



LEADERSHIP IN DURHAM REPORT

DURHAM\$U

Leadership in Durham Report

Background

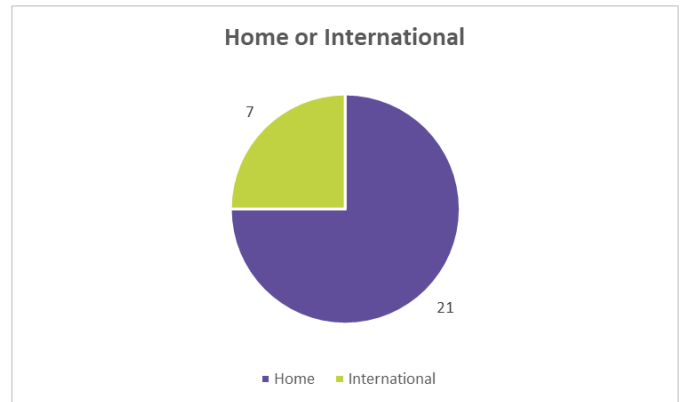
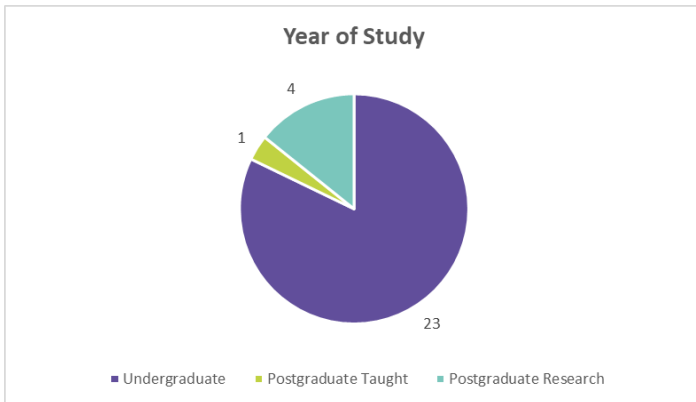
This report examines leadership opportunities across Durham, including departments, Experience Durham, the SU, and Colleges. The aim of the report is to explore the methods of gaining access to leadership opportunities which students take and whether there are any barriers to access.

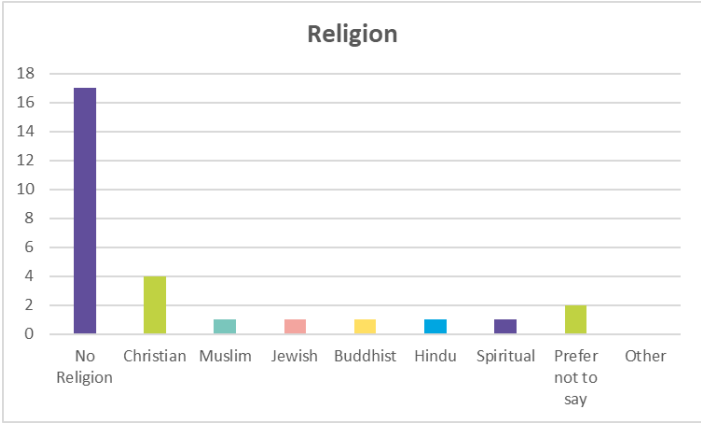
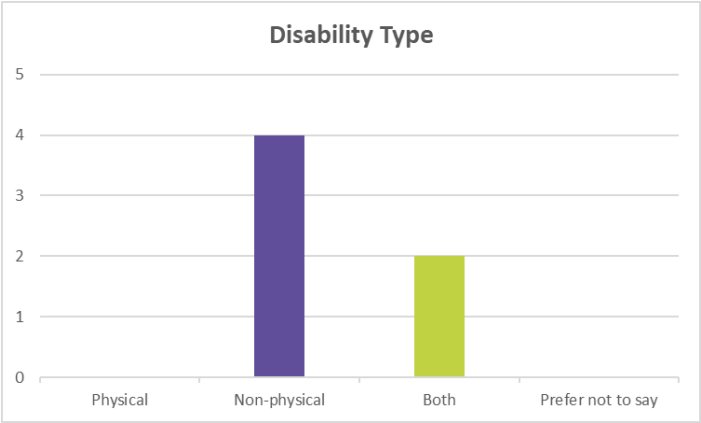
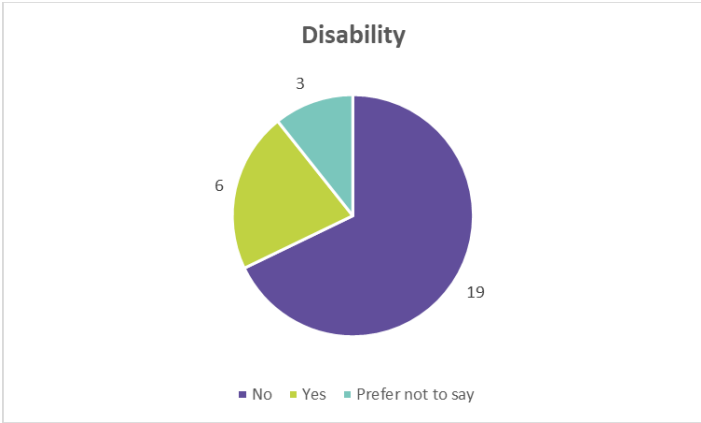
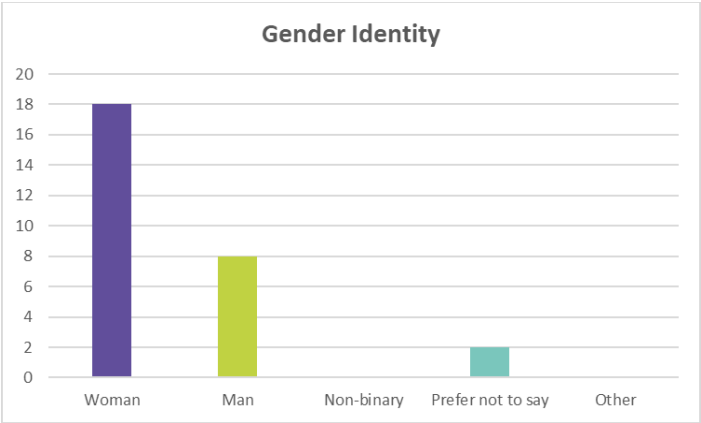
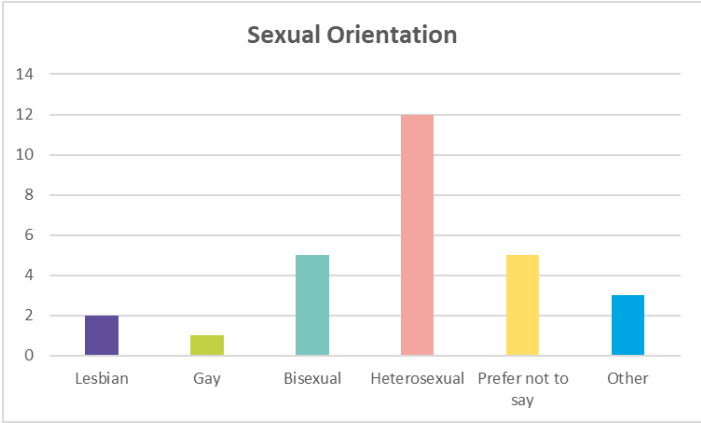
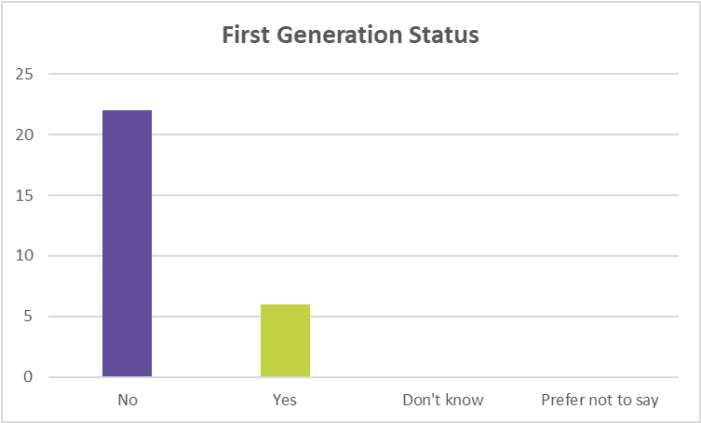
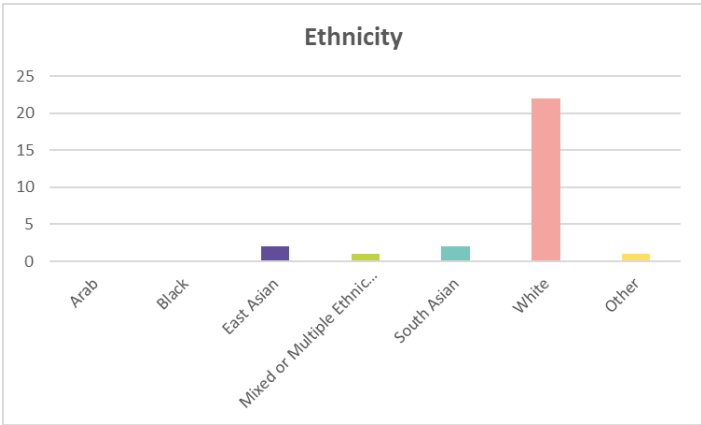
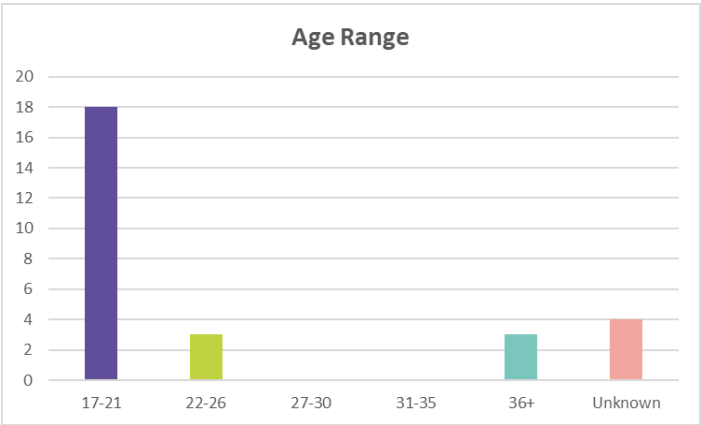
The findings of this report are based on a survey conducted in Michaelmas term 2023 ($N=29$), interviews with student leaders ($N=8$) and one meeting with a student leader facilitator. The survey element was composed of collecting demographic information and four open questions to be answered in free response boxes. The interview questions matched those from the survey. It should be noted that the small sample size is a limitation of this report. However, as many respondents brought up similar experiences, I would argue that there are points where the findings reached saturation.

It should also be noted that during the discussion I will speculate on some of the reasons for these findings in order to unpack them further.

Descriptive Statistics

Below are the demographics of student leaders based on the survey responses:





In total, there were 44 leadership positions held/declared by the student respondents. These ranged from President of a student group Executive to welfare support in college to peer mentor/support in departments, amongst others.

Findings

Why did students decide to take on their leadership roles?

Student leaders decided to take on leadership roles for a variety of reasons. Among the most common reasons for a student to take on a leadership position were a desire to gain experience for their personal development, an understanding of what the role entails through association with other student leaders, and a genuine care or passion for the group or cause they represent. Other reasons include a familial link to a role, entering a role as they created the group, an interest in the role itself – for instance being President of an Exec, having previous experience in similar roles, being given the role by the outgoing position holder, confidence in their ability to do the role well, to try new things, and to have fun.

What methods were used to get the opportunity?

Student leaders often access their roles via three main avenues: they are given the role by the outgoing post holder, they fill in an application form and attend an interview, or, most frequently, they are elected. While elections may differ slightly, the main format is that a student submits a manifesto, they participate in a hustings, then they are elected by their peers. Some of the variants of this basic elections process include the use of written hustings, rather than verbal ones, or that candidates produce a poster to aid with their election campaign. One participant noted that they did not campaign further than their friendship group.

Were there any barriers that students faced in accessing these opportunities or that they believed someone else might?

Most participants stated that they found no difficulty in accessing their leadership positions. Those that did state some difficulties noted that this was due to existing mental health conditions, such as anxiety, a lack of information about the role, imposter syndrome, the time commitment of the role, and lack of confidence in public speaking.

Despite the ease which many participants found in accessing leadership opportunities themselves, they did note several potential barriers that others may face. Some of the most common included a lack of confidence, feeling intimidated by hustings, a lack of knowledge around accessing the position, and opportunities being missed as they aren't communicated well. Other potential barriers include intimidating role titles and positions, such as President; the time commitment, both of

campaigning and the role itself; lack of student engagement; English being a candidates second language; lack of information about what the role requires; the candidate's proximity to Durham; a candidate's popularity; the common methods of campaigning – including bar crawls; unconscious bias of their peers; and nepotism.

Discussion

Decision-making moments

Unpacking the findings from what I am calling decision-making moments, we can see that entering leadership positions is not entirely due to the students desire to gain experience for their own personal development, or because a role will “look good on a CV”. While this can’t be discounted, as these extracurricular activities can set students apart from others in an increasingly competitive graduate job market, exploring the other decision-making moments can prove enlightening.

This exploration reveals a complex and interconnected picture of student interactions and considerations of how the role can help themselves and others. During decision-making moments student leaders are not only thinking about their present or future, but also those of their peers and those that come after them.

This can be seen most clearly in a frequent response to the decision-making question. Many student leaders decided to take up their positions due to a genuine passion or care for the group or cause. These respondents ranged from leaders in advocacy and liberation groups to course reps to those in theatre and music groups, among others. One respondent decided to be a leader as they saw that mental health had deteriorated among their peers and wanted to help in any way they could. Another noted that a peer support group would fail in the coming years due to the small group size but found that group so important when they were studying that they felt the need to take up the role to continue it. Others decided to become leaders as they noticed that something was missing that was desperately needed and sought to create it, whether that be a community in a department or a specific liberation group. Tying these together is a genuine care that student leaders have for their peers and a desire to support them in the new environment of university. Stretching this further, leadership in such circumstances could be seen as a duty by some student leaders.

Interestingly, there was some trepidation among these respondents to call themselves leaders, with one calling themselves a facilitator. This raises questions about the language used in discussions of leadership. One of the problems I ran into during the research for this report was finding informal leaders, those who might campaign on an ad hoc basis for instance. From the findings of this report, it occurred to me that such individuals may not consider themselves to be leaders at all, despite

conducting many of the functions of what we consider to be leadership. They may consider themselves to be facilitators or may not even put a name on the work they are doing. One suggestion to expand the language of leadership would be to think of these students as community builders, as this recognises the collaborative work that goes into such endeavors and the aims of the activities.

Another frequent reason which respondents gave for deciding to take on a leadership role was being friends with other student leaders. This suggests that a more intimate knowledge of what such roles require, both the high and low points, can be a driver for students to access leadership positions. Additionally, the level of interactions does not need to be as deep as a friendship. Some respondents discussed having conversations about the role with student leaders before they put themselves forward for the leadership position. This not only helped the respondents understand the role a little better but also collapsed some of the hierarchy which is inherent in leadership positions. Being able to see the student leaders as similar to them enabled the potential candidates to imagine themselves in those roles.

This is further aided by another decision-making moment, which was less reported but no less significant, in which a staff member who the student trusted or respected recommended that the student should consider taking up a leadership opportunity. Those who reported this as a decision-making moment stated that they had never considered being a student leader prior to this or that they did not think they could do it. Having a trusted member of staff state that they thought they would be good for the role helped to boost the confidence of these respondents, allowed them to see their potential through someone else's eyes, and, in effect, acted as permission to aspire higher and think bigger about what they were capable of. It should be noted that the majority of these respondents were First Generation Scholars (FGS), who may be less confident in their abilities.¹

It should not be forgotten that these roles open up new opportunities for students and allow them to try new things in a relatively risk reduced environment, due to the wealth of staff support throughout Durham University and the SU. Students entering these roles are sometimes unaware of the specifics of the position, so being able to turn to a member of staff for support or guidance can provide a safety

¹ Bauer C.A., Job V. and Hannover B. (2023) *Who gets to see themselves as talented? Biased self-concepts contribute to first-generation students' disadvantage in talent-focused environments*, Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 108 (104501), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2023.104501>.

net for student leaders. This ability to fail safely may have a lasting effect in boosting confidence among student leaders, as it does in the workplace and academic studies.²³⁴

Sometimes student leaders do not necessarily want or seek the role, they are handed it by the outgoing post holder or someone within the group or society. Acceptance of the role appears to happen for two main reasons, which are both mentioned above: the student does not want the group to fail; or they want the role to add to their personal development. While being given a position may be an easier route for leadership to change hands, particularly in smaller groups where elections or applications may seem excessive or unnecessary, this does have the potential for nepotism to creep into groups, which was highlighted by some participants. It should be noted that this does not only occur in smaller groups but also within groups that do carry out elections or have an application process.

Routes to Leadership

As noted above, some student leaders are given their roles rather than taking a more formal route, such as through application forms or elections. Being given a role is obviously the less time and resource intensive method of obtaining a leadership position, though, as noted, comes with some potential drawbacks. I will discuss further the issue of nepotism in a following section, so for now we will turn to the formal routes.

The use of application forms and interviews was noted by several participants. This is a method which the SU has employed to recruit course and faculty representatives, for instance. Unfortunately, the participants did not go into detail about what was in the application form or how the interviews were conducted. I will therefore draw from the practices of the SU and my own personal experience. Of the application forms which I have seen and the interviews which I have conducted, the application form includes some basic demographic information, such as year of study and department/faculty, and then gives the potential leader the opportunity to fill out a short personal statement about why they would be suitable for the position. At the interview stage, the potential leader is asked questions relating to how they would behave in certain situations or how they would resolve tensions.

² Gaillard S, van Viegen T, Veldsman M, Stefan MI, Cheplygina V. (2022) *Ten simple rules for failing successfully in academia*, PLoS Computational Biology, 18 (12) e1010538.

³ Cornwall S. (2018) *Failing safely: Increasing theology and religious studies students' resilience and academic confidence via risk-taking in formative assessment*, Teaching Theology & Religion, 21, pp 110–119.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12429>

⁴ [Have you made it safe to fail? | McKinsey](#)

A drawback of applications is that a student is not chosen from amongst their peers to lead them, as they are in elections. Those conducting the interviews may be staff, rather than students. This also relies on students having the confidence to put themselves forward for a position, which some may lack. However, this route does allow students to nominate themselves for a position without having to campaign or “put themselves out there”, which may be beneficial for some students.

Elections are the most commonly used route to formal leadership positions, including Common Room execs and SU Officers. As noted in the findings section, students create a manifesto, participate in a hustings where they address potential voters, and then they are voted in, or not, by their peers. What is of interest here is that there are variations on this method, indicating that some in the student body are alert to the fact that some students might find elections difficult, which I will address further in the following section.

Of note are the use of written, rather than verbal, hustings and the creation of a poster as a campaigning tool. Written hustings allowed participants to speak to their peers without the often intimidating experience of public speaking. At times, there may be a public question and answer session, but the candidate's message is mostly conveyed through their manifesto and written hustings. Posters and, much more frequently, social media have been used during elections in conjunction with other methods, such as hustings. The use of a poster as the main source of information about a candidate's suitability and aims utilises a much overlooked skill in leadership: creativity. Being able to convey a message and get buy-in from stakeholders in a creative and engaging way is a skill that should be nurtured in all leaders. It also sits comfortably alongside public speaking, which was commented on by participants as not only about what is said, but how it is said. The dissemination of information using non-verbal means can be a useful tool to help students who may struggle with public speaking.

Barriers to Leadership for the self

In practical terms, the main barriers which participants faced in accessing their leadership positions were a lack of information about the role prior to becoming a student leader, and the time commitment which goes into campaigning. Further information could be given to students about both these points, either by current student leaders or by members of staff. Utilising social media and other forms of communication, such as email could be beneficial here. However, if email is used there should be more encouragement for students to check their emails, which is often not the case, particularly outside of term time. Another method could be for potential student leaders to meet with the current position holder, or a leader in a similar role, to discuss the intricacies of the role.

The time commitment of campaigning does not only encompass the time which candidates are interacting with potential voters, but also maintaining their social media presence, working on their hustings, and practicing for the question and answer sessions. In a sense, candidates always have to be “on”. When we consider that candidates are campaigning alongside their studies, often in their important final undergraduate year, this time commitment can be all-encompassing. Many participants stated that they found campaigning incredibly stressful due to the aforementioned reasons. While there are codes of practice in place for campaigning, such as a limit on spending for materials and the use of social media, many respondents who had campaigned stated that they felt that if they stuck to these rules' others would not, and the candidate would lose the election. Being unaware of their opponents' actions led to an increase in time spent campaigning by all parties. While some support measures are available to candidates during campaigning, the uptake of these has been variable. Further discussions need to be had about what support students would find useful during campaigning.

The other barriers that leaders faced was a lack of confidence in their abilities, whether that was through public speaking or imposter syndrome in the role. For some, this was coupled with pre-existing mental health conditions, such as anxiety. What is notable here is that despite these doubts and barriers, the candidates were all successful in obtaining these opportunities. However, further work could be done to increase students' confidence in activities commonly associated with leadership, such as public speaking, along with empowering them to feel like they have something valuable to offer to the roles. This has the potential to be work that is carried out during every aspect of their university journey, not only when they decide to become a leader.

Potential barriers to leadership for others

When considering the barriers to leadership opportunities, it is interesting to note that respondents did not go into any great detail about the barriers they faced, though they did highlight numerous potential barriers for others. This should be commended as it shows that student leaders are alert to the potential difficulties that their peers may face.

Again, lack of confidence is highlighted as a potential barrier to accessing these positions, as is the nature of verbal hustings, lack of information about the role, and the time commitment of the role and campaigning. However, there was more variety in the potential barriers that others may face than those that were faced by the current leaders. I will discuss each in turn.

Participants noted that opportunities may be missed as they are not well communicated. This links back to an earlier point about the use of communication channels to reach students, particularly the

encouragement of the use of emails but also the need to think of new ways to communicate leadership opportunities.

Participants also noted that the role titles may be intimidating for some, for example president. Without having the existing knowledge of what being a president or treasurer means in practice, some students may discount themselves from leadership opportunities. As noted above, clearer information about what the role entails could be useful here, potentially through peer support. This may also be due to students not wanting to take on the title of president of a group but still wanting to help or further the objectives of the group. Again, this may be due to the hierarchical language of leadership which may be off-putting for some students.

Lack of knowledge was also raised by participants in relation to accessing leadership positions, which some stated may be a barrier. This is due to some participants taking the initiative to ask staff or students if there were any leadership positions available. However, not all students have the confidence to do this, which means that they may miss out on opportunities. Additionally, some participants stated that others may not know how to conduct election campaigns. In many cases there are resources available to students on how to campaign, however the language used may not be clear or may draw on tacit knowledge which some students may not have.

This may be of particular note for students whose first language is not English or international students. The methods of obtaining student leadership positions may be different in other countries, meaning that they may be unsure of how to access them in the UK. Additionally, students for whom English is a second language may not feel as confident in public speaking as native English speakers. When we consider the common use of verbal hustings in campaigning, this may be a barrier for some students.

To this last point, some participants noted that there may be unconscious bias among potential voters. As noted, some stated that delivery of a message is important during public speaking events. If a student speaks English as a second language their delivery may not be as fluid as native English speakers, which may impact the voters' decision on who to vote for. Unconscious bias was brought up again by some male participants who stated that they may have had an easier time of campaigning due to their gender. Unconscious bias was also discussed by some white participants in relation to skin tone. Unconscious bias may not only be a barrier to winning an election for those students who do try to access leadership positions but may be a consideration for those thinking about entering leadership positions. In these instances, students may disqualify themselves as they may believe that it is not worth it as they won't succeed due to their personal characteristics. Further work should be carried out into exploring unconscious bias among the student population. I am aware

that this may be difficult and uncomfortable for some, however I believe that it is something which is important for students to be aware of, not only during their time at Durham but throughout their lives.

The popularity of those seeking to be student leaders was also raised by participants. Participants noted the belief that the popularity of a candidate would mean that they would be more likely to obtain a position. This is due to such a candidate already having a strong network of people who will vote for them based on who they are, not what they stand for or their message. This can be seen in one response from the survey which stated that they, “*didn't do any promotions other than telling my friends to vote for me*”. This could lead to students who believe they do not have a strong network feeling as if they have to work harder to get the support of the students. In such circumstances, potential leaders may not bother to put themselves forward for a position as they believe that a more popular person will win anyway.

This is crystalised in the frequently raised issue of nepotism. Participants stated that nepotism among Execs, in which positions are given to the friends of current Exec members, is a likely barrier for some. If a student is not already friends with an Exec this may limit the number of positions they can access, as some will be given to others based on their network and not necessarily advertised to the group or student body. It should also be noted that nepotism occurs within Execs. For instance, if an event or activity needs to be organised, rather than opening this opportunity up to the society members or student body the Exec members may give the opportunity to another Exec member. This may be done thoughtlessly, as it is easier to give someone a role instead of recruiting for it. However, this creates a closed system whereby leadership opportunities remain within a small group of existing leaders. Faced with this some potential leaders may wonder why they would waste their time and energy to try and access a position which they know they are unlikely to get. Further work is required to explore where there is oversight of Exec leadership positions.

A less frequent, though no less significant, barrier raised by participants was the use of bar crawls as a campaigning method. Here, candidates will go to college bars to speak with potential voters. Some believe this to be a barrier as some students don't drink, so may not feel comfortable in these spaces, and therefore cannot reach this voter base. Additionally, this may be a common space for home students to socialise and discuss ideas, due to the cultural significance of pubs in the UK,⁵⁶ but this may not be the case for international students. This cultural barrier may limit the reach of international students campaigning strategies. Further, campaigning via bar crawls exacerbates Durham's well

⁵ Thurnell-Read, T. (2023) 'It's a Small Little Pub, but Everybody Knew Everybody': Pub Culture, Belonging and Social Change, *Sociology*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385231185936>

⁶ Markham C, Bosworth G (2016) *The village pub in the twenty-first century: Embeddedness and the 'local'*, In: Cabras I, Higgins D, Preece D (eds) *Brewing, Beer and Pubs: A Global Perspective*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, pp 266–281.

known drinking culture. Students who do drink, though not frequently or to excess, may not feel like a bar crawl is something they can use as a campaigning tool. It should be noted that bar crawls may also be a barrier for voters for the same stated reasons. If voters do not use pubs frequently, or at all, they may miss key messages from candidates who use bar crawls as a campaigning tool.

Physical space was discussed by other participants in relation to campaigning and the leadership position itself. Participants noted that being close to Durham city centre may make it easier for someone to become a leader, as they can attend pre-leadership events and meet with potential voters at any time without being reliant on parking availability or public transport. A potential leader's proximity to Durham may also impact whether they believe they will be able to fulfill the requirements of the role, as they may be needed at times which they are unable to get to or from Durham. This may be a particular concern for commuter students. This barrier may also be exacerbated by the current housing crisis in Durham, with some students moving into the surrounding villages, which can be difficult to get to due to sometimes unreliable public transport. Though not stated by participants, the physical space which leadership positions are conducted may also be a barrier for students with disabilities.

Conclusion

There are a variety of reasons why students become leaders, including personal development and care for a cause. Some students may need to be encouraged or recommended to become a leader due to lack of confidence.

Leadership positions are frequently accessed through elections, though at times roles are given to students without any formal process.

While leaders did not note many barriers to accessing their roles for themselves, they identified many that others may face in trying to access the same roles. These included a lack of confidence and knowledge, popularity and voter perception of the candidate, and the physical spaces of leadership.

Initial recommendations

- Consideration of the language of leadership: Other terms could be used, such as community builder or facilitator.
- Student support: Have discussions with students about what support they would find useful while they aim to become a student leader, particularly finding a work-life balance during campaigning
- Creativity: Encourage and promote creativity in campaigning, including through non-verbal means. Develop creative methods to communicate opportunities to students.

- Clarity: Improve students' knowledge about what a role entails and how to campaign for a position.
- Confidence building: Raise the confidence of students in their abilities and further develop their confidence in common leadership qualities, such as public speaking.
- Alternate spaces of leadership: Develop different landscapes in which leadership takes place, utilising digital resources and meeting spaces which are not reliant on serving alcohol.

Areas of further exploration

Further research is required in two main areas:

- Nepotism: A thorough understanding is needed about how and why leadership positions are given to people who are friends with Exec members. As noted, this may be thoughtless but still has implications for the leadership opportunities available for students.
- Unconscious bias: Conversations need to be had with stakeholders about how best to approach this, at times, difficult subject.

For further information or any questions please contact abigail.a.lewis@durham.ac.uk