

TO: Assembly

FROM: Officer Team

RE: Covid-19 (Emergency Core Position)

DATE: 14 May 2020

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### **The belief and its justification**

Durham students have a right to a quality education, good housing, and accessible wider student experience. Covid-19 has caused considerable disruption to the normal operation of the University, and to the lives and circumstances of students. Precarity, financial insecurity, and inaccessibility have been exacerbated and increased by these changes, jeopardising students' lives and wellbeing.

In order to centre students' needs and interests, as the University and wider community responds to Covid-19 and the damage it may cause in the coming months and years, we need to have a clear vision of what we know needs to be prioritised, protected and championed.

The Union believes that all students should have equal access to a decent education during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, and that it should be of an equal quality expected before the pandemic. We believe that students should not be unduly penalised for a situation outside of their control, and assessments and other academic commitments need to be considered within the context of the pandemic and mitigated appropriately.

For a significant portion of the calendar year, Durham students live in the city, often in private rented accommodation. Our beliefs about a good renting experience are set out in our Core Position on Good Quality Student Housing, and this includes the need for widespread knowledge of tenants' rights as well as access to support. The Union believes that throughout this crisis, student tenants must be treated with fairness and compassion, and should not be exploited or disadvantaged because of their student status.

Covid-19 has had many wide-reaching implications, but one of the biggest areas of concern for many is the financial impact resulting from decreased income. The Union believes that students' income is likely to be particularly affected, as students are more likely to have low-paid, part-time jobs and be reliant on seasonal income which has already been disrupted. Some students cannot depend on family support, and some students may now depend on drastically reduced family income. Both student feedback and wider research indicates that financial stress can have a negative effect on health and wellbeing, as well as academic attainment. It's therefore crucial that the right financial support is in place for students and that this support is easy to access.

Wider student experience is an asset to Durham University's reputation, but student communities have for years been sustained primarily by the hard work and dedication of student leaders and volunteers. Student communities are particularly at risk of being eroded during this crisis, and in the way the University chooses to react to it. The Union believes that the University has a responsibility to take action to protect current and future student communities and organisations, and support them to thrive throughout the Covid-19 pandemic so that all students can feel connected, supported, and part of their community.

### **The definition of a better future**

Students should not be financially exploited by the University in order to make up shortfalls. Students should be at the heart of decision-making, where both the impacts of decisions on students' lives and their right to be co-creators in these spaces is recognised. Student consultation and co-creation is key to making the best decisions for the University as a whole.

Delivering education online should be for students' benefit - to make education more accessible and of a higher quality. Moving teaching online is not the end-goal of curriculum reform. Students should not be disadvantaged due to a lack of technological knowledge or equipment. The knowledge and expertise gained in the process of moving education online should be targeted at making Durham's educational offer more accessible and inclusive for all students, in line with the University's Access and Participation Plan. Online education should not make a two-tier system permissible, should not be used as a tick-box exercise in relation to the University's access commitments.

Postgraduate research students should not be exploited in the delivery of online education and should be valued as peers within academia as researchers and educators, and afforded support by the University as such. This includes providing support at least on a par with the support offered to research staff, including funding, to guard against such students' precarious research conditions and enable them to see their research through to completion during this time of disruption. Students and staff should be fundamental to decisions both about delivering online education, and the material that is taught and valued.

Students should be empowered to have productive relationships with landlords and letting agents that are built on mutual understanding of tenants' rights and not exploitation or fear. Students from all backgrounds should be able to be part of a community of like-minded people, and those communities should be protected and not undermined by the University's response to Covid-19. Students who require financial support should receive it easily and quickly, and should not be made to feel alienated by a system and institution that views financial insecurity as an abnormality. The University should be pro-active in securing the continued existence of thriving student communities and opportunities, that are accessible to all students. Durham SU should support student communities, through student groups and Associations, and continue to work with the local community in the interests of students.

### **The barriers**

Corporate governance in Higher Education limits the extent to which students' needs and interests guide University decision-making. Whilst the University plans to make spending changes in order to ensure financial sustainability post-Covid-19, students' interests might not be at the top of the agenda.

Not all students have the same ability to access technology that is now necessary to continue education and participate in the Wider Student Experience. Durham University staff already experience precarity and high workloads, and the teaching online requires learning new skills and an increased workload. The wellbeing and working conditions of staff are vital to the delivery of a quality education for students. Students and staff are susceptible to digital fatigue and reliant on online platforms for education and wider student experience delivery. Moreover, the extent of Wider Student Experience activity is severely limited in the current context.

Financial support from Durham University is already difficult to access, and typically requires students to provide evidence of their personal circumstances before any support grants are approved. Thus, the application process itself presents an existing barrier to accessing support, in

addition to the practical barriers of limited funding and financial resources available to the University, particularly during Covid-19.

Many students do not know their rights as tenants, and letting agents and landlords can exploit this knowledge gap. They are under no obligation to negotiate rent payments with tenants. Continued financial commitments, as well as travel restrictions which mean students may be separated from their belongings, put pressure on students and require many to seek flexibility from their landlords. International students are disproportionately affected, with some who have already travelled home without all of their belongings and some who may be unable to return home due to travel restrictions.

Accessing the University's student support services online and remotely, creates barriers for students who may need help, exacerbating pre-existing pressures and problems. Student peer support networks are under more pressure than before and facing many of the same challenges.

### **Belief about a way forward and the responsibilities**

#### **Student Consultation**

Students MUST hold power in decisions made by the University – not just the decisions that directly affect students, but the processes and mechanisms that shape the character and values of the institution. This has never been more true than in a time of crisis. Student reps have already made significant improvements to the way the University has responded to Covid-19 and this should not be forgotten as we move forward. Departments need to make student consultation and collaboration the norm in the design of online teaching material, and the University needs to materially support student leaders to develop and safeguard their communities as they're sustained online.

#### **Financial**

The University needs to invest money into this cohort of students – through an improved hardship fund, resourcing and supporting student organisations effectively, and in the development of online learning tools, to protect students' interests now and safeguard student communities and educational experience in the future. The University needs to ensure that the education students were promised is delivered and students can complete their studies to the best of their ability, before focussing on the hypothetical needs of future students. This includes resourcing solutions to the problems of inequality of technological access and inadequate study space.

The University should not consider raising fees – for college rooms or tuition, - in order to make up shortfalls caused by Covid-19. Students should not be treated as a means to an end, by providing the cash the University needs to continue at its current rate of growth with a dramatically reduced educational experience. Staff and student goodwill should not be exploited – solutions to the problems we face will take considerable time and effort and staff should be treated and remunerated fairly.

#### **Student Voice**

Durham SU student representatives will co-create solutions to the problems we face now and those that may emerge with the University. Durham SU will work to join the conversation on national student issues and will continue to shape the response of national student organisations.

Durham SU will empower students by educating them on their rights as students and tenants, so students' expectations about their educational experience can be met. Durham SU will hold the University to account for its consultation, communication and decision-making.