

**Durham Students' Union**  
**Assembly COVID-19 Special Agenda**

Thursday 14th May 2020, 16:30, Virtual meeting, Zoom

**Item A - Welcome**

JM - opens meeting. Explains zoom etiquette and that there is a media observer in attendance.

**Item B - Minutes of the meeting on 6<sup>th</sup> February and on 12<sup>th</sup> March**

No amendments to minutes from either meeting.

Minutes from both meetings were approved.

**Item C - Apologies for absence and conflicts of interest**

JM – Apologies received from student groups committee, trans association and academic affairs committee.

**Item D - Censure Investigation Outcome**

JM - censure investigation into Kate McIntosh occurred and found that there was no case to answer.

**Item E - Board Update**

KM - presents board update from 14<sup>th</sup> May meeting. Board discussed issues arising in the next 6 months relating to Durham SU finances and the strategy. New strategy approved to take the organisation through this period and happy to take any questions.

JM – any questions on board update

No questions asked.

**Item F - Officer Questions**

JM - Question for Kate – “I would like to know what is being done about the University still charging full tuition fees?”

KM – the university’s current direction is focussed on ensuring the financial sustainability of the organisation over this period and are therefore not considering tuition fee refunds at this point. The NUS are campaigning for tuition fee refunds as part of their ‘safety net’ campaign

and if we are going to see a change in this it's likely to come from a national effort such as this. This is also something that is a longer term priority for the SU and not an immediate concern, there are some things we can solve quickly which is something we've been focussing on.

JM – Question for Kate – “How will officer roles be handed over?”

KM – outlines plan for officer induction but explains that it won't be done in the same way as previous due to the likely need for online delivery. There are new University committees set up to respond to covid-19 stuff and we've asked for the University to play a role in inducting the officers into those spaces.

JM – Question for Kate – “What sub-groups need student reps? When apps open how to students reply? Responses from Council on decolonisation motion and disablist motion?”

KM - Sub-groups are now changing as the immediate crisis has altered. Now looking at forward planning. Two student reps on each of these groups. Opportunity for more students to feed in. Probably already elected students e.g. Officers, JCR presidents, faculty reps. In relation to Council's responses - disablist motion got a full response which we are pushing to make public. The work is ongoing but good we got a response. Decolonisation response was a paper that was co-written by Sam (UG Academic Officer). This work is also ongoing.

AMc - Nothing that Council said that we weren't expecting, but Covid-19 has thrown us into a new world. A lot of the things we asked for have shifted and been done already. Disabled students' access has appeared overnight due to changes made for Covid-19. Working with Jess Madden and SwaDA to make the motion relevant to Covid-19 now.

SJA – on the paper that went to Council co-written by Sam. University developing an inclusive teaching package. Work to make sure the Uni understand decolonisation is not just an inclusive teaching package and goes further. Conversations with People of Colour Association and others to develop resources to help aide understanding of what decolonisation actually is.

JM – Question for David – “Is it not inappropriate to reschedule tuition fee payment? We're not currently even getting what we're paid for.”

DE – has looked in to this and believes there is some confusion as to what the dates were. A finance document from earlier in the year said the payment date was 11 May. Sympathetic with lack of resources point. University is allowed to do this, which is why they continue to do so. This sets a low standard. Doesn't think that paying tuition fees now would weaken position about reclaiming them. Recommend keeping notes of what opportunities you expected to get that you have now lost as a result of disruption. Contact the SU Advice Service for more information about reclaiming money for disruption. On no detriment, making sure you keep notes of the opportunities that have been missed – that's the route to complain down, would very much push back on the idea that no detriment is a bad thing.

### **Item G - Committee Questions**

JM – no questions for committees were received.

## **Item H - Association Questions**

JM – no questions for associations were received.

### **\*Democracy Report Statements\* (not agenda item)**

JM – invites SW and AM to give pre-planned statements regarding the democracy report.

SW – democracy report is means to an end goal, can safely say that the report was disappointing in quite a lot of ways. Seriously regrettably how many people were interviewed for it. It has made the outcome quite one sided, not touching on structural issues or the election. Disappointing that many more students wanted to be involved but were not contacted to take part. On a personal note, I was not expecting to be name checked and feel uncomfortable being. Statement provides criticisms of the report released regarding Durham SU democracy. SW is concerned that it is one-sided and not well-publicised. Believes it's important that the review did happen and that it's a starting point and that the full scale democracy review is still needed. Believes that serious change is needed through a review that is totally transparent. Questions, who is leading the next stage of the democracy review? What are the initial plans for how the review will be done? How will students be included and kept informed? How can students get involved?

AM – thanks SW for statement. Wasn't involved in the commissioning of the report but AM thinks the next step is focussing on the conclusions of the report. Do we need to overhaul the democratic structures – the answer is yes. Level of deception is really problematic and we need to ensure that doesn't happen again. Don't want a repeat of this year and need to make sure students are getting to the democratic structures available to them and that they need. In terms of how the democratic review will be conducted, conducting any level of review requires it to be designed in some way, and when the topic is on democracy and representation it's more difficult. The only way to make sure the real stage of the review is done well is that these voices come forward and make sure it's a professionally done review. All these issues that people are talking about relating to lack of consultation and lack of transparency – we can all only represent ourselves – my appeal right now is for as many diverse groups to come forward and find a solution. Online discourse that we've seen over the past few months has been done in a quarantine – how can we come together as a community and make direct change rather than focussing on the past.

JM – in agreement with both of those sentiments. The report had elements that certainly were disappointing to lots of people but does very much share the sentiment that that was a temperature gauge and that there will be more opportunity for us to pull together and make something better. Encourage anyone and everyone to get in touch to be involved. The report was very focussed on Assembly but exciting times in the future.

**\*\*ACCESS BREAK\*\***

## **Item I - COVID-19 Core Position**

JM – explains that debate will follow same format as normal but extra time allowed. Invites KM to speak on this.

KM – summary of position – in response to Covid-19 the university moved to online teaching and made a series of big decisions in quick succession and dealing with covid-19 is a really big task. This position expresses the hard lines in what the University should cut and what it shouldn't. It expresses what we should safeguard and protect. Students' rights as students and student communities. The pandemic is going to have big effects on education at Durham, and also probably long-term direction of the Uni. When the university makes decisions, students need to be at the centre of decision making and it has to come from students, in everything the university is doing.

JM – any questions for clarification?

JMad – sent through some amendments and want to make sure they were received

JM – confirming they are typos rather than content amendments

JMad – confirms

JM – any speech opposing the motion?

No speech opposing the motion

JM – any general comments?

No general comments

JM – we'll now move to a vote (zoom poll initiated)

Motion passes.

## **Item J - Finding a Silver Lining: Carrying forward improvement to accessibility post Covid-19 in Durham**

JMad – this is semi-linked to the disablist motion. It's making sure that what happens nationally also happens at Durham. Activists have been told that disabled students couldn't have the choice for alternative assessments etc. and now due to covid-19 that has been proven to be possible and we'd like to have a silver lining in this situation in keeping the worthwhile changes that have been made.

JM – any questions for clarification?

KE – could this motion be applied to students with mental health challenges who have been treated by the university in a similar way, or if not could we extend it to cover them too?

JMad – yes it does cover students with mental health problems and the university considers mental health under the disability bracket, so it would include those students anyway.

JM – asks for speech opposing the motion?

No speech opposing the motion

JM – any general comments?

LH – students from John's would like to see a standard way for teaching online and know that people teaching online have the right qualifications to do so. Also wanted to note that students with dyslexia are not allowed to record lectures online.

JMad – SwDA are working towards all students having the option to record, this motion is more to specify that students support these changes being made permanent.

AMc – had a conversation last week with head of disability support about how the service is coping with the switch to online, and was told there were no problems they were aware of so would advise students to go to disability services and go to advice service if they are encountering problems such as this.

SJA – a lot of the issue we've seen recently in the university is with them using the fact that things are online to shirk their responsibilities in other areas. It encompasses everything, so if there are cases where the university is using things being online as an excuse, get in touch with us to share these examples so we can feed these in.

JM – anyone wanting to do a summation

JM – moves to a vote (zoom poll initiated)

Motion passes

### **Item K - Academic Support Core Position**

SJA – core position was drafted by academic affairs committee. The university's academic support is bad, and the purpose of this motion is to push the university to have a more standard level of academic support so that it is less of a lottery as it is currently. Take into account that the right time and resources are allocated for academic support rather than it being an add-on to the workload that academic staff have already. Part of this should be mental health first aid and is not a good situation if these individuals have not had training.

JM – any requests for clarification?

SW – wanted to clarify under the paragraph about the change and responsibility, it talks about the introduction of a standard list of responsibilities for academics. SW concern is that by department it may vary quite differently depending on which department you're in. Also making sure that academics don't have to just do a box ticking exercise and that they do need to have some freedom while there is still a basic standard.

SJA – oftentimes the university, in a cynical manner, uses excuses of departmental autonomy to remove the need to have that standardisation. A standard list would still include things that all departments would so but agree there are things that you would need in some departments than in others.

SW – agrees and sounds like something the University might do. Something that can be all looked at later and would be down to who was pursuing that in future.

JM – a speech opposing the motion?

No speech opposing the motion

JM – any general comments

AMc – in terms of minimum requirements for departments to not shirk their responsibilities - some depts. are seeing their academic staff as purely academics and some are seeing them as giving pastoral care. Having an actual requirement for what support should be as a minimum and us having a vision on what that should look like is important. They have a minimum duty of care that we need to put firmly on their radar.

LH – students at John's are aware that they are slipping through the cracks when they're taking courses that span over multiple departments.

SJA – agrees that this is the case

LH – the motion suggests we should lobby the university to put in place training for staff – is this department specific and what exists currently?

SJA – nothing in place currently, some department specific stuff could be worthwhile but there is no training in place that we're aware of currently. Training in motion relates to the minimum standard across depts.

LH – suggests that it might not be a lack of training but a lack of communication between modules and departments?

DE – to add context there was no training for students supervising PHDs, so it's very unlikely that there's any training that exists for academic support. Having something that is standard and also applicable to each department is what we should lobby for. Minimum standard saying anyone delivering academic support should deliver this. It's making sure students who are experts in each discipline feed into making sure departmental differences are considered.

LH – last thing that John's students want to bring up was on the mentor system mentioned in the motion and what this would mean?

SJA – explains that this would be people that already exist within the University and drawing upon this network, for instance people who are a first generation scholar would be able to have a mentor from the first gen mentor network. Making sure that there is a push throughout the university to make sure that if students want that option that is made available to them.

LH – so would there be mentors from outside the university to help current students?

SJA – the thinking was from within the university community and using existing networks and academics who already do that work. Better coordination for the students from 'non-traditional backgrounds' to have access to staff in with university from similar backgrounds to have that opportunity for a positive mentor relationship

JM – summation?

SJA – summarises motion, academic support should be more standard and bad experiences with academic support minimised

JM – move to a vote (zoom poll initiated)

JM – motion passes

JM – closes meeting, thank you. Reiterates that if you do not want personal information to be in recording send in to [dsu.governance@durham.ac.uk](mailto:dsu.governance@durham.ac.uk) before 18<sup>th</sup> May.