

TO: Assembly

FROM: Jess Madden (President, Students with Disabilities Association)

RE: Finding a Silver Lining: carrying forward improvements to accessibility post Covid-19 in Durham

DATE: 14 May 2020

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### **Assembly Notes**

1. For years disabled students have been asking for flexibility in teaching and assessment formats, particularly exams.
2. The Covid-19 outbreak has proven that requests repeatedly denied by Universities to disabled students are possible and can be implemented quickly when Universities chose to.
3. In April 2020 Durham Students' Union submitted a policy to NUS Liberation conference 2020 entitled "Finding a Silver Lining: carrying forward improvements to accessibility post Covid-19" attached as Appendix 1.

### **Assembly Believes**

1. If the flexibility in teaching and assessment methods continues post Covid-19 it will benefit many disabled students.
2. Durham University should offer this flexibility to students post Covid-19.

### **Assembly Resolves**

1. To require the SU Officer to team to work with the Durham University to ensure this flexibility in teaching and assessment continues post Covid-19 as outlined in the NUS policy (Appendix 1).

## **Appendix 1**

### **Finding a Silver Lining: carrying forward improvements to accessibility post Covid-19**

Submitted by: Durham Students' Union

#### **Summary of issue**

All students should receive an education which is fully and truly accessible and offers an equal opportunity to succeed, regardless of identity. For many years, liberation activists have campaigned for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to make changes in order to achieve this and for many years, they have been told that such changes are not possible. However, the Covid-19 outbreak has clearly shown that not only are such changes possible, but HEIs are capable of implementing inclusive methods such as online recorded teaching and take-home exams both quickly and widely.

These teaching and assessment methods, if carried forwards beyond the pandemic, would make a substantial difference to the education of many students whose needs have traditionally not been prioritised by the education system. Specifically, this includes students with disabilities and students from other liberation groups, who experience disproportionately high rates of disability and mental ill-health in particular<sup>1</sup>.

In addition to teaching and assessment methods, processes and policies regarding concessions and deferrals have also been adapted in response to the Covid-19 outbreak; another change which liberation activists have consistently campaigned for. Previously, to receive extensions, deferrals or special consideration, students have been expected to jump through hoops to demonstrate their needs, often by providing costly medical evidence and following invasive bureaucratic processes. At NUS National Conference 2020, student representatives from across the country passed Durham SU's policy on Parity in Healthcare, confirming the need for HEIs to review and alter their policies and procedures to become more streamlined, 'focusing on genuine necessity for medical evidence'<sup>2</sup>. Now, HEIs have proven that this is possible, and we must ensure that this progress is not lost when HEIs eventually begin to review the changes made during Covid-19.

#### **What could be the solution?**

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<sup>1</sup> Williams, Buck and Babalola (2020). *What are Health Inequalities?*. The Kings Fund. Available at: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/what-are-health-inequalities#long>

<sup>2</sup> Durham SU (2020). Policy passed at NUS National Conference 2020. Policy and voting figures available at: <https://conference.nusconnect.org.uk/policy>; <https://conference.nusconnect.org.uk/results/policy-and-report-voting-results>

In the months during the global Covid-19 outbreak, HEIs have shown that the changes so many activists have campaigned for in the past *are possible*, contrary to what they've so frequently been told. We cannot allow this progress to be lost. We believe that education must be fully and truly accessible to all, regardless of disability, mental illness or background, to ensure that everyone is given equal opportunity to succeed in our education system.

Together, we must lobby for HEIs to adopt accessible and inclusive teaching practices as standard – beyond the immediate circumstances of Covid-19 – and for these to be protected in policy. This means that all students will have access to recorded lectures and other online resources, allowing them to fully engage with their education.

HEIs must take responsibility for ensuring that all students have the necessary resources, space and time to effectively engage with their education. This means that all students who need it will have access to appropriate assistive technology, as well as suitable space to complete assessed work and additional time if required.

Students should be given the option to complete alternative assessments, such as take-home and online exams, whilst also recognising that all students will have unique, individual needs. This means that HEIs must listen to the experiences of students with disabilities or other individual needs and ensure that they are fully supported during assessment periods, in order for them to demonstrate their academic abilities as best as possible.

Concessions such as extensions and deferrals must be made more accessible to students without the need for costly medical evidence and bureaucratic processes. This means that students will be trusted by HEIs to request concessions when they need them, without having to share extensive personal details or 'proving' their need.

We now know that all of the above *are possible* across the sector. Though it's disappointing that HEIs have only made these changes now that they have had to, rather than to support students from liberation groups, we must now ensure that they are carried forwards, post Covid-19, in a step to make our higher education system more accessible to all.