Student Activities Participation and Impact Report
2016/2017

Durham Students’ Union
Kara-Jane Senior, Activities Officer

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Introduction

This report presents the findings from a two-stage research project investigating participation in student groups at Durham University, and the impact that being a part of a student group has, during the 2016/2017 academic year. It aims to provide an overview of participation levels in Durham and outline the main motivations and barriers to involvement. The report also explores the impact that being part of a student group has on individual students and also on the wider community around them.

The first stage of this research project focused on the motivations for student group participation and also barriers that students face in becoming involved. Student groups are an important part of university life for many students, not just at Durham but on a national scale. Students’ Unions provide a wide range of activities for students to get involved in, yet some students still feel excluded or feel they are unable to become involved for various reasons (Mapping Participation, NUS, 2013)\(^1\). In this context, our Activities Officer, Kara-Jane Senior, was keen to find out whether Durham University and Durham Students’ Union could be doing more to enable more students to get involved in the range of student groups on offer. According to ‘Pathways through Participation’, a research project carried out by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)\(^2\), there are a number of motivations, triggers, resources and opportunities that impact on a person’s participation in voluntary work. Similarly, in the NUS ‘Mapping Participation’ report (2013), there were a number of motivations for involvement in student activities highlighted among their student participant group, such as having fun, wanting to make a change and helping people. This report aims to establish the main motivations for Durham University students specifically in participating in student groups.

Each year we see a rise in the number of students who come to study at Durham University, meaning there are growing numbers of students wanting to get involved in extra-curricular activities each year. In order to cater for more students and enable more students to participate in years to come, we first need to understand what motivations and barriers are present for existing students, and then we can work to alleviate barriers and encourage continued participation for future students. This report also therefore highlights a number of barriers which have been cited by students as preventing them from becoming involved, and it also provides practical recommendations for student group providers to help alleviate these barriers.

The second part of this research project focused on the impact that being in a student group has on both the individual students involved and on the wider community. It is easy to see the amazing impact that student groups have on the wider community, in the form of volunteering work and social action, however students who take part in these groups also benefit as individuals. Aside from being a fun way to take time out from studying, being part of a student group provides students with skills and life experience to aid them in applying for jobs, in interview etiquette and in becoming active citizens. A recent NUS report made reference to the fact that students now need ‘more than just a degree’ when they leave university, and are spending more of their time at university becoming active citizens, participating in democratic, volunteering and student group activities. This has been echoed in the sphere of employment with numerous employers now saying that they look for additional skills alongside a good degree, such as leadership and being a team player (Interview
with Aldi, September 2016)\(^3\) and self-awareness and creativity (Interview with Cancer Research UK, 2016)\(^4\).

In 1989, just 19% of school leavers entered higher education, compared to 47% in 2016 (The Guardian, 2016)\(^5\). This means that almost half of school leavers this year will eventually enter the job market in possession of a degree, and will therefore be in need of something more to help them stand out from the crowd.

If university is now about ‘more than just a degree’, perhaps Universities should be putting more resource and funding into student group activities, to enable their students to stand above the rest. If getting a job post-university is the main goal to acquiring a degree, and if students now need additional skills to achieve that goal, and if the best way to get those skills is by taking part in extra-curricular activities, then the answer would be for universities to support student group activities at their institutions as far as possible, to help make their graduates the best in the country.

KEY FINDINGS:

**Participation in Durham University Student Groups**

- Active/sports groups and clubs were most popular for students to take part in
- Only 15% of participants currently involved in a student group said they had never come across a barrier preventing them from getting involved
- 49% said there are additional activities that they would like to be involved in
- Of the participants not currently involved, over 50% said they would like to be

**Barriers to Participation**

- Time was the biggest barrier for both participants involved in groups currently and those not currently involved
- Money was the second biggest barrier for participants currently involved
- For those not currently involved, not actually knowing how to become involved was the second biggest barrier

**Motivations for Participation**

- Fun/enjoyment was the main motivation for almost half of participants currently involved in a student group
- Making friends/social aspect was the second most popular motivation for involvement, with 23% of participants mentioning this

**Student Group Impact**

- 97% of participants said being part of a student group had made their university experience more enjoyable overall
- Almost 50% said that being part of a student group has definitely, or has maybe, impacted on their decision to remain at university, when otherwise they may have dropped out
- Student group activities encourage altruistic behaviour amongst members, bring people together, support innovation and enable students to share their interests more widely.
Executive Summary

Kara-Jane Senior
Activities Officer, Durham Students’ Union

The spectacular range of extracurricular opportunities at Durham University is something widely loved by Durham students, and is used as a big selling point in student recruitment. However, until now there has been little proactivity to better understand students’ participation in such activities. Understanding what motivates students to get involved in student groups, and any potential barriers to participation, is essential to determining the best ways to ensure amazing experiences for all students who wish to take part. This study also looked at the impact extracurricular activities have on individuals and the wider community, to realise the importance of such opportunities for students during their time at Durham.

One of the stand-out findings of the first stage of research was that only 15% of survey participants involved in a student group had never come up against a barrier to their involvement. This clearly demonstrates that there is much that can be done to improve the experience for those already taking advantage of the many opportunities available. Time was cited as the most common barrier to participation, for both students involved in a group and those not. Whilst inevitably it will always be an issue for students who would love to take part in multiple groups, there are a number of ways in which participation can be made easier in this respect.

Unsurprisingly, a large number of students not involved in a student group were postgraduates or students living further away from the University. This demonstrates the need to pay more attention to these students who are in danger of being neglected when it comes to extracurricular activities, particularly when they are often the harder-to-reach students. It really is important to ensure that as much is being done as possible to open opportunities up to all.

Interestingly the research showed that the biggest motivator for participation in student activities was students seeking a break from their academic studies, to have fun pursuing their interests. However, in promoting extracurricular activities providers often speak of the personal development benefits, which may demonstrate a certain amount of misunderstanding of what really attracts students to get involved. This is further illustrated by the data from the second part of the study, looking at the impact of such opportunities on individuals, where students were low in agreement that participation had benefitted their skills development and employability.

Though fewer students took part in the second stage of the research project, the findings are regardless highly informative. The combination of individual experiences and the achievements of groups as a whole, illustrates beyond any doubt the importance extracurricular activities have in the Durham student experience, as well as the immense benefit such opportunities can have on wider society. The examples included in this report are shining illustrations of the amazing things our students achieve completely off their own backs. Impact data like this should be collected continuously to build up a solid database of what student groups are capable of and the impact they have within the University and wider communities.

Going forward, the recommendations of this report will require action from all stakeholders to implement. Such action will undoubtedly be of great benefit to the wider student experience.
Recommendations

There are several key recommendations for Durham student activity providers (including Durham Students’ Union, Experience Durham, and College Common Rooms) to take action on:

1. **Better and more regular publicity of the student groups available at Durham** – opportunity providers should take a more collective approach in ensuring it is clear and easy for students to get involved in groups.

2. **Broader range of time commitments available to students** – more opportunities should be made available so students can get involved at times they are available, and consideration should be made for making Wednesday afternoons academic-commitment-free for all students.

3. **Investigation into student group funding** – financial support for student groups should be reviewed, with the potential to create hardship funds to enable individuals to get involved in groups regardless of the cost.

4. **Membership fee always = involvement in group** – students who pay a membership fee to a group should have equal access to all opportunities provided by the group, and take further steps to ensure groups are as inclusive as possible.

5. **Further research into non-student group members** – the number of students who fall into this category is relatively small so for a better understanding more research should be done.

6. **Help students realise their development** – more support should be given to students to recognise their own development as part of a student group.
Methodology

This was a two-stage research project carried out in the 2016-2017 academic year by Durham Students’ Union. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining both quantitative & qualitative data, to form a complete picture of student group participation and the impact that student group activities have.

The aim of the first stage of this project was to formulate a picture of student group participation at Durham University. It involved surveying a total of 1168 Durham University students, via an online survey promoted in Michaelmas Term. The survey was open to both students who were part of student groups and those who were not, however there were two different survey streams for the two different groups of participants. There was no sampling of participants involved; any individual who was a Durham University student for the 2016/2017 academic year was able to complete the survey. It was advertised via our weekly emails and on our website, and also by other student group organisations such as Experience Durham. It should be noted here that a limitation of this stage of the research is, due to the fact that the survey was promoted by student group organisations, the percentage of students involved in student groups will be inflated; 85% of participants were part of a student group. Aside from this however, the sample was fairly representative of demographic factors across the student population. Please see tables 1 & 2 below.

Table 1: Participant demographics: gender, age, academic status and student status

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<th>Non-binary</th>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Academic Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1168</td>
<td></td>
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Table 2: Participant demographics: year of study

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<tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Postgraduate Taught</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Overall Total</strong></td>
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</table>

Data was collected over a 6 week period during Michaelmas term and then analysed for the purposes of this report.

Stage two of this project involved gathering information from both the individual student members, involved in student groups, and from the student group execs. This dual aspect data collection approach aimed to collect individual stories about how being in a student group has impacted on the lives of the students themselves, but also collect wider reaching social change stories from student group execs about the amazing things that groups do when all of their members come together.

This stage of research was carried out from the end of Epiphany term and through into the start of Easter term via the use of two online forms. For the individual level, students were asked for ‘submissions’ in the form of short stories/experiences/anecdotes reflecting on their time being part of a student group, alongside quantifiable rating-style questions. For the group level, the exec members were again asked for submissions, but this time focussing on the wider impact that their group has had. As student group activities are so broad, it was felt that giving participants the opportunity to express impact in their own words was the best way to go about data collection at this stage.

For the group level, we had a total of 12 submissions all from Durham Students’ Union groups. No demographic information was required for this participant group. For the individual level, there were a total of 254 respondents spanning across all three student group providers; Durham Students’ Union, Experience Durham and the Colleges. No other demographic information was required for this stage of the study, in order to keep the online form short and encourage participation. There was a relatively even spread across these three locations with members from a broad array of student groups ranging from Divas Cheerleading to Josephine Butler’s Disney Society. Please see graph below for more details.
Research Findings

1. Stage One: Student Group Participation, Motivations & Barriers

The first stage of this project aimed to outline student group participation at Durham across all student opportunity providers; Durham SU, Experience Durham and Colleges. There were a total of 1168 students who took part in the online survey involved in this stage of the research.

1.1 Students involved in student groups currently

Out of our 1168 participants, 85% stated that they were involved in a student group currently. As mentioned previously however, the number of participants involved in a student group will be inflated from that of the general population, due to the fact that the survey was primarily promoted by Durham SU and Experience Durham. Full-time undergraduates between the ages of 17-21, and living less than 5 miles away from the University were the participant group most likely to take part in a student group. There were no real differences between men and women or between UK and international students. The demographic group least likely to take part were taught postgraduate students, aged 30+ and living more than 5 miles away from the University.

Of the many varied student groups on offer at Durham, the most popular category of group for students to be involved in was sports and active groups. Similarly to the NUS ‘Mapping Participation’ report, which found a majority of participants took part in a sports or outdoor activity, 65% of participants in our study were involved in some kind of sports or active group. The most common participant demographic for this type of group was UK undergraduate men between the ages of 17 and 21. Academic groups and drama & music groups were the next two most popular types of groups. Please see the graph below for full details.
On average, participants were each involved in 2 of the 11 student group categories investigated in this report. Some participants were involved in up to eight different types of student group however. Groups which had the lowest involvement were those with the least number of student groups in their category, as expected (for instance, there are only 4 media groups at Durham SU compared to 31 active groups and this does not take into consideration the numerous groups in Experience Durham or College groups).

The collegiate system at Durham has resulted in resources and services being spread across different organisations, meaning that there are multiple places for students to get involved in student group activities. Durham SU has over 250 student groups ranging from Belly Dancing to Chess. Experience Durham is a university governed student group provider which houses all sports clubs, most music groups, most drama groups and it also runs a volunteering programme (Student Community Action). On top of that, each College then also has a range of student groups on offer for the students at that College. With there being so many potential places for students to take part, we were keen to work out which of these providers was being most utilised by students. To do this, participants were asked where they take part in each of their student groups.

Durham Students’ Union was the location most frequently cited as being the place for students to take part in their groups, with Arts & Crafts, Academic, International, Political, Campaigning, Hobbies & Games and Media groups with the highest participation rates at Durham SU. College was also a very popular place for student group participation, with the highest participation rates for Sports & Active and Music & Drama groups. In the majority of student group categories, there were two or three different places for participation to occur (9 out of 11 categories), however Volunteering and Fundraising groups spanned across 6 different locations for participation. Please see the graph below for full details.
We have seen so far that the majority of our participants take part in student groups, and that they do this in a number of different locations across the University structure. What we haven’t yet established is why so many students choose to spend their spare time taking part in extra-curricular activities.

Understanding the reasons behind why students get involved in activities currently will help us to provide recommendations to increase participation in future years. The NUS ‘Mapping Participation’ report found that having fun and meeting new people/making friends were the two top motivations for why their participant group chose to take part in Students’ Union clubs and societies, with around 70% of their participants mentioning these two motivations. In our study, participants were asked what their primary motivation was for taking part in a student group and were given an open text box to write their responses. Our sample found similar results to the NUS research; the top motivation for participation amongst the Durham sample was to have fun/for enjoyment, with 47% of participants mentioning this as their primary motivation. The second most frequently mentioned motivation was to meet new people/be social (mentioned by 37%) and the third most mentioned motivation was interests/hobbies (mentioned by 24%). The top 3 motivations for participation in student groups all interestingly have a pleasure element, as in participants take part to enrich their time at university and to make it more enjoyable, as opposed to getting something back for their time (i.e. CV enhancement) or spending time doing something they believe in (i.e. campaigning). The NUS research compared a number of different activities that students could choose to spend their
of all possible options, taking part in a student club or society was the only one in which participants said their primary motivation was for pleasure. The motivations for the other options were to improve things and to develop skills or to gain work experience for their CVs. With the increased academic pressure placed on students at university, it is important to highlight that student group activities enable students to enjoy themselves and do the things they love, enhancing their university experience and, in some cases, enabling them to continue under the academic pressure placed on them. Please see the graph below for full details on motivation for participation.

Out of the 996 participants who take part in a student group, 21% indicated that they were discontent with their current involvement. This could be taken to mean that these participants would like to be involved in more student groups, but are unable to due to certain circumstances, or that they simply are not enjoying taking part. Alternatively, it could mean that these students feel too involved and would like to reduce the amount of activities that they do.

With regards to the first rationale, participants were asked whether they had ever come across any barriers making it difficult for them to be involved or prevented involvement altogether. The most commonly mentioned barrier, by a long way, was time, which was selected by 70% of participants. A couple of time-related issues that were mentioned were that groups clash with academic timetables and that the administrative work that goes along with running a group can be very time-consuming. Money was the second most frequently chosen barrier, selected by 30% of participants. Student groups can charge fees for things like membership, equipment, classes and these fees can vary drastically. For instance, the membership fees for the student groups at Durham SU vary from being free of charge up to £75 for a one year membership.

One thing not present in the pre-defined list, which was mentioned by a number of participants as being a barrier, was that certain societies took their membership fee payment and then made them undergo an interview to take part in the group. If the student did not pass the interview, they were then not allowed to take part in the group activities and were not offered a refund. A similar thing was mentioned by participants belonging to groups which require auditions; if they did not succeed in the audition they were not allowed to take part in the group. These are barriers that are directly preventing willing students from getting involved in the activities that they want to.
Only 15% of students currently involved in a student group stated that they had never come across a barrier. This means that while only 21% of participants currently involved said they were discontent with their current involvement, 85% have come across a barrier either making it more difficult for them to take part or prevented them from taking part in all of the groups that they wanted to. While the majority of students in groups are content, a large number have had to overcome obstacles in order to continue to take part in activities outside of their studies. When asked whether there were additional groups that students would like to be involved in, but are not currently, 49% said that there were. This suggests that the aforementioned barriers have had an impact on these students’ ability to do all of the extra-curricular activities that they would like to. This is something that should be investigated further by Durham SU, in order to enable all students to take part in all student group activities that they want to, with no barriers, and make the most of their university experience.

1.2 Students not currently involved in a student group

Out of the 1168 participants who took part in this stage of our study, 15% said they were not currently involved in a student group. As was to be expected, the most likely participant demographic group to not be involved were international postgraduate students, living over 5 miles away from the University. The ‘currently-involved’ sample was made up of just 9% of postgraduates, whereas the ‘not-currently-involved’ sample contained 37% PGs. Almost half of all PGTs who took part in the study were not involved in a student group. One potential explanation for this is that the majority of taught postgraduates are studying for a one year master’s degree, and so never have chance to become involved due to only being in Durham for one year. There were slightly more
students, who live in college, not involved in a student group, compared to those who live in private rented accommodation within 5 miles of the University (15% of college livers-in and 11% of livers-out within 5 miles of the University were not involved).

In the previous section, time and money were both cited as being two barriers to increased involvement in student group activities. These barriers were present for students who have already invested both time and money into student group activities however. We are yet to establish what prevents students from becoming involved in the first place.

Similarly to those involved in a student group, the main barrier to participation for students not currently involved was time, with 61% of participants selecting this option. Interestingly, money was far less of an issue for those not currently involved, than for those who were part of a student group. Money was the second most frequently selected barrier amongst students who were currently involved, whereas it came in 5th for participants not involved in a student group. Participants already involved in student group activities have already invested money into their group and so it seems that further monetary requirements prevent them from further involvement. Students not currently involved, however, have not yet invested any money, and this research would suggest that involvement for the majority of these students is not restricted due to a lack of funding.

Instead, the second most frequently selected barrier for students not involved was that they did not know how to get involved, which was closely followed by a lack of interest and then not feeling as though they fit in. Please see the graph below for full details.
Based on these findings, 26% of participants are not involved in a student group simply because they did not know how to get involved. Increasing awareness and promoting student groups more is something that the SU could have a direct positive impact on, in order to remove this barrier. In support of this, when asked whether they would like to be involved in a student group, 50% of participants said that they would. This would suggest that, for half of our not-involved-currently participant group, the barriers to involvement have had a direct impact on their ability to become involved. While this group of participants was relatively small in comparison to the general population at Durham University, this finding is worth noting and additional research into the wider student body would be of benefit.

In order to enable these students to perhaps become involved in student group activities in the future, we asked them what they felt could be done to encourage participation. Working on the timing of activities and having more information/better advertising for student groups were the two main things that were mentioned by participants. It was suggested that activities could be run at lunchtimes and have more flexible timings with different levels of commitment available. Having better scheduling of academic timetables was also mentioned as being something that would encourage participation in student groups. With regard to having more information and better advertising, participants suggested that there needs to be greater clarity with regard to what the groups do throughout the year and publicity of groups outside of the freshers fair. Please see the graph below.

**Graph 7: percentage of students not currently involved who would like to be**

- Yes
- No

**Graph 8: Factors to encourage participation amongst students not currently involved**

- Timing
- Change student group procedures
- More information/better advertising
- Interest & Choice
- Inclusivity
- Other
2. Stage Two: Impact of Student Group Activities

2.1 Impact of Student Groups on Wider Community

Student group activities are very diverse and can vary from things like volunteering to pick up litter to swimming competitively at a national level. The impact that student groups have is therefore also very diverse. NUS carried out some research in 2016 into the impact that student groups have on a national level. They did this by posing a number of negative statements about the work of Students’ Unions and asked SUs to ‘prove them wrong’ by providing evidence to show how incorrect the statements were. The research found that, among other things, student group activities help to encourage altruism, slow down climate change and ensure positive mental health (NUS, Impact of Student Opportunities: Prove Me Wrong, 2016). Our submissions follow a similar theme, with altruistic behaviour, bringing people together and supporting innovation being just a couple of the main impacts that a number of our student groups have had and, perhaps more importantly, have been able to evidence.

Altruistic Behaviour

Research has shown that the under 30s are typically the demographic group who donate the least amount to charity (Charities Aid Foundation, 2012), however participation in student group activities has been proven to encourage altruistic behaviour. Our student groups raise incredible amounts of money for charity; our submissions ranged from £100 to £1180 raised for charity, and last year ‘DUCK’ (Durham University Charities Kommittee) raised over £130,000 for a wide variety of charities. Altruism comes in many forms however, not just in the form of raising funds for charity. This year so far (2016/2017 academic year), students involved in Student Community Action (SCA) have spent over 16,000 hours of their time volunteering. A total of 2,132 students have given up at least one hour of their time to volunteer thorough SCA this year. All of this time spent volunteering, alongside the positive outcomes and impact transpiring from volunteering, would not be possible without participation in student groups. In one of the submissions, Durham Students’ Union group, EWB (Engineers without borders), was planning outreach sessions to be delivered to local schools and Durham for Economic Pluralism was planning to offer the local population of Durham basic economic education. Student group activities are enabling students to become more altruistic citizens and, in the process, raising funds for charities and offering great opportunities to the local population.

Bringing People Together

Student group events are often open to all students and also advertised to the local population of Durham. They enable people to come together and bridge the gap between the student body and the local population. Through student group events, local people are able to appreciate the amazing
things that students do when they come together; something of great importance in a city with a
growing university impacting on the local population. Durham Students’ Union group, Kendo, is
proud to have numerous non-student members, both adults and under-18s, who regularly take part
in their events. Durham University Coffee Society has created a local business scheme that rewards
students for buying coffee from local coffee shops instead of big chains, aiming to build positive
relationships with the local business community, whilst simultaneously benefitting students.

This impact occurs within the student population as well as between them and external parties.
Being part of a student group can create links to students doing a similar thing, on a national scale,
at other Universities. Kendo will be hosting the 2nd Northern England University Kendo League this
year and have also attended events in Newcastle and Scotland. Creating links to other university
students can be of benefit in a number of ways, not least in building an active student community on
a national scale.

Student groups also have an impact on the specific Durham situation and within the Durham student
population in isolation. The collegiate system at Durham creates very close-knit communities within
college; however this inevitably leaves some students feeling like they do not belong. Student
groups provide a place for students with things in common to meet and have fun. This enables
members to meet students from other colleges, from other courses, from other cultures and from
other year groups. Durham University Improvised Comedy Society - “Shellshock!” - are proud to
have a wide spread of members ranging from first year undergraduates to PhD students in their final
year and Durham Inter-Collegiate Christian Union held an events week with over 5000 students in
attendance. Student groups provide an alternative space for students to come together outside of
their living situation or their academic course. They enhance the Durham University experience by
enabling students to meet like-minded people and sharing the things they love to do together.

**Innovation**

Students do incredible things when they come together, and being part of a student group with a
common shared interest is a great place for students to explore and exhibit their skills. The
outcomes and products of students’ collaborative work are really exciting and often of benefit to
society. In one of the submissions, Engineers without Borders describe a bike powered charger/smoothie maker
that they are building and are aiming to make available for use by the wider student body. Durham University Electric
Motorsport designed and built a solar powered car using 391 state-of-the-art silicon solar cells to propel it up to
70mph! These are just a couple of examples of the amazing things that student groups create. Student
groups give students the opportunity to work on things that interest them outside of their academic courses and,
at the same time, enable them to create amazing things for others to enjoy. They enhance the Durham University experience by enabling students to meet like-minded people and sharing the things they love to do together.
Sharing Interests

Student groups have a common interest at their core and are run by passionate members keen to share that interest more widely. One of the main impacts that a student group has is its ability to share a message with the wider community. Student groups often have charitable objectives or aims, meaning that lots of the messages are positive and of benefit in the wider society; out of the 229 student groups at Durham SU, 25 of them would fall under the category of having ‘charitable objectives’. Durham Students’ Union society, Durham for Refugees, held an event named ‘A Taste of Syria’, in which Syrian refugees cooked traditional Syrian dishes for around 180 people. It encouraged students and locals to speak to the refugees and hear their stories; an opportunity that they would never have had without the society event. Events like these are really impactful within the local community, as they demonstrate that students do care about things outside of their university bubble, and they enable that message to be communicated to the general public.

A number of our submissions described sharing their interests through the use of guest speakers, providing an opportunity for their members to advance their knowledge and for external people to learn more about their area of interest. Science Fiction and Fantasy Society have recently created a convention named ‘DurhamCon’ in which one well-known science fiction or fantasy author and one genre literature academic is invited to present talks at the University. Durham University Photography Society holds both winter and summer exhibitions which are open to both students and locals. They are keen to promote photography as well as show appreciation and love for the area in which they study and live in, and they choose to do this through the art of photography. Durham University Improvised Comedy Society (Shellshock!) holds free shows every other Friday evening that are well-attended, giving people a chance to relax and laugh, and at the same time learn more about the society. None of these great events would have been possible without the existence of student groups and the fantastic work that they do.

2.2 Impact of Student Groups on Individual Students

On top of the amazing impact that student groups have on the wider community, being part of a student group also has a profound positive impact on those students actually involved. The NUS ‘Prove Me Wrong’ research found that, on an individual level, being part of a student group can help to ensure positive mental health, help to keep students in education and facilitate good jobs for all. In our own research, 97% of participants agreed that being part of a student group had made their university experience more enjoyable overall. With increasing academic pressure and rising numbers of students with mental health issues, being part of a fun and supportive student-run group is more important than ever to a huge number of students.

Participants in our study were asked to what extent they agreed with a series of statements about the impact that being in a student group has had on them. The most positively rated statements surrounded the friendships and the people that members had met through being part of a student group. 93% of participants agreed that being in a student group had enabled them to meet people they otherwise would not have met and 92% agreed that being part of a student group enabled them to make more friends. At the other end of the spectrum, and in contrast to the NUS research findings, some of the least positively rated statements were those surrounding life after university and job prospects. Only 60% of participants agreed that being part of a student group had broadened their job prospects (over 30% fewer than meeting new people) and 72% agreed that it
had prepared them for life after university. Only 51% of participants agreed that being part of a student group had increased their involvement in democratic activity. On the most basic level, it would seem that the majority of participants feel that the ability to make more friends and mix with people you would never come across otherwise, are the most positive things about being part of a student group. Please see the graph below for full details.

Graph 9: Individual impact factors for being part of a student group

Setting aside the differences between the ratings, and now looking at the similarities, we can see that all statements were agreed with by over 50% of participants. This would suggest that being part of a student group does have a positive impact on the majority of participants and that this positive impact is spread over a wide variety of factors. On average, the statements were agreed with by 80% of participants. In contrast, an average of only 6% of participants disagreed with the statements.

In the NUS ‘Prove Me Wrong’ research, the submissions from both Leeds University SU and Glasgow Caledonian Students Association, found that there was a link between a higher level of well-being and taking part in student activities. In our study, participants were asked to share their personal
experiences of being part of a student group; there were multiple comments made about well-being and the positive impact that being part of a student group has had on participants’ mental state and overall happiness during their time at university. The fact that these were free-text comments, and not selected from a pre-defined list, emphasises the fact that members really do feel the positive impact that being part of a student group has on general well-being. Here are a selection of comments made by participants to illustrate the link between student group participation and well-being:

“It has given me something to look forward to amongst the ridiculous amount of work we’re set, the stresses of exams, the mental health issues I’m being treated for and my general low mood during the week”

“Taking part in student groups, both at a college and university level, has been amazing. It has benefited my mental health significantly, particularly as I struggled to settle in at my college at first.”

“Given me something to enjoy and destress, to get away from work, as well as being a creative outlook. I definitely don’t think I would be enjoying Durham on the course alone.”

In addition to general well-being, a sense of belonging and inclusivity were also experienced by a number of participants when taking part in a student group. The quantitative data illustrated that participants felt that making friends and meeting new people were the most positive things about being involved in a student group, and this was echoed by the free-text responses. A number of participants made reference to a sense of belonging and community within their student group; a place that is separate to their academic course or their college in which they feel they belong. For some, being part of a student group was what helped them to settle into the “Durham Bubble” and for others it is where they have made their closest friendships. Below are some quotes to demonstrate the link between belonging, friendship and student group participation:

“I feel that it has helped me feel a lot more at home. Had I not settled in as quickly, I may not have wanted to stay as I, personally, get homesick very easily. However, joining societies and meeting lots of new people that I usually wouldn’t have mixed with has made me feel a sense of belonging to many different aspects of the university.”

“Being part of women’s rugby at university has given me a community, a family, that I wouldn’t have otherwise known. As a part of the clubs I have grown immensely as a person, have made long-standing friendships, and have felt a part of something special. For women who perhaps aren’t the most confident and don’t feel a great amount of self-worth, rugby can make you feel strong, capable and valuable.”

While the quantitative data indicated that job prospects and life after university were not things that participants felt they gained from being part of a student group, learning new skills and developing as people were two experiences mentioned frequently in the qualitative responses. Some participants felt that student group participation had enabled them to become more confident and gain an understanding of things in the wider world outside of their academic courses (i.e. the running of an event, dealing with big corporate companies and the importance of publicity). Below is
a selection of quotes to demonstrate the link between skills/personal development and student group involvement:

“Student groups, especially being involved on an exec, have...given me a chance to learn new skills and have given me confidence that I have practical skills to take forward in life.”

“Being part of a student media group has afforded me a huge range of skills that have broadened my horizons and influenced the type of career I want to go into after graduating.”

“I have become more confident in myself, and happier!”

So far we have seen that being part of a student group enables members to make more friends, mix with different people, learn new skills, find a sense of belonging and keep their general happiness levels high. Aside from all of those fantastic factors however, the most impact that a thing can have on the life of a student is to either dissuade them or persuade them to continue their studies, when they think they may want to drop out. In the NUS ‘Prove Me Wrong’ research, Teesside, Staffordshire and Liverpool Hope all found evidence to suggest that being part of a student group keeps students in education. We asked our participant group whether being part of a student group had ever impacted on their decision to remain at university, when otherwise they may have dropped out. Please see the graph below for the results.

Graph 10: Has being a part of a student group/groups ever been the reason you continued to stay on your current course at University, or had an impact on your decision to stay, when otherwise you might have dropped out?

- Yes (25%)
- Maybe (24%)
- No (51%)

A quarter of participants state that being part of their student group has impacted on their decision to either remain at university or has been the sole reason they have decided to stay. A further 24% state their student group involvement may have had an impact on their decision to stay, meaning that being part of a student group has impacted on almost 50% of our participant group in total. This is hugely significant and demonstrates the importance of the role that student groups play in the lives of many students. Getting a degree is the main focus for students attending university, however for a number of students, taking part in a student group is the difference between achieving that goal and giving it up altogether.
Conclusions

This report aimed to provide an overview of participation levels in Durham and outline the main motivations and barriers to involvement. It also aimed to explore the impact that being part of a student group has on individual students and also on the wider community around them.

The research found that while the majority of students were involved in a student group, 85% of them have had to overcome barriers in order to take part, and almost half said that there were additional activities that they would like to be involved in. Over 50% of students not currently involved in student group activities said that they would like to be, however barriers such as a lack of time and a lack of information were preventing them from doing so. A lack of time was the biggest barrier for both students involved in groups currently and for those not currently involved. A lack of money was only a significant barrier for those who were currently involved, and had already invested money into their group, indicating that further monetary requirements were preventing further involvement. Money was not a significant barrier for those not currently involved however, and it was rather a lack of information on how to become involved that was preventing participation. At the opposite end of the scale, fun/enjoyment was cited as being the main motivation for almost 50% of participants who were currently involved in a student group.

With regard to the impact of student groups on the wider community, our research found that, among other things, student group activities help to encourage altruistic behaviour, bring people together, support innovation and enable students to share their interests more widely. Student group activities are enabling students to become more altruistic citizens and, in the process, raising funds for charities and offering great opportunities to the local population. They also give students the opportunity to work on things that interest them outside of their academic courses and, at the same time, enable them to create amazing things for others to enjoy. They enhance the Durham University experience by enabling students to meet like-minded people and sharing the things they love to do together.

At an individual level, this research found that being part of a student group has enabled participants to develop a sense of belonging, to make friends, mix with people they would otherwise have never met, learn new skills, develop as people, become more confident and contribute towards general well-being. Most importantly, the research also found that being part of a student group has had an impact on almost 50% of participants’ decision to remain at university, when otherwise they may have dropped out.

Overall, this research has shown that being part of a student group has had a considerable positive impact on the majority of students involved, as well as on the community around them. There is no doubt that university is now about ‘more than just a degree’ and, as we have demonstrated in this report, being part of a student group enables students to grow as people and develop the skills they need for life after university. This research has provided a starting point for exploration into the student group participation picture at Durham University. The impact that student groups have, on both the individual students involved and on the wider community, is undeniable. The next steps following this research will involve deciding how best we can enhance support, resources and funding available for the incredible range of student groups doing amazing things at Durham University.
Recommendations

1. Better and more regular publicity of the student groups available at Durham

A number of participants felt that they were unable to get involved in student group activities as they did not know how to get involved. Creating a higher profile of student groups, and better information on how students can get involved, would help to alleviate this barrier. Currently, the main way that students can find out about student groups is through the Students’ Union freshers fair and the Experience Durham equivalent. Students can sign up for groups on our website all year-round, however this makes the assumption that students recognise the Students’ Union as a student activity provider, know what a student group is, and how to find them on our website. There should be a wider range of methods used to publicise student groups (i.e. mini-fairs on the Science Site, student group booklet sent in freshers’ packs), to ensure that every student gets to hear about the opportunities available to them, and a more collective approach from the wider University community to publicise all opportunities.

2. Broader range of time commitments available to students

Time was cited by the majority of participants as being the primary barrier preventing them from taking part in all of the activities they would want to, or preventing them from getting involved altogether. Further research should be done looking into the timings of student group activities compared to the time spent by students on their academic courses (i.e. what time of day are students typically free from academic commitments). This emphasises the importance of keeping Wednesday afternoons free for undergraduates and suggests that this is potentially something that should be considered for postgraduate students too, to enable more students to take part in extracurricular activities. As a starting point however, student groups should be encouraged to accept a broader range of commitment levels from members, for instance monthly, termly and bi-weekly attendance, as well as weekly attendance and also considering the time of day for sessions to occur. The membership fees involved with decreased participation should also be considered (i.e. escalating range of payments and one off small payments for students who only attend termly). The number of ‘Give it a Go’ style activities should also be increased and there should be alternatives to societies to provide more opportunities with less time commitment needed. Improving the processes and support for student group leaders would also help reduce the time required to run a student group. This would hopefully enable more students to be involved without feeling as though they have to dedicate masses of their time to the group.

3. Investigation into student group funding

For participants who were currently involved in a student group, money was the second most frequently mentioned barrier to involvement. A number of Students’ Union groups are funded annually through our grants application process, some do not require funding as their activity is free and others are funded through membership fees. There is no funding available to individual students who want to get involved however. Some groups have high membership fees (up to £75 per year), which means that not everyone can take part in these groups. Further research should be done into the ways in which individual students fund their student group involvement and whether there would be scope to offer a ‘student group involvement fund/loan’ to students wanting to take part,
but who lack the funds to do so. The student group fees at the higher end of the scale should be reviewed and perhaps discounts could be offered to students who are struggling to pay. There should be more help available for groups to find sponsorship and to get discounts on activity costs. In general, Durham University should also consider the cost of its student experience more generally, and in relation to the Durham Grant and Hardship Funds.

4. Membership fee always = involvement in group

It was highlighted that one barrier to involvement in certain societies is that there is an interview or audition that must be passed before students can take part in activities. In some cases, students pay a membership fee and then fail to pass the interview, meaning that they are unable to take part in activities and lose their money. If a membership fee has been paid, this should equate to involvement within the group, without any extra hoops for students to jump through. Those student groups with extra requirements from their members should conduct a screening process before any money is paid. Where opportunities are limited the process should be fair and transparent, and students should not lose out financially. Student groups should be supported to be as open and inclusive as possible, ensuring that there are opportunities that all students can participate in.

5. Further research into non-student group members

Out of the participants who were not currently involved in a student group, 50% said that they would like to be. This participant group was relatively small in comparison to the general student population at Durham however, and so further research into this area would be of benefit. If the majority of students do not take part simply through a lack of interest, then it would be reasonable to conclude that we do not need to do anymore to enable these students to become involved. If they are struggling to take part due to financial or time-related issues, or if they simply do not know how to become involved, these are things that we could have a direct positive impact on. Students studying on taught postgraduate courses should be considered in particular, as this was the group with the lowest participation rates.

6. Help students realise their development

In the individual impact survey, very few participants felt that involvement in a student group had helped them to develop skills or prepared them for life after graduation. However, growing numbers of employers are looking for extracurricular activity on job applications. It could be that many students do not realise their own personal development through being involved in a student group, and so more should be done to support students in recognising what skills they have acquired whilst being part of a group and how to use these post-graduation.
References

1 NUS (2013) Mapping Participation: the journey of Students’ Union Participation in Higher Education.


3 Interview conducted by Durham Students’ Union with Aldi representative (September 2016).

4 Interview conducted by Durham Students’ Union with Cancer Research UK representative (2016).

