

TO: Assembly
FROM: George Walker, President
RE: Value for Money Core Position
DATE: 20th June 2019

The belief and its justification:

With students paying over £9,000 per year in tuition fees and incurring other significant costs associated with their course, extra-curricular activities and living costs, there has been much debate in the Higher Education sector about how Universities should seek to deliver 'Value for Money' (VfM) for students. This discussion has been led by the Universities' regulator, the Office for Students, and was highlighted in the recent Augar Review of post-18 education funding. Despite the desire of the regulator to scrutinise VfM, it is still unclear exactly how this is defined across the sector, or here at Durham.

We believe that students should receive value for money from the University for the various fees they pay. For students, value for money means transparency about costs and how money is spent, quality of provision and affordability of the Durham experience, so that cost doesn't become the tool of creating a Durham that is increasingly exclusionary.

The Union must make sure that the University regards students as key partners in the development of the University's work on VfM. When considering VfM, the primary focus should be on the experiences of students whilst studying at Durham. VfM must be delivered for all students, regardless of socioeconomic status, background, protected characteristics, home or international status and course of study.

Definition of a better future:

The Union will lobby the University to implement an approach to VfM that puts students and their interests at its heart. To do this, we must adopt a student definition of VfM based on the following principles:

Quality – The cost of attending Durham must be matched by a high-quality student experience and learning provision for all those who attend Durham University. This experience must be high-quality in all areas, including: academic studies, Wider Student Experience activities and support services. It is not good enough for the University to seek to demonstrate the quality of this experience through eventual graduate outcomes, or by relying upon the University's reputation. Students at Durham must agree that the experience they have had is high-quality and the University should utilise a range of quantitative and qualitative data to demonstrate that this is the case.

Affordable – In order for VfM to be delivered for all students, the Durham student experience must be accessible to all, regardless of ability to pay. This means that costs must be set a level which is fair and reasonable, so that cost is never a barrier to attendance at Durham. The affordability must encompass the whole student experience, including costs related to academic studies, the wider student experience and living costs so that it can be a vehicle for widening participation. The University must utilise its resources to provide adequate financial support to students for whom cost is a barrier, in order for them to meet these costs and to be able to enjoy a high-quality student experience.

Transparent – The University must take all reasonable measures to make clear to students the true cost of attending Durham University, and how that money is spent. These costs must include not just headline figures such as tuition fees and the University accommodation, but also the hidden costs relating the wider student experience, academic studies and support services. The University must work with the Union to best communicate this information to students, helping students to understand these costs and how their money is being spent to deliver a high-quality student experience. Students should feel able to hold the University accountable for its delivery of VfM.

The barriers:

The cost of being a Durham student is significant, with Durham SU's research into the cost of attendance (Appendix B) estimating the cost of the Durham student experience to be £20,737.00 per year, including tuition fees. Based on the principles above, we do not believe that Durham University currently offers good value for money across its provision.

The University's existing VfM statement (Appendix A) differs from the principles set out in this paper, with a far greater emphasis on graduate outcomes and the University's reputation and performance in league tables. We wouldn't recognise 'good value for money' from a gym where the equipment didn't work, the prices changed arbitrarily or trainers weren't good teachers, even if people were fitter after attending. So we don't think that we can say we get 'good value for money' in our education, just because the right number of Durham graduates go onto get well-paying jobs – the quality of teaching, learning resources and student experience must be considered as part of ensuring students get value for money. A major challenge will therefore be to persuade the University to centre its VfM work on the student experience, utilising the student voice in demonstrating value.

The complex nature of Durham's collegiate system can make it more difficult to determine cost and for the University to deliver transparency, as costs are different for different groups of students and it is less clear where money is spent. We must continue to be clear that whilst this presents difficulties, it must not be used as an excuse for a lack of transparency and that work must continue to be undertaken to make clear to students the true cost of the Durham student experience.

Belief about the change and the responsibilities:

The position of Durham Students' Union is:

That, in the short term, Durham SU should exercise its influence through the relevant University decision-making bodies to embed the principles outlined in this paper in the University's VfM work. In the long term, we'll lobby the University to adopt and implement a University wide VfM policy that puts quality education and student experience at the centre.

That Durham SU will continue to ask for recognition of the true cost of the Durham student experience and the financial support needed in order for these costs to be met by all students, and hold to account Durham University where the principles outlined in this paper aren't present in practice.