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TIMETABLING CONSULTATION AY 20/21

Background

On 3 June 2020, Durham University circulated a paper titled "Towards a Covid-19 Timetable for AY 20/21" to a range of internal stakeholders and Durham SU, as part of the University's planning for changes to educational activity in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This document identified that the planned timetable was incompatible with the UK Government's 'social distancing' guidelines which required individuals to remain at a 2m distance from one another – compliance with this guidance resulted in the 'Covid-19 capacity' of the University's teaching spaces being drastically reduced to around 15% - 25% of usual capacity.

Under this capacity restriction, a shortfall between available space within timetabled hours of 9am to 6pm Monday to Friday, and the required space for usual teaching activity was identified. To bridge this gap, the University proposed:

- All teaching activities with more than 50 enrolled students would be taught online, with face-to-face provision for smaller-scale activities maintained
- Extending the teaching day on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday to hours of 9am – 8pm
- Converting rooms ordinarily used for college and administrative activity into teaching space
- Further measures to address a capacity shortfall of c. 15% even when adopting the above measures

The University sought consultation on these proposals, in addition to seeking suggestions on ways to ensure the proper prioritisation of available space, and assurance that the University's delivery of education would be accessible to students facing particular barriers, such as inability to participate in face-to-face activity due to health concerns.

In response, Durham SU worked with student academic representatives to create a set of timetabling principles for AY20/21 which would safeguard students' educational priorities, whilst acknowledging the reality of the restrictions created by Covid-19. These principles were circulated to the student body on 16 June, with all students invited to comment any problems they envisaged and what they thought worked well about the principles. A copy of these principles can be found at Appendix 1.

This report contains an analysis of the feedback received on the principles circulated by Durham SU, to enable the University to modify its plans to ensure student opinion is taken into account. A copy of the questions student respondents were invited to answer can be found at Appendix 2.

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Executive Summary

- 60% of respondents opposed extending the timetable to include a 7pm-8pm teaching slot, even when this was explicitly linked to enabling more face-to-face teaching. Of those who opposed 7pm-8pm teaching, 55% made reference in free text responses to specific barriers they would face which would prevent them from being able to engage with teaching at this time, highlighting that opposition is based on practical concerns, rather than unwillingness to attend at a late hour.

- When asked if students believed they would receive 'quality teaching' should Durham SU's principles be implemented, responses could be broadly categorised as (NB 1% error due to rounding):

  47% 'Yes'   19% 'Yes, but lower than under normal circumstances'

  14% 'No'   19% 'Unsure' or 'Variable from person to person'

- The three most frequent positive comments about the proposals related to:
  - A desire to preserve as many face-to-face interactive teaching opportunities as possible – barring some access needs, there is recognition that moving lectures to online-only will not result in a notable loss of teaching quality and can enable more time for other, more valued forms of face-to-face teaching
  - The provision of an online alternative for face-to-face commitments (particularly for students with physical health conditions/anxiety about COVID-19/an inability to travel to Durham) and student choice about which format they wish to attend
  - Student choice in selecting the timing of scheduled educational activities i.e. the ability for students with evening commitments to justify having priority to attend timetabled activity during standard working hours

- The three most frequent concerns raised (excepting opposition to extending the timetabled day to include 7pm-8pm, covered above) about the proposals related to:
  - Resistance to any attempt to reduce the quantity of taught educational content, often in the sense of viewing this as breaking expectations on which students were sold a 'Durham education'
  - Concerns about the quality of education that is moved to an online format for the first time – even where online provision is recognised as necessary, this is often caveated with a lack of confidence that academics are currently equipped with the skills to deliver education online effectively
  - Worries that personal wellbeing and community building will be hampered by social distancing, in addition to reduced opportunities for extra-curricular activities and the more isolated nature of online-only provision

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Feedback can be broadly grouped into 5 sections: Timing, Quality and 'Value for Money' (VfM), Access, Methods of Teaching and Learning and Spaces. The following analysis provides a flavour of the feedback in each section, including indicative quotes; further specific comments can be made available in detail at a later time if needed.

Timing

A majority (60%) of students are against the idea of extending the timetable to 8pm, even when expressly linked to this enabling more face-to-face delivery. Many are also against any extension to 7pm, though it is unclear where a majority lies on this shorter extension. A variety of reasons were cited, including: the need to eat, inability to attend due to health and disability, safety in travelling around Durham in the dark, impact on access to extra-curricular activity, part-time work, caring responsibilities, the reduced ability to concentrate and engage at late hours, risk of burnout, and concern for staff workload and family commitments.

"I'm a single mother and my child is in nursery during the day. The late-night sessions massively worry me and feel that they exclude people like me even further as I just simply wouldn't be able to attend"

"Students with part time jobs such as in bars will be affected by this, leaving them barely enough time to get home and have something to eat before having to go to work"

Student choice about the timing of commitments to attend is valued highly, and our suggestion that any commitment scheduled in extended hours also have an option made available in 'standard' hours was consequently very well-supported. That said, it would be important to ensure that pre-6pm activities do not become overcrowded; students should have a valid reason (such as part-time work, health, time zone of student's country of residence or WSE commitments) for requiring a switch to such options, as many departments already require, though the list of reasons may need expanding.

"I like the idea that students have a choice of attending either online or in person teaching groups and students who have pre-existing health issues and are at a higher risk will still have teaching delivered to them."

"To avoid issues with students being in different time zones, students should be able to have an element of choice as to which tutorial group they join so they can find one that works for their schedule"

Quality & 'Value for Money'

There is strong resistance to reducing the amount of content delivered, and a perceived unfairness surrounding expectations which had been raised when joining the University, as well as concern about picking up the skills that a degree from Durham is meant to signify. Value for money, particularly for international and PGT students, was also a recurring theme.

"Given the amount of content that has been missed in previous years as a result of strike action, I feel that missing out any course material would reduce the amount of teaching content to a laughably small quantity"

"We have already lost the majority of access to the library, so if teaching also gets reduced, I fail to see where our money is going"

Concerns about poor or variable quality and attainment are interwoven, in the sense of there being a general concern about the ability to learn often as a consequence of a perceived reduction in quality. Whether or not the quality issue is real, a changed model of educational delivery may present specific barriers to some students, hampering attainment – how will issues beyond a students' control that limit their ability to engage with material online be mitigated against?

A desire for 'choice' also intersects with the notion of 'quality' in several calls for allowing students to defer a year, or indeed a term and have a January start date (noting this is already planned for PGTs). In the interest of student consumer choice, once a 'final' presentation of what teaching will look like in the 2020/21 academic year can be made and students can determine whether they personally are happy with this, it may be appropriate to permit students to defer a year if they are unhappy with how their education will be delivered.

The quality issue also leads to several comments calling for partial refunds of tuition fees for Michaelmas term, but a majority of respondents indicated a belief that, subject to academics being well-supported in developing their online teaching, a quality education would continue to be delivered. Bolstering academic advice provision, as well as capitalising on other opportunities to contact academics may also help address concerns about a reduction in face-to-face contact.

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"I believe you will need to reimburse students for part of tuition fees for Michaelmas. With limited face-to-face teaching and potentially limited access to university-owned facilities a clear justification will be required for full fees"

"If lecturers receive proper support for delivering a genuinely alternative online course, then I believe the teaching would be of sufficient quality"

Access

Priority over choice in attending a face-to-face vs. online option for a given educational activity should be given to those with any disability-related need. There are further points raised regarding the practicalities of teaching and on-campus activity (e.g. potentially restricting lift use to those with an access need only, not wearing a mask while recording lecture video to allow for lip reading etc.) that merit a separate discussion with the Students with Disabilities Association. Several respondents who disclosed they were disabled referred to any plans to require face-to-face teaching and teaching at unsociable hours as ableist.

"Any lectures that are delivered in person need to have full online capability, so no board work unless it's filmed. Students working remotely can't be at a disadvantage for needing to shield."

"With online teaching sound quality can be problematic for students with hearing impairments and conditions like epilepsy can prevent attendance… also whether in person lectures will involve face masks which may prevent lip reading. Longer teaching days are unsuitable for some students with fatigue-based conditions."

A number of students raised concerns about access to technology for participating in online learning, both from a cost point of view and an international student access to services ('Great Firewall') point of view. The University must take responsibility for ensuring every student has access to the technology needed, funding grants and laptop loans, ensuring that on-site services are usable as far as possible, and selecting accessible means of delivery as appropriate.

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Methods of Teaching and Learning

The commitment to delivering as many tutorials and seminars face-to-face as possible is highly prized by students, including by 'splitting' the largest seminar groups to enable socially-distanced face-to-face teaching to take place for whole groups. There are however concerns about safety with this such as allocating time for cleaning between each classroom use. There is recognition that the ability to engage with lecture material is impacted in a relatively limited manner if transitioned online appropriately, and support for this to be asynchronous in order to free up more timetable space for synchronous tutorials and seminars. Some respondents noted that in-person lecture provision may still be of particular benefit to some students with specific access needs. One respondent provided an in-depth critique of whether online provision could be better used in ways other than the traditional 'lecture / tutorial / seminar but now online' model:

> *"The university is not using online teaching effectively because they are neglecting it's most powerful attribute - the ability for asynchronicity… Online teaching should be treated as a fourth approach to content delivery instead of just a way to recreate [the lecture, tutorial, seminar model]… Some other approaches that learning could take: instead of lectures, create video resources that don't have to fill an hour, but are instead as long as the argument takes to make. Instead of hundreds of pages worth of reading to go with those lectures, targeted reading that comes with explanatory notes that helps guide students through what they're supposed to be getting from it."*

The need for an online option for all material, even where face-to-face teaching options are offered, is clearly identified. This is particularly useful to enable students at higher risk from COVID-19 and students not able to be physically present in Durham to continue to engage in their education, as well as to facilitate student choice to meet their learning preferences. Academics need to be well supported in the delivery of online modes and the capacity of our current systems need upgrading (e.g. whiteboard capture or equivalent), and there needs to be clearly identified avenues for students to raise concerns about variable competency in online delivery in an appropriate and sensitive manner.

There were some concerns particularly affecting STEM subjects, including a higher number of contact hours meaning higher risk of more excessively long days (i.e. more likely to have both a 9am and 6pm commitment), concerns over lab capacity with a preference to try and move to smaller groups that can adhere to social distancing requirements before reducing or restricting access to certain groups as this may have an adverse impact on the development of lab skills. These concerns

are compounded by uncertainty about the capacity to 'catch up' on lost lab time in future academic years.

> *"As a STEM student, I find it hard to see how the lab sessions would work. Using model data in no way compares to actually being in the lab and doing an experiment yourself"*

> *"9am – 6pm is often hard enough in stem subjects with a serious drop off in concentration later in the day, so making it longer will only make it worse"*

Further specific concerns came from students studying in the School of Modern Languages and Culture, who noted that the nature of education in languages presents a barrier to language practice taking place effectively via online activity. This might suggest a need for allowing exceptions for some departments to retain face-to-face delivery of certain activities, that University principles might otherwise require to take place online.

The structure of assessments will need to be reviewed as a consequence of the change in structure of teaching. In particular, group work assignments may not be practicable, and we very much agree that staff should be encouraged to use this opportunity to innovate and diversify the assessment methods used in modules to explore ways in which students can be assessed both as fairly and practically as possible.

Spaces

Many comments suggest a variety of individual study settings, including the Library, TLC, College study spaces and additional University rooms be opened up to alleviate issues ranging from poor internet connections in accommodation to the feeling of being 'confined' to one room for a majority of academic and recreational activity.

> *"Please try to reopen study spaces where safe, and if not safe give priority to second and third years to access the library. I would struggle to study at home all day"*

> *"Study space, in my opinion should be a priority for the university, since it evens the playing field between those students with more resources and space, and those with less"*

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While there is recognition that staggering start times could help minimise close physical contact, improperly implemented staggered start times could lead to clashes of overlapping back-to-back commitments for both students and staff, particularly if staggering varies by department for joint honours students. It may also limit staff ability to run multiple tutorials in succession, limiting capacity.

Particularly if more rooms are opened up for use, it may be a good idea in timetabling to limit the number of staff members that are scheduled in a given room throughout a day, in order to reduce the risk of infection both from transit across campus and from multiple different room users. An updated map of teaching rooms may be a low effort way to help minimise unnecessary journeys around campus and hence unnecessary close contact at the beginning of term.

There were concerns about efficacy of measures to reduce transmission – e.g. if rooms in college used for teaching, it may create risk of transmission between students living in college and students attending academic commitments. The issue of transmission as students transit along narrow paths in the city was also raised, noting that measures in place on University property alone would not eliminate these risks.

"You'd also need to think about the footfall along church street between 5-to and 5-past the hour when students move between classes. It's already dangerous, with many students walking in the road / being nearly hit by bus wing-mirrors, but it'll be impossible to maintain social distancing"

Questions were raised regarding the provision for on-campus 'dwell time' e.g. if a student has a 1hr gap between two face-to-face activities, where are they able to go on a socially-distanced campus? If advised not to remain during these gaps, but the student does not live a reasonable distance away, this may create potentially difficult situations in other locations, such as cafés off University property.

"How will having multiple teaching activities in a single day which are not back-to-back work? Suppose that there are two in-person teaching activities on the Mountjoy Site with 1-2 hours between one finishing and the other one starting. It will be unfeasible to return to accommodation"

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The problem:

It is very likely that social distancing measures will impact teaching in Michaelmas 2020. One consequence of this is that a teaching room that would normally hold 100 students will hold far fewer. That means there is not enough space to do in person teaching as normal – we need bigger rooms to accommodate people, and there isn't enough space within current teaching rooms and within the current timetabled day to accommodate in person teaching.

How do we solve the problem?

Some combination of the below is necessary to meet the need for space:

- Extending the timetabled day.

- Teaching in rooms usually used for meetings, including rooms in Colleges.

- Moving more teaching online to make space for in person teaching.

- Teaching less content.

We've consulted academic reps and had lots of conversations with the University, and our current draft plan is:

- Small group teaching (less than 15) is delivered both online and in person, and students are able to choose which session they attend

- Large group teaching delivered online

- Some seminars and tutorials that would ordinarily include more than 15 people may be broken down into smaller groups so they can take place in person

- The timetable is expanded to include 6pm – 7pm teaching, specifically to facilitate in person small group teaching.

- If teaching happens after 5pm there is an option within the same module for the same content to be delivered before 5pm (multiple options for seminar groups at different times)

- Meeting rooms and rooms in college are used for small group teaching to increase capacity

- Lecturers and tutors increase in informal contact hours delivered online and/or in person (i.e. 'office hours', not an increase in the number of formal tutorials or seminars) with the option for non-module specific meetings

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- If capacity is not sufficient, lab sessions may be reduced with priority given to finalists/PGTs. This could be compensated for by either or a combination of rescheduling lost activities into future years or alternative lab skills provision (e.g. using existing model data for analysis)

- Start times for in person teaching within the same building could be staggered to reduce close contact in the building e.g. activities in one room of a building could start on the hour, those for another room could start 10mins past the hour etc.

Things we considered:

- Staff workload should not be dramatically increased; all reasonable measures should be made to ensure staff are able to deliver teaching within their contracted hours, and supported to deliver teaching in a new way.

- Priority should be given to the development of quality teaching, both in person and online and reviewing appropriate teaching methods. Some small group teaching may be better suited to online methods.

- The different circumstances of students – access needs, learning styles, time zones and health considerations – should be reflected in a plan that allows students to as far as possible choose the best form of provision for them.

What we need to hear from you:

- **What problems do you foresee with this plan?**

- **How will the students you represent be affected by this proposal?**

- **What works well about this plan for you?**

- **If this proposal were to go ahead, do you believe you would receive quality teaching?**

- **Would you choose to have scheduled teaching between 7pm and 8pm, if it meant teaching was delivered in person rather than online?**

- **Anything else you want to tell us about this proposal for teaching in Michaelmas 2020.**

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Appendix 2: Consultation Questions

Unique respondents n=166

Total words of feedback: 25227

Question	Answer format
Would you choose to have scheduled teaching between 7pm and 8pm, if it meant teaching was delivered in person rather than online?	Binary "Yes/No", mandatory
What problems do you foresee with this plan?	Free text (no restrictions), mandatory
If you're a student leader, how will the students you represent be affected by this proposal?	Free text (no restrictions), optional
What works well about this plan for you?	Free text (no restrictions), mandatory
If this proposal were to go ahead, do you believe you would receive quality teaching?	Free text (no restrictions), mandatory
Anything else you want to tell us about this proposal for teaching in Michaelmas 2020	Free text (no restrictions), optional

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