

Council
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Durham SU Report
Proposed Resolution

Council is asked to note the contents of this report.

Communication Status: Paper	Open	x	Open Internal		Confidential Restricted/External	
Communication Status: Appendices	Open		Open Internal		Confidential Restricted/External	
Freedom of Information Exemption	Paper:					
	Appendices:					

Previous Consideration by this or other Committee

N/A

Further Committee approval required

N/A

Appendices

None

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 As the President of Durham SU, I present this report, which addresses:
- Priorities for Durham students.
 - Strategic student sector development, for Council's consideration.
 - Developments within Durham SU.

2. Priorities for Durham students
2.1 College fees and the cost of Durham

- 2.1.1 Durham students noted the recent paper to Finance Committee, which explored the cost of College. The paper was, regrettably, not consulted on prior to circulation to Committee, which could have assisted a more thorough discussion. The existence of the paper in any form, however, is a very welcome step. I am grateful to the University Finance Office for producing the paper following years of Durham SU urging a more transparent approach to unregulated student fees.
- 2.1.2 The paper provides information but fails to take any opportunity to reduce costs for students. Current market demand provides no incentive for the University to take action on widening participation by reducing costs of College; Council may, however,

be required to take action through national policy directives if it doesn't voluntarily show leadership on cost and value.

- 2.1.3 Council will be aware of the Augar review's focus on both value for money and access. The sector press has increasingly focussed on unregulated University income raised through accommodation fees (see Wonkhe on ["The rent challenge at the heart of the Augar review"](#) and a Times article which [casts student rent as a 'stealth tax'](#). The (recently departed) Minister for Higher Education was interviewed at WonkFest, a leading sector event for policy professionals, in November and he spoke about the student cost of living crisis and a [summary article](#) gives some insight into the editorial analysis. The Minister was asked about accommodation fees at the event in an 'in conversation with the Editor' session, and he said most of the issues students raise with him are around the cost of living crisis and, when asked about rent in particular, said *"we are looking at this issue [accommodation fees] in the Department [for Education]. I'm not quite sure rent control is the right mechanism, but I think what we can do around student accommodation to help with the cost of living is something that we are looking at"*. The Minister was asked whether he'd want the Augar review to consider student maintenance and the cost of living, to ensure that no proposals affected access negatively and he said that the review was about *"making sure education is accessible for everyone...within that, cost of living, maintenance, comes into that. I'd expect the review to look at that"*.
- 2.1.4 Council may also be aware of a recent Higher Education Policy Institute report ['Where do student fees really go? Following the pound'](#), which was welcomed by the Office for Students. The leadership shown in other institutions (chapter 4) may stand as a useful example of what Durham could strive for, if either UEC or Council chose to be transparent with its students. Chapter 3 may, perhaps, give some insight into the benefits of voluntarily publishing this information, before the regulator removes any choice as to transparency of income and expenditure.
- 2.1.5 Council is, again, urged to reflect that the Executive's denial of a problem in using a Finance Committee paper to tell students that 'they are not ripped off' is becoming an increasingly unsustainable position in light of policy pressure from government and the regulator. The recommendations of the HEPI report may be a useful starting point for UEC and Durham SU to have further conversations about financial transparency.

2.2 Private rented sector housing

- 2.2.1 Durham SU Welfare and Liberation Officer Meg Haskins has worked with 200 tenants at Dun Holm House, the most recent purpose built private housing complex in the City, to protest Fresh Student Living moving students in before the building was actually finished. In October, Meg, Roberta Blackman-Woods MP, and the Health and Safety Executive visited Dun Holm House and observed the barely legal position of the build. The tenants have received refunds and reduction as a result of our campaigning.
- 2.2.2 The presence of the University in the City, in the context of student number growth, is contributing to a dysfunctional private rented sector housing market. Landlords were only able to move students into unfinished and unsafe rooms because students were desperate to attend a leading University, needed a bed, had immediate access to cash, and houses of multiple occupation are less available and of lower quality than ever before. Durham SU has raised these issues with the local MP, who is shadow minister for Housing and Planning, and will have further conversations about the best way to correct a distorted housing market.

- 2.2.3 This should be an area of common interest for Durham SU, the University, and the County Council, but while words have been warm, action has so far been minimal. Council may be aware that the University is considering the best way to demonstrate leadership and engage with its community responsibilities; this would be an ideal opportunity for further work.

2.3 Students employed by the University

- 2.3.1 Durham SU is a volunteer-led organisation. We couldn't do the things we do without the commitment of students, and others, who want to give a few hours of their time. They want training, support, development, expenses, congratulations – but not wages. Durham SU and the students understand that they're not doing work, so wouldn't be contracted as workers or paid as such.
- 2.3.2 A large number of students are, however, employed by the University in various roles with wildly varied terms and conditions of employment: consider, for example, that work expectations of a postgraduate teacher in one department have no relationship to another department. There are a number of students who are classed as 'volunteers' who are most likely, in fact, working without payment: this might include, for example, students responsible for making open days so successful by welcoming people into Durham and into College.
- 2.3.3 Council is aware of a significant piece of work by colleagues in HR to better understand work across the University for career staff. Student staff are absolutely no different to career staff, and should have the same rights and expectations. Durham SU has raised these matters with the Director of HR, and Council may wish to consider the amount of risk to which the University is exposed by not having a clear understanding of student employment. This should be considered urgent work, and the first step may be a clear statement from Council and UEC that it accepts the rights of student workers, and realises the efforts necessary to ensure that they are valued and protected in the workplace.

2.4 Community Engagement

- 2.4.1 From 28-30 November I attended the first International Town & Gown Conference at Stellenbosch University, alongside the University Director of Student Support & Wellbeing, Sam Dale. The conference was attended by University and student leaders from 13 institutions across the globe and provided an excellent opportunity to share best practice with colleagues in the sector. The Conference also agreed to the creation of a Town & Gown Universities Network, of which Durham will be a founding member. I will be contributing to a report following the conference which may include some suggestions for Council's consideration, and I hope that Durham SU can remain engaged in the newly formed network.

3. Strategic student sector development, for Council's consideration

3.1 National Union of Students

- 3.1.1 Council may be aware of a number of press reports about the financial sustainability of the National Union of Students. These stories are, for the most part, simplistic and exaggerated. NUS is experiencing a significant cash flow concern which will require reform to ensure it doesn't happen again, but it has a very healthy balance sheet and there is no existential crisis. The difficulty arises in over-governance and an unclear line of sight throughout the eight parts of the NUS Group.

- 3.1.2 There is very little financial risk associated with this news. The legal relationship between Durham SU and NUSUK is clear; NUS is a company limited by guarantee, and Durham SU is a Company Law Member of NUS with liability of £1. The trading service arm of NUS (NUS Services Limited), which provides Durham SU with commercial stock as part of a national consortium, is a profitable enterprise.
- 3.1.3 Durham SU is more concerned that the national voice of students' unions is at risk of appearing unsustainable at a time of significant change in education policy and when students are concerned about the world around them. Durham SU is strongly committed to the future of the national union, and is working hard to support NUS turnaround work.

4. Developments within Durham SU

4.1 Course Reps

- 4.1.1 In cooperation with Departments across the University, Durham SU recruited 353 Course Reps throughout Undergraduate, Postgraduate Taught and Postgraduate Research communities. The SU has run a number of training sessions throughout October and November, and to date 70% of those Reps have now received training.

4.2 Good governance

- 4.2.1 Durham SU has convened a working group to consider its Articles of Association, as previously reported to Council. This group continues to meet, and will report in the new year within Durham SU's democratic and corporate framework, and to Council's Governance and Nominations Committee.