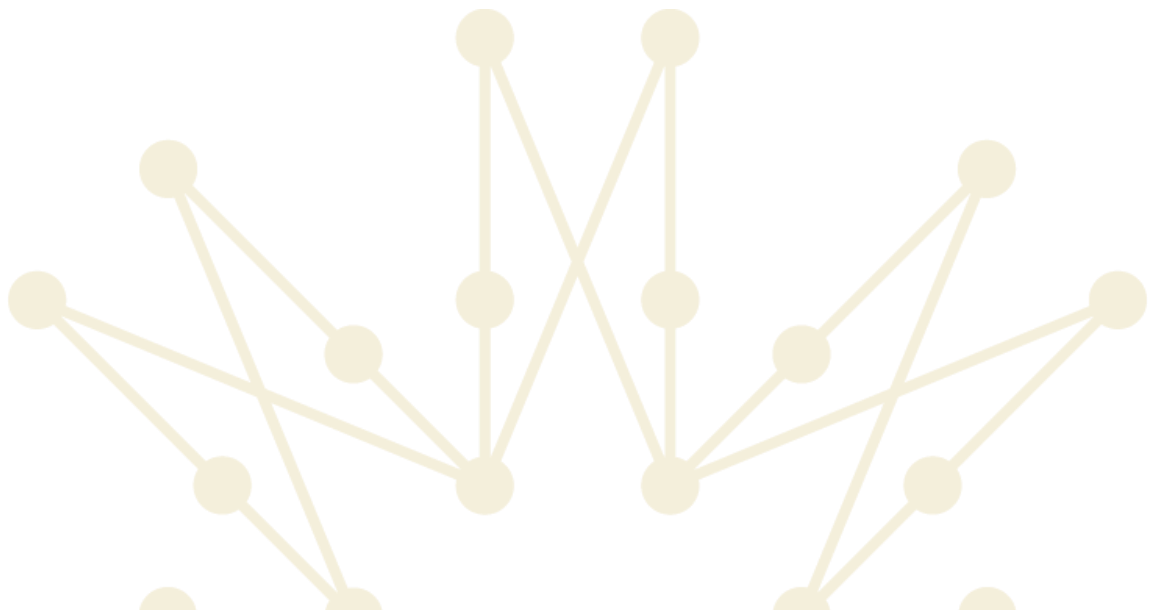


MiraGold

DSU Democracy Health Check

Spring 2020



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1. Context

It has been many years since Durham Students' Union last conducted a review of its democratic structures and processes. Whilst some students participate in its democracy, leaders of the organisation know they are not fully engaging a meaningful number or representative cross-section of our membership in ways that make sense to them. It is felt that they are supporting a framework that suits the organisation, not the members and which is becoming increasingly difficult to administrate. DSU are currently conducting a mid-point 'refresh' of our Strategic Plan and need to begin considering whether its existing model of democratic engagement best serves current and future students.

2. Methodology

In person/telephone interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders:

- Kate McIntosh – President
- Sam Johnson-Audini – Officer trustee
- David Evans – Officer trustee
- Amelia McLoughlan – Officer trustee
- Jess Dunning – Officer trustee
- Gary Hughes – DSU CEO
- Georgi Lambert – DSU senior staff
- Dani Beckett – DSU Consultant with responsibility for Democracy oversight
- Charlotte Lawson – DSU staff member with responsibility for Democracy support
- Jonny McCausland – Chair of Assembly
- Silas Welch – Assembly member

In addition, a paper prepared for another reason by

- Harry Cross – SCR President at St Aidan's College

was agreed by the author to be shared with MiraGold. Quotes from this paper, appropriate to the headings generated through interviews, are utilised below.

It should be noted that a number of additional assembly members were invited to participate in this process, but of the 4 who confirmed their appointment, 0 attended on the day.

The interviews focussed on comparing the practice of democracy at DSU with the desired standards of Professor Graham Smith's "Democratic Goods" as outlined in the proposal. Professor Smith's "Democratic Goods" are the basis for the Quality Students' Unions Democracy section and provide an academically sound set of principles under which many differently tailored forms of democratic modelling can be developed. These principles do not require specific practices to be in place but can provide an excellent starting point for membership consultation to begin to shape the methodology at the next stage. With these principles in place, significant time savings can be made to the project.

- Professor Smith's "democratic goods":

- ❖ Popular-control
- ❖ Considered Judgement
- ❖ Transparency

- ❖ Inclusiveness
- ❖ Efficiency

MiraGold would like to thank all participants in the interviews for their time, honest feedback, and genuine desire to improve practice at DSU.

3. Current Perceptions

These are the overall perceptions of strengths and weakness, where the generic questions were asked of interviewees, not broken down specifically to the “democratic goods”. They provide a useful sense of general feeling regarding democracy at DSU and can be then used in conjunction with the analysis to develop specific actions to maximise the strengths and address the weakness

3.1. Perceived Strengths – There was a significant absence of strengths articulated by the interviewees, so all of the responses are included below. The most consistent of these was around the ‘on-paper’ representativeness of Assembly.

- 3.1.1. Representativeness:** “The representation does work to a certain extent – no one has ever questioned the spread of people who are on assembly”, “we are representative of students; we have a place [they] can air their voice”, “we have a number of ways of gaining student feedback, assembly regularly put out different kinds of surveys, student groups elect their own representatives”, “undrepresented groups in HE as a whole are well represented in the SU”
- 3.1.2. The ability to debate:** “The actual debate that occurs in the room can be good if it’s on something that enough people care about – the structures allow for good debate which can be very respectful”, “The discussion is broadly civil – we don’t tend to scream at each other”
- 3.1.3. Individual strengths:** “The chair of assembly, because that is somebody who can facilitate good discussion and tries”, “The CEO is very wise and there to give advice and support”, “the staff really turn it around”, “we have a lot of students who care, and they bring motions – we have motions from non-assembly members”
- 3.1.4. Logical structure:** “The cycle of how things feed in structurally works correctly”, “The set-up of assembly means there isn’t a quoracy issue, they are not held up by lack of quorum”
- 3.1.5. Space for Liberation:** “The one thing that is ok is that we have spaces for liberation groups”
- 3.1.6. Engagement levels:** “The people who engage with it engage at a really high level”

3.2. Perceived Weaknesses – It is typical to hear more perceived weaknesses than strengths in a review of this nature, but the limited responses in 3.1 lead to a particularly distinct overall impression of dissatisfaction.

- 3.2.1. Assembly’s limitations:** “first impression of the assembly was how few voting members there were, second how few people in attendance full stop”, “there is little time for people to debate and discuss things – 2 mins on the floor – it’s formulaic” “[assembly members] hadn’t read the motions, hadn’t thought of questions, nothing was getting properly dissected”, “limitations to assembly’s powers e.g the finance of the SU managed by the governance”, “[assembly’s] not very engaging, we are told; ‘that’s the way that we do it’, I don’t like the processes – that’s why we have hardly anyone turn up to it”, “Things pass at Assemblies that

no one really understands and there are conflicting policies – why was officer neutrality allowed to go? That should have been the board’s decision, not assembly’s”, “assembly is the only point at which we bring reps together and say ‘students think this’”, “the processes of assembly are super rigid and really difficult to administer – which then leads to disengagement – they think it’s a joke, they come and drink alcohol”, “Assembly is totally wrong – in terms of how it interacts with democracy is bad, for example I don’t think you can have guillotines in real democracy, 2 mins speeches, not everyone turns up”

- 3.2.2. **College dominance:** “I think the same amount of the students feel loyalty to their college as to their activities”, “a lot of SU reps lack critical thinking about what’s going on with their colleges”, “[college reps] are elected by 50 people so many students are disenfranchised”, “massive over-representation of college reps on assembly”, “We just do not involve students as academic people. We spend loads of time talking about how many times rooms are cleaned in college and not about feedback is shocking – students don’t only have one identity”
- 3.2.3. **Division between DSU and the JCRs:** “They are really not happy with the amount of money they get compared with the SU”, “Engagement [between] SU or Common Rooms is pitched as an ‘either/or’ battle”, “feels like there’s quite a division between the SU and JCRs”, “SU doesn’t acknowledge when another body has led on an event – climate change march ECODU”, “feels like it’s them against us”, “JCR Presidents, all they want to do is rip everything apart”, “they are so familiar with the way that it is done in colleges that they cannot connect with how we do it”, “Really bad cultural problem with SU versus college – where JCRs act as if they are separate from assembly – ‘Assembly have done this’ where they are 1/3 of the members”
- 3.2.4. **Toxic atmosphere:** “It’s the culture around it, it’s actually quite toxic”, “serious mistrust between internal staff and officers”, “the level of hatred towards us in the student body has been a slow burn, but [issues] have created this mistrust and irreparable reputation damage”, “so much toxicity has already been brought into our procedures, it’s baked into the cake”, “the culture is a bit toxic- because of their frustration with the way that it is and that they feel it is not transparent”, “everything is being taken in bad faith and we are being seen as undemocratic”, “The union rep committee – are like a pack of wolves”, “Toxic environment – a lot to do with inefficiency and frustration”
- 3.2.5. **Exclusivity:** “We don’t use technology enough in these processes – we spend so much of our time doing the right process in the right way that we don’t have any time to hear the students who are not in that bubble”, “It’s not inclusive and accessible – you need to know, you need to be in the gang, you need to have already got there”, “[colleges] are elitist and exclude many students”, “We put democracy in a hoop in the middle and to get to it you have to jump through a billion hoops; you have to be able to understand the system to access it”, “we barely access specific groups of students – the whole of the PG community! It’s the same with the colleges – one person from each college – one person will have a very particular view of the SU and not representative”, “it’s super-complicated”, “quite a lot of distance traditionally between leaders and the student population – I think it comes down to elitism”
- 3.2.6. **Accountability:** “A lot of reps don’t turn up who are supposed to be there – no one is keeping them accountable”, “We do accountability incredibly badly; we think it’s about bullying –as if we have the right to bully people if they have been

- elected”, “performed accountability – toothless”, “severe lack of accountability – across the board, with a lack of understanding of what people’s roles are”
- 3.2.7. **Transparency:** “The SU website is quite inefficient; people don’t know where to find things”, “information is being fired at us over a number of different channels...students are worn thin by the amount of information coming in”, “Don’t know what the internal structure of the SU is”, “everything is there just impossible to find”
- 3.2.8. **Communication:** “The SU should communicate to Common Room Presidents about the big issues coming up in the university before they have boiled to the surface”, “We don’t do a very good job about telling people why they can’t do something, we give them lots of ‘No’. They want to change the governance, but they don’t want to run for student trustee”, “A lot of hearing and not listening on both sides”, “[the SU] did not communicate a line, an analysis of the policy, or offer a campaign strategy for students to engage in”.
- 3.2.9. **Lack of training for those involved:** “Both assembly and governance and grants, as well as trustees, they could probably do with some form of formalised training”, “the SU should train all student leaders in all aspects of university structures and policy at the start of the year”
- 3.2.10. **Efficacy:** “It’s really slow”, “the SU places a huge amount of work on 5 officers by asking them to represent students on a huge range of committees”, “there’s no effective discussion – model is dichotomy – doesn’t allow for a sharing of ideas”

4. Analysis

On a reading of the perceived strengths and weaknesses alone, it would be clear that Durham Students’ Union needed to review and reform its democratic processes.

The implementation of such itself, however, needs to take account of the strength of feeling and the “Democratic Goods” used as a measure for Quality Students’ Unions. A full analysis, therefore has been conducted below, with recommendations as to next steps at the end in Section 5. The analysis is delivered against the 5 “Goods” for ease of reference, with additional consideration of what would make a good process in DSU’s context.

To apply the democratic goods, they need to be maximised at the same time as balancing them; it is not possible to design a system where students decide every single thing, for example, as this would automatically reduce considered judgement and/or efficiency. This balancing allows for consensus and compromise, as well as common sense, to be applied in the delivery of such systems to allow flexibility for changing student needs and preferences. This, in turn, provides a way of developing systems which are future proofed to some extent.

4.1. Popular Control

- 4.1.1. Whilst there is provision for referenda, this is not the default mechanism for decision making within DSU; instead it falls back on a representative democracy system via Assembly. The student population at Durham might be quite comfortable with this, given the anecdotal lack of interest in the general affairs of the union. However, this has never been tested and a starting point for any reform process should be to ask the question.

- 4.1.2. Another layer to the popular control element of the democratic goods is the range of decision making which is taken by the broadest range of students. Currently, the exclusivity of assembly and governance and grants committee make it impossible for an everyday student to turn up, access the information they need to influence and participate in active decision making. A new system should seek to include multiple decision-making opportunities for a broad range of students.
- 4.1.3. Any reform process itself should include students throughout as a way of re-introducing the concept of popular control and testing the extent to which this can be maximised without affecting the other goods below.

4.2. Considered Judgement

- 4.2.1. The ability to receive, digest and analyse information in order to make better decisions is significant by its absence at DSU in all democratic systems with the exception of the officers. The latter have access to a range of high-quality information from different sources, allowing them to develop independent views on topics which mature over the course of their term in office.
- 4.2.2. Assembly has stringent and narrow processes allowing for only one perspective to be tabled as a motion, with alternative views forming a natural opposition rather than resulting in genuine debate, discussion and compromise. Members of assembly have commented, as relayed in Section 3.2, that Assembly provides no mechanism for members to develop perspectives over time. The only consideration which happens is amongst the College Representatives who meet in advance of Assembly to discuss their ideas.
- 4.2.3. Governance and Grants committee appear to have conflicting levels of training, information and therefore understanding, leading to members not always feeling armed with the ability to make a good decision. This particular committee was not the focus of most interviewees' responses, so analysis on it is limited.
- 4.2.4. Several interviewees referenced that information for students was extremely limited, even in the case of referenda, with significant differences of opinion as to what was appropriate to articulate during such democratic events. Part of the review should consider how effective communications, regular small-scale check-ins, representative cascading, and external expert opinion could be utilised to move this "good" into a better position.
- 4.2.5. Protecting considered judgement should not be confused with recommendations from experts, or those with particular understanding and knowledge. Of course, freedom to reject these is safeguarded, but if one body within the union wishes to make a recommendation based on their experience, this should be similarly safeguarded. This is true of DSU and of the Colleges; both are trying to be as representative of their membership as possible, and this very nature should be utilised to disseminate information to improve considered judgement. It is clear that many students take the advice and recommendations of their JCR and MCR Presidents, and DSU Reps very seriously; this is to be celebrated.

4.3. Transparency

- 4.3.1. Once students are engaged in the decision-making at DSU, the transparency levels improve, but it was universally acknowledged that there was a long way to go before regular students would be able to access a whole host of relevant information regarding the SU. At DSU, transparency is directly linked to the

amount of information an individual is directly given, rather than being about having clear and straightforward processes which are accessible to everyone.

- 4.3.2. When designing new systems of decision-making, care should be taken not to simply replicate traditional processes for debate, as these are most likely to lead to an exclusive club which leaves most students unaware of the union's operations. The Union Society has excellent systems of debate in place for students wishing to develop critical thinking of complex ideas in that way, and DSU should distinguish itself from that laudable institution to protect its own *raison d'être*.
- 4.3.3. There is also a need to provide more information, in a readily available space, regarding the rest of the organisation, such as the governance arrangements, conversations with the university about improving provision and the commercial operation. This breadth of information allows interested students to develop their understanding of DSU over their time at university, being able to consider it during key decision-making points, rather than relying on the small amount of information it is possible to provide during referenda, elections etc.
- 4.3.4. The concept of training all student leaders and equipping them to participate in university meetings was raised by more than one stakeholder. Any multi-layered approach to the structural relationship between the SU and the university will automatically increase transparency as more people are involved. The critical element would then be to have a strong communication process in place to disseminate these broad interactions to the rest of the student body, to avoid another perceived clique.
- 4.3.5. Accountability is also a critical part of transparency and was raised by a number of stakeholders regarding different elements of the elected representative structure. Officers have a triple accountability system, but this is often overlooked when considering what information students need to hold their representatives to account. As employees of the students' union, officers are afforded specific protections with regards assessment of their performance, so should have clear and published reports on their work *as an employee*. As trustees, the board has responsibility for holding the officers (and each other) to account for their performance in that sphere, and it is recommended that officers reports to this body are also published. Critically in democratic terms, the officers are accountable to the constituency

4.4. Inclusiveness

- 4.4.1. Much of the above narrative would automatically improve the inclusiveness of the students' union, with more students involved across different areas and levels of both the SU and the university decision-making. However, there is still a likelihood of perpetuating the cultural norms of student leadership at the SU unless decisive actions are taken to include individuals who would not usually have participated.
- 4.4.2. Diversity is part, but not all, of this democratic good and should be considered on the basis of the specific demographics of Durham University. A baseline check on the diversity of student leadership should identify key gaps which can then be filled with appropriate targeting and peer identification. Diversity gaps should not be assumed and should be considered along intersectional lines as well as through more than solely a liberation lens.
- 4.4.3. Inclusiveness also considers the barriers to participation that are put up by an organisation and whether they are necessary. For example, participation at

Assembly may be on paper open to everyone, but to be notified of the agenda, you need to be a member. With any new model, each process should reflect as open a structure as balances with the other democratic goods to excel in inclusiveness. There should be no requirement for a level of understanding prior to arriving at University as to what the processes for engaging in its activity should be.

- 4.4.4. Another part of inclusiveness is about the ways in which people can become student leaders. Having only elections as the process will automatically limit the pool of prospective representatives and this, in turn, automatically limits the level of inclusiveness. Major Union Office Holders are required to be elected by a cross campus ballot in which all members can vote, but this does not have to be replicated across every single channel. Having some space for students to apply for roles based on skills and/or to attend decision making sessions as one of a randomly selected group of students allows for the maximum spread of participation and opens the union up to students who would never have considered this previously.

4.5. Efficiency

- 4.5.1. One of the anchoring goods is that of efficiency, as it prevents any other good taking over to the detriment of active decision-making. It was raised by a number of interviewees and needs to be considered throughout the next stage of the process.
- 4.5.2. Much of what makes a democratic set of systems efficient are already covered in the sections above – transparency is about clear and simple communication lines; inclusiveness is about removing traditional barriers to participation which require prior knowledge or understanding. However, there are other actions which can be taken to ensure that efficiency runs through each process.
- 4.5.3. Setting timelines against each process as it is developed allows a rough approximation of how long a given decision will take. Adding notice periods, time for circulating agenda items, time for debate and discussion, and any required peer review or scrutiny all limit the efficiency of any process but need to be included for all the other goods.
- 4.5.4. There should also be thought given to the administrative burden of each process and to whom this is likely to fall. If staff are required for specific skill sets, are they empowered to execute such without interference from lobbying activity? If students are required to administer sections to secure membership leadership, is there a robust skill analysis and gap training, alongside the appropriate time allocation to balance against studies or other representative functions?

5. Recommendations

- DSU has a clear and present need for a full-scale democracy review, based on the Democratic Goods model, and the desire of its own membership
- This review needs to have legitimacy in the eyes of students, the university and DSU staff
- Therefore, a particular approach is recommended below

- 5.1. Full scale student consultation at the outset, with particular parameters:

- ✧ Conducted by an external professional agency following a tender process involving engaged students to give confidence
- ✧ Minimal references to the students' union as a concept, but focussing on how students would like to see decisions made in general concept
- ✧ Including significant focus group delivery with currently engaged members from student groups (including JCRs) and unengaged students

- 5.2. Either by the research company, or another agency, full external analysis of the student consultation to ensure a bias-free consideration
- 5.3. Analysis published on DSU's website and circulated to student group leaders (including JCRs) to aid transparency of process
- 5.4. From the analysis, an externally facilitated modelling exercise with students, staff, the university and other identified stakeholders
- 5.5. This exercise should test various practical approaches based on the analysis and the Democratic Goods to assess suitability and buy-in
- 5.6. Following the modelling, one or more full systems to be presented to the membership for final decision
- 5.7. Depending on the diversity of feedback at the modelling stage, this may include options and discrete sections to allow a thorough consideration of student opinion

The views and recommendations within this report are strictly confidential and should not be used for any other purpose than a source of assistance to Durham Students' Union to consider options for its future. These views and recommendations are personal to the authors and are based on the evidence of observations, interviews, financial and anecdotal evidence during the course of this assignment. They should not be the sole reason for taking appropriate management actions, and other appropriate evidence should be considered alongside these recommendations.

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