. The Durham bubble is a self-sustaining success. The collegiate structure undoubtedly contributes to the University's narrative of its exceptionalism and exclusivity. However, there is a dissonance between the principle of having a collegiate system and its impact. A bubble can distort perspective, inflate one's sense of self, and limit wider interaction.

"If I walk down north road, I can guarantee I will bump into someone I know."

Due to the overrepresentation of 'home' students within the undergraduate cohorts, the Durham Bubble feels young and very English. Mature and postgraduate students reported feeling displaced within student life because they either have less time or less space for their hobbies, both inside and outside college. Infamous for its drinking culture, enabled by college bars and the popularity of elite sports, the young English university bubble encourages laddish behaviours. The loud, intimidating, and at times, aggressive actions of young male students have led to predatory behaviours and incidents of sexual misconduct and violence. For international students in particular, many tokens of British culture, including excessive drinking, shared mealtimes and college dining traditions, the nightlife, formals, etc., are barriers to an internationalised experience, though many admitted they were and still are attracted to the feel of the University as a uniquely "British" institution.

"Yeah, most people I know, know someone who has been sexually assaulted, which is sad."

COLLEGES AND CLASS

"When college works, it works incredibly well."

The College system in Durham breaks the student body into 17 manageable communities. There are many ways to measure the success of the collegiate model including through its retention rates, its rate of returners, and its alumni donations. However, the true success of the college system is measured by the immense sense of pride students have for their colleges and respective common rooms; the affection is visceral and for many students, college is the most impactful part of the Durham student experience. Friendly college rivalries, comparing traditions and stereotypes, common room activity and campaigns, and alumni attachment demonstrate how colleges are the immovable pillars of student culture. Students derive value from being at Hatfield or being a student at St Chad's and, arguably, their sense of belonging as a Durham student starts and ends with their perspective of their college. This unwavering loyalty to protect the quality of the collegiate experience reached its peak during the University's 2019-20 college restructuring decision also known as BPR2, that saw a dramatic change to college operations and staffing. Students en masse displayed a collective sense of ownership over their collegiate experience in objecting to many of the changes stemming from the restructuring.

"I went to a formal dinner at Hatfield once. Never again. They were banging cutlery on the tables. It was so childish and disrespectful to the staff."

On the other hand, the comforts and security of a college are overtly reminiscent of a boarding school. There are set mealtimes, a regular room cleaning service, college principals, and the subtle elitism of the British upper classes. Colleges are a highly polarising feature of Durham University as they can just as easily be experienced as a foreign, paternalistic imposition. Many times, college can feel like a glorified school, restricting students' exploration into the wider university or community. When respondents would recount their feelings of exclusion, it was in reference to their collegiate experience.

"It's very cliquey and tribal."

CULTURES OF EXCLUSION

"No one tells you how much everything will cost."

The culture(s) of exclusion in the Durham community are commonly framed around accessibility and affordability, with a particular focus on the hidden costs of the 'Wider Student Experience'. For example, beyond the increasing tuition fees are the rising costs of accommodation (be it in catered colleges, purpose-built student accommodation, or shared rental housing), common room levy fees, gowns, the frequent formals, balls, fashion shows, etc. The Working-Class Students' Association, Students with Disabilities Association, college #Rippedoff

campaigns, student workers, and the 93% Club often reported that the cost of being a student is wildly underestimated because we assume the average student is wealthy. Hidden costs are a major barrier to entry and contribute to the image of Durham's exclusivity and pretentiousness.

Moreover, hierarchies of class are mirrored by hierarchies of race and other forms of discrimination including misogyny, xenophobia, and homophobia that manifest into explicit acts of violence. Recent examples of these acts include zoom-Bombing LGBTQ+ events[25] and the high prevalence of drink spiking.[26]

"The queer spaces are really tight and close-knit. We all know each other and look out for one another."

There is a prominent and vocal minority of Durham students who struggle to find a sense of belonging, either because they are naturally disengaged or over time become disillusioned. For these students, their sense of belonging comes from community building, particularly around alternative hobbies and interests, or personal, political or religious identities. Respondents commonly labelled this Durham's "counterculture" and identified an 'anti-Durham' student as someone who tends to keep the Durham bubble at a distance.

The 'anti-Durham student' is more selective regarding their 'Wider Student Experience'. Notable examples are college feminist groups, student groups representing racial and religious minorities, the First Generation Scholars Network, groups who coalesce around key campus based social issues ("It's Not Ok," "Not on My Campus," "Reclaim the Night," to name a few), as well as many Students' Union Associations, including Trans, Mature, LGBT+, International Students, People of Colour, Students with Disabilities, Women, and Working-Class student groups.

Within the Durham counterculture the communities are disparate, and they vary in size, presence, and activity. It is also important to note that the collegiate nature of the University does not necessarily obstruct the emergence of alternative, non-traditional communities as they are not necessarily antithetical to core student life, nor are so-called 'anti-Durham' students exclusively represented by marginalised or minoritised students. For example, Durham People of Colour Association successfully led a series of anti-racism workshops in St Cuthbert's Society demonstrating the interconnectivity of student networks.

"As a Northern student, I felt like a complete outsider."

Student Laura White's report (discussed earlier) about the experience of northern students highlights the superiority complexes of some Durham students, who find enjoyment and entitlement in ridiculing local-area students for their accents, despite the university's geographic location in the northeast of England. The 'Durham bubble,' populated disproportionately by southern middle- and upper-class students, empowers their classist attitudes, internally and within

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25 *Palatinate* "St. Mary's LGBT+ Zoom event hijacked by anonymous callers" 20 October 2020.
https://www.palatinate.org.uk/st-marys-lgbt-zoom-event-hijacked-by-anonymous-callers/
26 *Palatinate* "Increase in drink spiking incidents" 14 October 2021.
https://www.palatinate.org.uk/increase-in-drink-spiking-incidents/

the larger County Durham community, often exacerbating existing tensions between long-term residents and transient students. An extreme example of this was in November 2017, when a miners' strike-themed social event at Trevelyan College, organised by members of the rugby team, posted an invitation on Facebook containing a tone-deaf, disrespectful understanding of the area's local history: "Flat caps, filth... a few working class and beating-bobbies wouldn't go amiss."[27]

BELONGING TO THE CITY

"But students will always choose to live in the viaduct."

Durham University has a tremendous sense of place. However, the 'Durham bubble' is very insular and as a result, students rarely identify with or as residents of the City of Durham; in fact, there is a sense of detachment. Students from the local area reported feeling displaced due to the over representation of affluent students from towns and cities in the South of England. Students can be both victims (suffering from racist/religious hate crimes, media scapegoating) and perpetrators of said othering (displaying a class and age-based superiority complex). As a result, students make conscious decisions regarding where they shop, eat, and live within the wider city, and show disregard for the place locals call home.

The symbolic geographies of student life are common in most university cities. In Durham, the perception of the student community from residents is overwhelmingly negative.[28]

However, daily interactions between residents and students are not exclusively hostile. Many student groups are involved in volunteering and outreach projects. A growing minority are locals themselves (although many choose to live at home and thus exist largely outside of the 'Durham bubble'). Many are employed in local bars, shops, and restaurants, are environmentally conscious and respectful neighbours, and are involved with student societies that are also open to public membership, for example Durham University Labour Club and Durham University Scout and Guide Group. However, the tense relationship with the local community is undeniable as most students exclusively reside within the bubble. Some will not go into the city on 'locals' nights' and rent houses where there is a concentrated student presence such as the Viaduct or Neville's Cross. The perception among locals is that Durham students are inconsiderate and irresponsible neighbours, which only fuels their growing concerns around increasing student numbers in the city.

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27 *BBC News,* "Durham students miners' strike-themed event 'disgraceful'", 17 November 2017.
https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-42128595
28 *The Guardian,* "Students may be wrecking Durham. But the University is to blame," 29 June 2018.
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/29/students-durham-university-blame-council-selfish

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

We should work towards enhancing the University's role in the city, through a pan-institution student engagement project, alongside the University's community engagement taskforces and residents' forums.

As a university, it is possible to retain a powerful sense of place and identity within the local context and establish an internationalised university hub. Universities should also be spaces where students learn how to be citizens and how to be community minded. Students need to learn and foster a civic responsibility that comes from looking beyond the institution and engaging with the wider community in which they reside. There is no united student community engagement framework or structure that centrally promotes philanthropy, civic participation, volunteering, and social entrepreneurship as a part of personal fulfilment and community building. All these areas need to be consolidated into an institution-wide framework, managed centrally with a hyper-visible student face. The goal should be to facilitate and incentivise students to look beyond the 'Durham bubble' and advocate on behalf of the university, not just within it. Supported by the departments, colleges, and professional services, a united project on external community engagement has the potential to shift the narrative of the Durham student for the local community by deepening students' connection to it.

Creating a Community Officer sabbatical role in the Durham Students' Union.

The cultures of exclusion and classism, deepening housing crises, and a general detachment from the wider city contribute to many students' separatism within the larger community. The challenges of community building, nurturing, and engagement need to be met by a Durham Students' Union with consideration for the unique collegiate structure of the University. By creating a sabbatical role that is focused on community building, both internal and external, we can begin to strategically tackle long-term systemic issues around elitism, the 'Durham bubble,' the struggles and challenges faced by international students, as well as liaising with the Pro Vice-Chancellor of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion for a bespoke student strategy on cultural change. The Welfare and Liberation sabbatical role must be uncoupled in order that a new configuration might emerge, one that separates the "welfare" aspects of the role from "liberation," and broadens the scope of liberation to focus on minoritised communities within Durham University and within Durham, the city and county. This new Communities Officer role would be the student lead on issues surrounding social mobility, outreach, and community relations. The role would also address exclusionary practices within the institution such as the lack of fit-for-purpose Muslim prayer spaces and ensuring colleges are equipped to provide kosher food for Jewish students.

Develop an educational programme that encompasses consent, consumption, and bystander intervention

As an institution, Durham likes to celebrate its uniqueness and tout its exceptionalism, but it must also confront its concomitant shortcomings. As noted previously, context matters, especially with the overrepresentation of 'home' undergraduate students, the concentration of drinking spaces,

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a culture of elite sports, the reliance on volunteerism, and a reputation of elitist entitlement. There is a need for a more expansive, required training around sex, relationships, drug and alcohol consumption, as well as the power dynamics of student leadership, and their inextricable link to consent. Two members of staff who specialise in sexual misconduct and violence have published extensively based on research they have conducted at Durham. In their first book, Addressing Student Sexual Violence in Higher Education, Clarissa Humphreys and Graham Towl note that, "in the United Kingdom where the legal drinking age is 18, the first few weeks at university in particular... there are fewer personal controls on personal behaviours with potentially greater impulsivity."[29] A sabbatical Community Officer in the Students' Union would lead on campaigns to help make Durham University sector leading in its commitment to reducing sexual misconduct and violence relative to peer institutions across the UK, and to empowering students who encounter it to report and find support.

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29 Humphreys, C.J. and Towl, G.J. (2020), *Addressing Student Sexual Violence in Higher Education*, Emerald Publishing Limited, 16.

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Image courtesy of Durham University

"Every department does it differently."

Each faculty, department and even module have their own culture(s) and therefore there are few universal observations students made about themselves or their peers in learning spaces. Dual honours students and students with elective modules from different departments regularly identified the varying and sometimes inconsistent learning experience they have when navigating their degrees – from interactions with their departments to classroom dynamics with peers to workload and support. Whilst some thrive, others are limited, and where some are supported, others feel isolated and neglected. Nonetheless, students felt an expectation to acclimate to a very 'Durham' way of working and that particular inflexibility exacerbated inequalities within the Durham education offer.

"It's the type of person that comes here, head boys, head girls, the senior prefects. You can smell the ambition."

The Culture Commission's research uncovered a prevalence of feelings of imposterism among Durham students. Particularly in relation to students from under-represented or non-traditional backgrounds within academically elite institutions, imposter syndrome describes one's feelings of inadequacy and incompetence.[30] Imposterism at Durham, however, seems to be more of a universal phenomenon as students regardless of background, reported feeling intimidated by their remarkable peers and the prominent narrative of the "exceptional Durham student." Students internalise the imperatives to "be busy", and to "be striving and thriving." The pressure of "being amongst the best" creates a collective anxiety of not being or doing enough." [31] Although this may not be true for all students, during the research many students made connections between imposterism as a public phenomenon and a culture of obnoxious posturing, overcompensation, and pretentiousness.

"You know those boys that are always talking like they have something to prove. It is so annoying."

Students from underrepresented backgrounds reported feeling "marginalised," "dismissed," and "silenced" as the dominant voices of their peers can at times become overbearing. The willingness to play devil's advocate, to have the last word, to always be that loudest voice in the room can create an unspoken hierarchy where these voices are centred and prioritised.

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30 Cokley, Kevin, Germine Awad, Leann Smith, Stacey Jackson, Olufunke Awosogba, Ashley Hurst, Steven Stone, Lauren Blondeau, and Davia Roberts, "The Roles of Gender Stigma Consciousness, Impostor Phenomenon and Academic Self-Concept in the Academic Outcomes of Women and Men." Sex Roles vol. 73, no. 9-10, Nov. 2015, 414-26. https://doi-org.proxy.library.nd.edu/10.1007/s11199-015-0516-7. Accessed 13 Dec. 2019. See also, Drane, Leslie E. E., Jordan W. Lynton, Yarí Cruz-Rios, Elizabeth Watts Malouchos, and Katherine Kearns, "Transgressive Learning Communities: Transformative Spaces for Underprivileged, Underserved, and Historically Underrepresented Graduate Students at Their Institutions." *Teaching and Learning Inquiry* vol. 7, no. 2, 2019, 106-20. https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/TLI/article/view/57535/53369.
31 Breeze M. (2018), "Imposter Syndrome as a Public Feeling," In Taylor Y., and K. Lahad (eds), *Feeling Academic in the Neoliberal University: Palgrave Studies in Gender and Education*, Palgrave Macmillan, 191-219. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64224-6_9

First-generation scholars and international students are often frustrated with the use of "flowery language," "obscure references," and a general "overconfidence of one's opinion" to the point of pomposity. As a result, these students tend to be more reticent and reserved, more reluctant to share or contribute to discussions, which induced overwhelming feelings that they need to play catch up.

TEACHING AT DURHAM

"I liked my degree; my degree did not like me."

When students were asked about their relationship with academic members of staff, the findings, again reflected a sense of inconsistency as some students reported feeling supported and encouraged by teaching staff whereas others recognised a detached and distant relationship from academic staff. The latter was an observation also made by academics themselves, reflecting on students' "transactional" attitudes towards their education and as a result their educators. Several academics who were interviewed recalled hostile interactions with students, reflecting the recurring themes of entitlement and disrespect also highlighted in the Respect Commission. One academic member of staff even stated they felt students belonged more to their colleges than to their departments and desired a stronger bond with their students both in and out of the classroom environment.

"Students are always busy but never busy with their degrees. They are running for an election, have choir or lacrosse practice or hanging out with friends."

In the students' minds, the 'Wider Student Experience' is distinctly separate from the academic side of their degrees, largely because the University promotes it to be that way. Students attend a few lectures and seminars a week or have their designated lab hours, and leftover is a considerable amount of free time to explore and pursue other interests. They turn to WSE opportunities to seek out opportunities for enrichment, development, and personal growth, arguably because they are not consumed by their education in ways they had previously expected. One respondent explained that this is why extracurricular activities like competitive debating, sport, and leadership roles within common rooms are so popular. Students are encouraged to have overactive social lives because in their minds their departments are responsible for their learning, whilst their colleges, societies and sports teams are responsible for their wider enrichment. This distinction enables students to dedicate a considerable amount of time to extracurricular activities and often leave their education as an afterthought, given the fewer or less obvious opportunities for overlap.

"No-one talks in my seminars."

In contrast to the undergraduate emphasis on the "work hard, play hard" dichotomy, postgraduate and mature students identified a culture of enthusiasm and a general willingness to centre their student experience

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within learning communities or at least strike a balance between their education and WSE. Comparatively, there is more diversity in the postgraduate and mature student numbers and as a result, these students also identify student cultures of inclusion. Postgraduate and mature students, admitted with distinctly different and diverse student journeys, observed that when their learning environments were populated by students from different backgrounds, ages, nationalities, and life experiences, they felt more comfortable and more relaxed.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

Curriculum reform is essential for the evolution of student culture at Durham University.

Curriculum reform may look and feel like anything and everything, but what is important is that there is a reimagining of the Durham education offer to address the inconsistency in learning experiences. Who is the Durham student? This is both a question of diversity and of what it means to study in this university. The core vision, clear purpose, and distinct identity of a Durham degree should be more obvious that it currently is. For students to feel equally supported and challenged by their degree, the Durham education offer needs to both identify the diversity in student learning journeys and critical capabilities whilst carving out a specific "Durham tradition" that is identifiable and communicated to all students regardless of department or course.

For an example of best practice, Durham University can look to the London School of Economics (LSE), another academically elite, research-intensive institution, however with a vastly different history, geography and student body. LSE offer a compulsory module entitled 'LSE 100,' described as "LSE's flagship interdisciplinary course for all undergraduate students designed to bring you into the heart of the LSE tradition... with aims to broaden your education and intellectual experience at the School and to deepen your understanding of your own discipline."[32] LSE 100 introduces all new students to the LSE tradition and the university as a learning community. It articulates the vision and the identity of an LSE degree regardless of department or course. Director of LSE, Baroness Minouche Shafik, explains that the module "is designed to ensure that LSE graduates possess distinctive skills that cut across specialist subject areas."[33]

Decolonising the curriculum and the university.

As a university, we have already made strides toward decolonising the curriculum. [34] Initiated by Durham Students' Union Officers and the Durham University People of Colour Association actively campaigning and drafting a Manifesto,[35] their efforts culminated in wide-scale support from the Vice-Provost (Education) to support paid student interns to carry out anti-racist projects and to restructure colonialist pedagogy and knowledge. Often decolonisation is conflated with diversity and puts the burden of creating meaningful change on students of colour from marginalised backgrounds rather than

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32 LSE website. https://info.lse.ac.uk/current-students/lse100
33 Ibid.
34 Durham University website
https://www.durham.ac.uk/departments/academic/common-awards/policies-processes/curriculum/decolonisation/
35 Durham University website https://documentcloud.adobe.com/spodintegration/index.html?r=1&locale=en-us
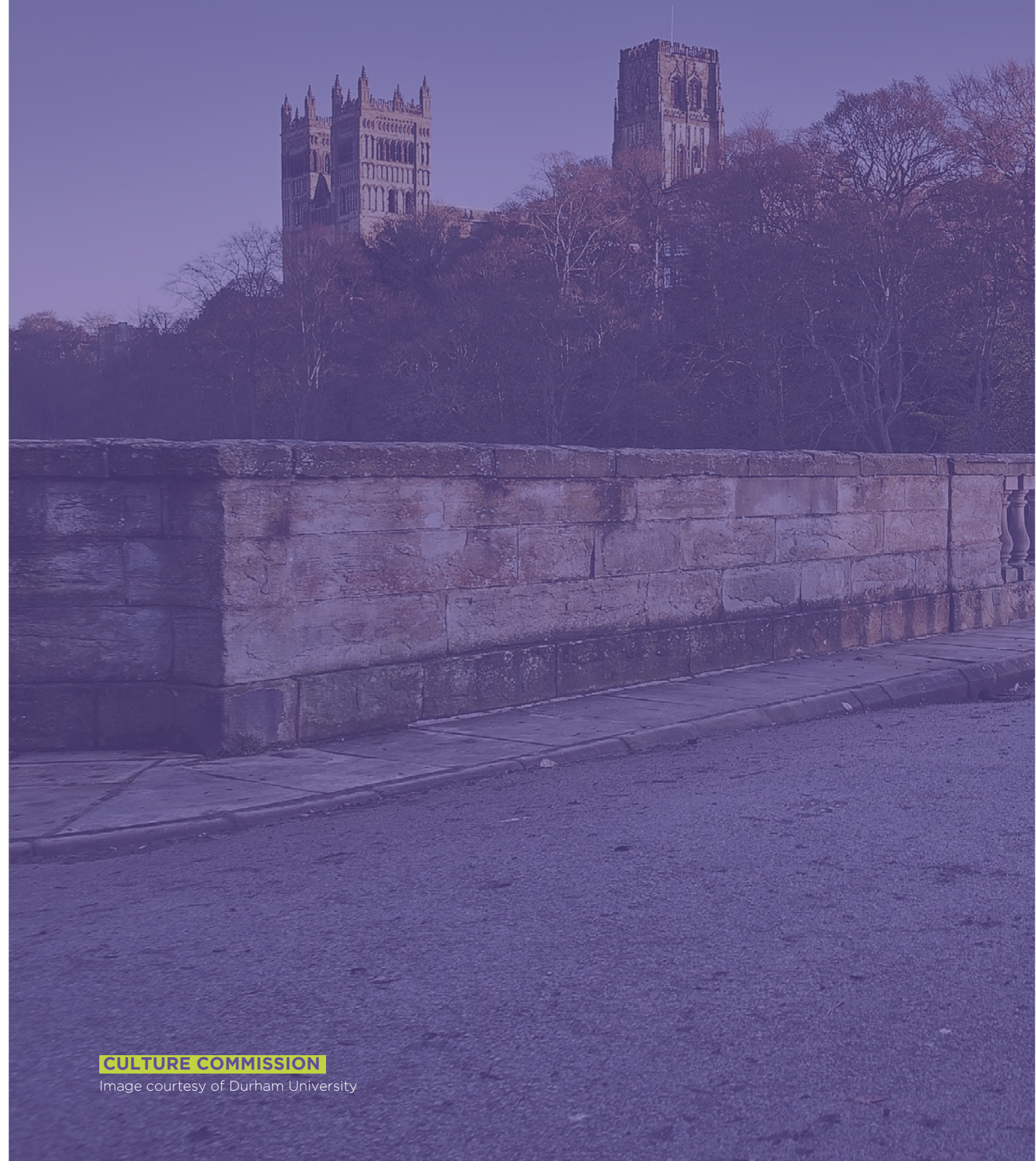
being regarded as a transformative means of enhancing the fundamental quality of higher education in Britain. The expanded bases of knowledge and other key tenets within the decolonisation agenda seek to undermine the superiority of the western canon and therefore is liberating and empowering to all students. Decolonisation at Durham, though underway, still requires development and further support. It has taken different forms in different departments and faculties, but it is providing a means for students to engage in the co-production of knowledge, in self-discovery and reflection, and it is addressing the legacies of imperialism on British higher education. Moreover, decolonisation fosters a culture of collaboration between international students and British students, students of colour and their white peers and academics alike. All are encouraged to embark on journeys of epistemic resistance, which is crucial for an enlightened education. The process of decolonisation is itself enriching to student culture as it grants more opportunities for students to actively reflect on their teaching and learning, and unpack their student identity.

For transgressive learning communities to emerge at Durham University, there needs to be more interaction between the colleges and departments.
Through the collegiate system, a tangible sense of community is fostered and through departments, the academic excellence of Durham University is realised, therefore greater interaction will inevitably create a more immersive learning experience. The reality that education and the Wider Student Experience are alien to each other – are at times in conflict with each other – at Durham University is problematic. More cross-over is needed. For example, if public lectures were hosted by colleges during term times, or if academic reps promoted the work of academic societies to colleges and departments alike, or if academics received open invitations into Junior, Middle, and Senior common room events, we may begin to bridge the gap between the WSE and the educational sides of the institution. Ustinov College provides an example of what this might look like. It hosts a Café Politique, described by one of the students interviewed as "the premier politics discussion forum in Durham outside the School of Government and International Affairs." The Café Politique brings engaging discussions and presentations to the Ustinov community, covering a wide range of local and global political issues, to inspire the "global citizenship" intelligence of Durham students.[36] This demonstrates how the postgraduate community can nurture learning communities outside of their degree, within the social structure of the college. Sadly, similar examples of WSE/academic interests intersecting in this manner are rare.

36 Durham University Website https://www.durham.ac.uk/colleges-and-student-experience/colleges/ustinov/fees/glob-al-citizenship-programme--scholarship/

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Image courtesy of Durham University

CULTURE OF SUPPORT
PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT SAFETY AND MENTAL HEALTH

"Yes, I do feel safe."

Overall, students feel safe when they are in Durham. It is a relatively small city, with a dominating student presence, and students are encouraged to interact in university spaces. Although the drinking culture may be problematic, it is centred in college bars, which are relatively secure and supervised environments. Nonetheless, Durham's reputation as a safe university is admittedly deceptive as student safety is experienced differently depending on the vantage point. Its reputation as a 'safe city' means that students are more willing to either test their boundaries or influence one another into excess as evidenced by sporting initiations, binge drinking, or just walking alone at night. The collective take on student safety may be overwhelmingly positive, however when considering sexual violence, harassment, and hate crimes, student safety is not felt evenly. It is disproportionately less safe for female, queer presenting, and visibly religious and racial minority students.

"I wouldn't hold hands with my partner on the streets."

In addition to safety, student mental health is another major theme revealed by the Culture Commission's research. Students feel that mental health continues to go unrecognised and under-addressed. The collective feeling is that the hidden cost of the WSE, in addition to housing and workload stress, is the (very Durham) cultural expectation to always be busy. In addition to myriad personal challenges students must confront at university, respondents believed that Durham students were either unwilling or unable to admit feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or exhausted because of the social pressure to perform an exciting student lifestyle. This contributes to persistent feelings of imposterism akin to those discussed earlier that are framed around class and finances.

"I think there is a right way to do Durham and I am doing it wrong."

STUDENT SUPPORT AT DURHAM

"Yes, I would say I know where to find help."

Welfare is undoubtedly student-led, student-driven and student-centric but also lacks common standards, professional expertise and at times can be overly complicated. Students know that their first point of contact for their welfare concerns is their college, however their willingness to interact with college support is dependent on their relationship with said college. Between academic departments, the Students' Union sabbatical officers and its advice service, professional staff and student groups, college welfare and common room leaders, and professional service staff such as the Counselling Service, there are many avenues for student support. Regardless, students can also feel as though they are being bounced around a disjointed university support structure with inadequate signposting.

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The student support framework is particularly difficult to navigate for international students, those unfamiliar with the concept of a college, and those who require bespoke pastoral care. The diversity of support, particularly peer-to-peer support, has been identified as both a strength and as a weakness. Many academic members of staff reported students coming to them with welfare concerns and admitted their own inability to navigate the student support system, causing them to give unhelpful advice and pointing students in the wrong direction.

Peer-led support is at the heart of welfare at Durham and relies on students generously giving up enormous amounts of time and labour to provide welfare in colleges, departments, student groups and societies, the Students' Union Associations, and related student groups. Peer-led support demands an inordinate level of volunteerism such as that offered by Nightline, whose student volunteers practice 'active listening' and work shifts from 9pm-7am as often as every four days.[37] Mental Health Advisors in the Counselling Service have expanded the mental health training they offer to include student Association leaders, however, as relentless volunteerism is normalised, inconsistent signposting, incidents of predatory practices (such as "sharking") at social events, and burn-out remain problems. Despite attempts to offer training, students are not mental health professionals. They may put themselves and others at risk.

Sexual and gendered violence is a major concern for students and activists as evidenced by "Reclaim the Night,"[38] "Not on my Campus," [39] and Active Bystander campaigns. [40] The close proximity of students within the 'Durham bubble' and the prevalence of drinking culture increases the risk of sexual violence between students. Some students believe the makeup of the Durham cohort further increases this risk – drawing a parallel between the entitlement of the stereotypical upper middle-class student and the entitlement perpetrators feel over others' bodies and spaces. This is paired with a lack of proper education for Durham's student leaders regarding the relationship between consent and positions of power.

Durham's social hierarchies create a possible barrier to reporting and intervention. Students may not want to intervene or report their own experiences if the perpetrator has a position of social power or leadership within their immediate community. Many students feel disappointed with the state of Durham bystandership – noting a general sense of apathy and recollections of peers who do defend and excuse misconduct out of an uncompromising sense of loyalty. This further pushes survivors to different sources of support such as alternate social groups, external helplines and resources, and the anonymous social media page "Durham Survivors."

"I can always find someone to help."

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37 Durham Nightline website https://durhamnightline.com
38 *Palatinate* Virtual "Reclaim the Night" vigil to be held to remember Sarah Everard – Palatinate 12 March 2021.
39 Ibid.
40 *Palatinate* Over 500 students receive new 'Active Bystander' training – Palatinate 17 October 2019.

DISSATISFACTION, OUTRAGE, AND PROTEST

"Students value process over purpose."

When students do not feel supported by their university or want to express dissatisfaction, outrage, and general protest, they do so through a discernibly Durham brand of collectivism. Under the collegiate system, students are supported by a myriad of student representatives, leaders and collectives that struggle to interact with each other. The 'student voice' becomes fragmented because it relies on functioning relations between and amongst student leaders, thus making student representation itself a common source of conflict. Collectivism at Durham looks like petitioning via a longstanding tradition of letters to the Vice-Chancellor and Pro Vice-Chancellors. Student representation is dictated by constant elections and by-elections that are run as popularity contests in common rooms and student groups and that abuse the 're-open nominations' function (RON). There is a high expectation when it comes to creating change at Durham and the outcomes are often underwhelming. Moreover, student activism rarely looks like large in-person protests or boycotts, though there are a few noticeable exceptions such as climate strike protests led by ECO DU and the recent protests of the South College Principal's bullying "free speech" tactics.[41] When asked, respondents struggled to identify what and where the politicised consciousness of the student body is and can be located. This was also a recurring observation made by academic members of staff who were careful not to generalise all students but wanted to see more engagement and enthusiasm in student activism.

"I don't know what Durham students care about to be honest."

Activism is very sensitive to the politics of student leadership and representation. An example of this is the hidden culture of hacking, which is when a group of students running in certain elections accumulate roles on committees for self-serving outcomes rather than to influence positive change in the institution. Many students see this as a legitimate form of protest because of the sheer volume of roles and representation opportunities at Durham. Furthermore, there are many students who choose not to engage in the student representation framework at all and pursue activism through a culture of whistleblowing, utilising external press and media outlets, contributing to the sensationalist narrative of Durham students and student culture. This form of activism through reputational damage has proven to be an effective tool for the students who wield it but it creates little helpful change for the student body as a whole.

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41 *The Guardian*, "Durham head steps back after calling students 'pathetic' at Rod Liddle event," 9 December 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/dec/09/durham-head-steps-back-after-calling-students-pathetic-at-rod-liddle-event

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

The Student Consultation Framework needs to be updated.
For students to have an effective and constructive dialogue with the University, they need to understand the boundaries for student consultation and representation. Mapping out where student representation and consultation lay, empowers students and student representatives to actually engage with it. Student leaders appreciate clarity and communication, and a student consultation framework that reflects the unique collegiality of the institution whilst respecting the diversity and hierarchy of student leadership can only enhance student activism and mitigate against conflict.

The student support framework, both pastoral and academic, needs to be consolidated into a central structure.
Currently there is no integrated system that recognises the dual importance of both academic and welfare support within the University's departments. Although all students are allocated an academic advisor, most have little to no contact with them past Michaelmas term of their first year. With student mental health issues on the rise, a more comprehensive approach to student support would be welcome.

The student support framework needs to include a strategy for the academic advisor system, either to abandon it completely or to enhance the system. The academic advisors in other collegiate universities play a crucial role in the academic experience and the culture of support, yet in Durham are wildly underutilised, while college student support staff are overburdened and ill-equipped to handle the volume of student support needs that exist.

Greater transparency around the outcome of disciplinaries
There is a strong sense that students have little faith in the University's complaints and disciplinary process for students due to a lack of transparency or effective communication in reporting outcomes. Students greatly value a responsive, transparent, and speedy disciplinary process, and the University must demonstrate how seriously it takes its commitments to equality and inclusivity. It is in the University's silence regarding the outcome of cases or the reluctance to breakdown reporting data around sexual assault and misconduct, that students lose faith in the culture of support at the institution.

CONCLUSION

In the interviews I conducted I always asked students what they liked the most about Durham, and for most respondents the answer was the same. For the average student, Durham feels like a second home. They feel secure and protected, whilst their friends in the University of Manchester or University College London were simply plunged into student life with no guidance, community, or support. Durham offers a smoother transition into adulthood.

There is nothing inherently wrong with being in an environment that is comfortable and familiar, but when it comes to culture, it is an aspect of Durham we neglect to unpack. When we start to ask who is comfortable or protected in student life, we are almost exclusively talking about a ready-made student, someone almost pre-programmed to thrive in our institution because it is familiar. The persistent attraction to Durham is being surrounded by people who look, sound, think and behave in the same ways as they do and who have been shielded from the rest of the world. The students that flourish enjoy the heighted sense of sameness that Durham offers. The irony is that the "Durham difference" is its homogeneity.

It is therefore fundamentally disingenuous to portray Durham's elitism as purely cosmetic. Elitism is the allure of Durham and is why student culture has remained unchanged. This is also why Durham is such a draw for the media. Journalists are so deeply fascinated by our little bubble of elitism in the northeast of England, and although our relationship with class, wealth and privilege may have shifted in recent years, there is still something very enticing about Durham's self-preservation. Elitism is the magnetic pull of the institution and the true USP. Durham can replicate itself in its image because of this idea of familiar and avoidance of diversity.

Although Durham's success is reflected in high student retention rates, the collegiate system, and alumni loyalty, to what extent are we conflating the undisturbed experiences and memories of privileged students with an inclusive, challenging and rewarding student culture? The truth is Durham is not an authentic reflection of wider society because student culture is cultivated to be familiar to one type of student. Durham feels like a second home because it is a second home, which means it can never provide a diversity of experiences and opportunities to a wider range of students. Herein lies the problem with student culture.

The sector's regulator, the Office for Students, requires universities to provide value for money and ensure public investment into higher education is protected. The University has a civic responsibility and regulatory obligation to produce conscientious graduates, proving higher education is a public good. Yet, the institution has forsaken its responsibility to expand the worldview of its students and cultivated a culture of comfort and familiarity. The average Durham student can easily see themselves in their curriculum or in college hallways so there is no incentive for them to challenge themselves to break out of the 'Durham bubble.'

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Diversity is at the very heart of cultural change, for the growth of the individual and the growth of the institution collectively.

To deconstruct Durham's elitist image, we must subvert the image of what the Durham student is and retell our collective narrative in a way that speaks to not just the diversity of student backgrounds and identities currently in the institution, but that also paints a picture of an institution we can all feel at home in.

The following recommendations are drawn from the above report, but are categorised into three distinct areas:

• Access, participation and support
• Student leadership and student engagement
• Curriculum and wider education

The recommendations themselves include both strategic pieces of work and "quick fix" suggestions to be undertaken by the University and the students' union. In recognising that culture change is a long-term endeavour that requires commitment and action from all areas of the community, I hope that the recommendations provided kickstart a much-needed sea change that enable Durham University to continue its reputation for notoriety, but this time for all the right reasons.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In consultation with the Commissioners, below are a series of recommendations for both Durham University and Durham Students' Union to begin to shift the culture within the University community.

Access, participation and support

Durham University to:
Develop a radically ambitious Access and Participation Plan that supports the contemporary Durham student in partnership with the student body. Key areas we believe the plan should focus on are:

- Recruitment and outreach programmes that expand the reach into diverse schools and communities.
- Deeper relationships with the local community in the North East, so Durham University becomes a destination for students from the area.
- Celebrate Durham's diversity with prospective students and the wider student community.
- Encourage retention and further study for Durham students by creating a Postgraduate Access and Participation Plan.

Durham University to:
Standardise and better communicate the student support frameworks that exist for students for both pastoral and academic issues. Monitor and evaluate how useful and accessible students find these changes to be.

Durham University to:
Commit to fit for purpose spaces of worship and religious practices.

- Create a permanent prayer space for Muslim students.
- Have more provision within the colleges to be able to prepare and serve halal and kosher food whilst supporting staff responsible to be able to provide this confidently.

Durham University to:
Develop and review culturally competent and intersectional mental health support and provision for students.

Durham University to:
Engage in effective communication and transparency of student disciplinary outcomes that includes dialogue and engagement with affected communities.

Student leadership and student engagement

Durham Students' Union to:
Develop mechanisms for student leaders and student groups to better coordinate in collectively condemning and challenging toxic behaviours.

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Durham University and Durham Students' Union to:
Co-develop an institution wide framework that supports students to engage more deeply with the local community of which they are part.

Durham Students' Union to:
Explore splitting the role of Welfare and Liberation Officer into two roles, one to focus on student welfare and the other to focus on liberation and community. Core elements of the new officer remit could include:

- Liaise with colleges, common rooms and Experience Durham.
- Student leadership and advocacy on issues relating to equality, diversity, inclusion and culture.
- Responsibility within the students' union Associations, faith groups, and other minority or marginalised groups.
- Liaise with PVC Global, PVC EDI, Director of EDI, as well as local MPs and city council, residence groups etc.
- Lead on external community engagement including outreach, civic participation, volunteering, philanthropy, and social enterprise.

Durham University and Durham Students' Union to:
Revise and update the Student Consultation Framework in recognition of the complexity of student leadership at the institution.

Durham Students' Union to:
Raise the profile of academic representation within the University with clearer relationships and points of engagement constructed between academic representation and academic societies and communities. Additionally, redevelop and enhance academic representation training, development and success sharing by drawing on best practice from other institutions.

Durham Students' Union to:
Develop a leadership programme to support students from marginalised backgrounds to engage and participate in student leadership positions, explicitly tied to the above recommended access work.

Curriculum and wider education

Durham University to:
In consultation with appropriate student leaders, external and academic experts, develop a required learning programme that focuses on sex, relationships and drug consumption that goes beyond current work on consent.

Durham University and Durham Students' Union to:
Deliver active bystander training to all students.

Durham University to:
Create a universal core module for students that distils the key elements, competencies and expectations of the contemporary Durham education offer and experiences.

Durham University and Durham Students' Union to:
Continue to work at decolonising the curriculum to create more egalitarian learning communities within Durham. The Students' Union specifically should utilise the current group of Decolonisation Interns to develop a clear long-term strategy for student led decolonisation work within the institution, building on the learning and experience gained during this past year.

Durham Students' Union to:
Work in partnership to explore and champion ways that areas of the university community can better communicate and collaborate on learning experiences across Durham to develop stronger transgressive learning communities.

CULTURE COMMISSION

Culture
COMMISSION
DURHAMSU

CULTURE COMMISSION
Image courtesy of Durham University

MEET THE COMMISSIONERS

SEUN TWINS (she/her)
Lead Commissioner
Seun Twins is the President of Durham Students' Union 2020-2022. Originally from northwest London and daughter to Nigerian immigrants, Seun was first introduced to Durham University through the Sutton Trust Summer School, a programme designed to encourage bright students from underrepresented backgrounds to apply to leading universities. Following her acceptance, Seun was allocated to the College of St Hild and St Bede and graduated with a First-Class Honours in International Relations (BA) in July 2020.

As an undergraduate, Seun's wider student experience mainly consisted of serving as President of both Durham People of Colour Association and Durham Politics and International Relations Society. She was also active in many other student groups, including Durham Intersectional Feminism Society and African Caribbean Society, as well as being the student representative on the Durham University Race Equality Charter steering group.

Following graduation, Seun became the first person of colour President of Durham Students' Union and Vice Chair of the SU's Board of Trustees. She continued in these positions for a second year after a successful re-election. As President, Seun has been part of the recruitment for Durham University's first female Vice-Chancellor and first Pro Vice-chancellor of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. Seun has acted as Lead Commissioner and author of the Culture Commission 2020-2022.

Seun plans on remaining at Durham University for her postgraduate studies. Starting October 2022, she will start an MA in Research Methods and PhD in Durham's School of Government and International affairs. Seun remains active in the national student movement having served on the National Scrutiny Panel of the National Union of Students.

SAMANTHA BUDD (she/her)
Independent Commissioner
Sam's independent work focuses on inclusion and cultural transformation with a particular emphasis on racial equity in the workplace. She supports senior leaders and boards to develop competence and confidence in leading inclusive organisations.

Sam is a specialist associate with Oasis School of Human Relations and a core contributor to their inclusion, diversity and culture group and an associate with Advance HE, specialising in governance and inclusion advice to the higher education sector.

Sam has worked at board level for a wide range of organisations including 11 years as the Chief Executive of the University of Bristol Students' Union.

She is also a board advisor for the Black Professional Network and the Inclusive Companies Network. She is an Associate Non-Executive Director of Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership, NHS Trust and a member of the Seacole Group, the national network for Black and Minority Ethnic NHS Non- Executive Directors and Chair of the Faculty of Business and Law Advisory Board, University of West of England. She has recently completed an assignment supporting the National Union of Students as the interim Director of NUS UK.s the interim Director of NUS UK.

MEG HASKINS (she/her)
External Commissioner
Meg studied Theology and Religion at Durham University, where she took an active role in her college JCR and served as the Director of Nightline. Meg then went on to be Welfare and Liberation Officer at Durham SU 2018-19. She is one of two External Commissioners for the Culture Commission.

HARRIET AXBEY (she/her)
Harriet is a postgraduate research student from Stephenson College. She has seen Durham University from many different angles since first studying as an undergraduate on Stockton's Queen's Campus.

EVE COWEN (they/them)
Eve studied Archaeology at Durham University and was enthusiastically involved in the LGBT+ community whilst at university. They were thrilled to be involved with the Culture Commission as the necessary first step in challenging systemic issues at Durham.

ELOISE FRITSCH (she/her)
Eloise studied Politics and Sociology. She hopes that the commission will allow us to define, in students' own terms, what Durham culture looks like and how it should change.

PRISHANTI PATHAK (she/her)
Prishanti studied an MA in English Literature, looking at themes of decolonisation within literature and ideas of gender. She was also co-President of Durham Women's Association.

MICHAEL SHIE (he/him)
Michael studied Economics at University College and is from South East Asia. At Durham University, he played an active role in the International Students' Association, helping to plan their first Lunar New Year event in the Great Hall of Durham Castle.

J SMITH (they/them)
J is thrilled to have been part of the Culture Commission, emphasising the importance of the work being led by current students. They aimed to focus their input on amplifying the voices of students from underrepresented, marginalised and minority communities.

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DAN TAKYI (he/him)
Dan studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics, and was President of the People of Colour Association during his time at Durham University.

SAM WINDER (he/him)
Sam studied Computer Science at Durham University, where he took on various volunteer positions within the Josephine Butler JCR before becoming the JCR's President.

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ABOUT DURHAM STUDENTS' UNION

Durham SU was created by students in 1899 to bring students from across the university together.

Originally called the Durham Colleges Students' Representative Council, the aim of the union was to allow students to work collectively, regardless of their college, on issues affecting Durham students.

The union was founded when there were only four colleges so its role as a place for students to come together across the colleges has become more valuable as the university has grown.

The ethos of bringing students from across the university together continues today and can be seen in the 250+ societies run by students with the support of the students' union, elected union officers in representing students' views at all levels of the university, campaigning on topics like getting more space in the Billy B, and associations for particular groups of students like trans students and mature students.

Nowadays, the union has its own building, the officers have specialist support, and a national network of other students' unions to work with, but its roots as a place for students to work together are still seen in the things students do through the union.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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