

TO: Assembly

FROM: Chahat Paruthi (on behalf of Academic Affairs Committee)

RE: Academic Support: SU Core Position

DATE: 14 May 2020

The belief and its justifications

Academic affairs committee believes that the level of academic support available across University is very variable. There are some fantastic examples of academic support from certain departments, where members of academic staff as well as professional services have gone above and beyond for students. However this is not the case for all. Some students, especially those pursuing joint and combined honours courses, feel that they have slipped through the cracks of a system that is largely reactive, not proactive. This was especially prevalent in students who declared a disability in the survey conducted.

The definition of a better future

All students receive a minimum standard of academic support, which secures their smooth transition between levels and provides a structure for students to check in with their studies themselves and raise any issues they may be having before they escalate into serious problems. In the same vein, all academics should feel able and supported to provide academic advising to the best of their abilities.

This takes several forms. The first, key, procedural change is that the University sets a standard for academic advising. This includes stipulating how often advisors should meet with students, what topics they can advise on, and knowledge of routine signposting options for services both in and outside of the department, such as work placement co-ordinators, mental health support and disability support. There also needs to be considerations put in place if an advisor leaves part-way through a student's degree.

Academic affairs also believes that a scheme to match up willing students from underrepresented groups with academics who self-identify within these groups may be an important step in providing a higher level of support for those who may struggle to see themselves actively and positively represented in Higher Education.

The barriers

There are obvious barriers; namely resources in the form of staff time and workload. It is understood that many individuals are severely hampered to deliver the service expected of them within the contracted time, so this would need to be considered by the University. Moreover, some may be performing roles akin to academic advising without having this explicitly mentioned in their contract. This poses an issue in that some may naturally see it as a lesser priority as it is not necessarily a duty they are contractually obliged to, but that they are expected to carry out in addition to their contracted role. However, Academic affairs believes that supporting students' educations well is a resource that the University should invest in, by making it a contractual obligation for those involved and making sure staff have the resources and time in their workload to fulfil their duties to the best of their ability.

It is also important to note that different students have different needs – one person's academic advising will look very different to another's. This is not to chastise those who

need extra support; more to make sure that everyone receives the appropriate level of support for their needs. As it looks different for every person, it can be hard to assure students that they have not “lost out” as someone else has received “more”, causing more harm and upset than intended. There would need to be assurances to students that the services are equally available to them, should they require it.

Putting in measures like requiring a certain level of support can look like a centralising approach, which is in direct conflict with Durham’s history of autonomous departments who structure themselves around the needs of their disciples, staff and students. However, the approach being tabled is a measure of standardisation, not centralisation. This means that each department needs to play their part in upholding a good standard of academic support driven by the University, not reporting to a central academic support mechanism that sits within the central University structures.

Belief about the change and the responsibilities

- Durham Students’ Union must work with the University to develop a standard for academic advising
- Durham Students’ Union should lobby the University for the introduction of a standard list of responsibilities for academic advisors
- Durham Students’ Union should lobby the University to develop and lead a training programme that is mandatory for all staff taking part in academic advising
- Durham Students’ Union must lobby the University for as many staff as possible involved in academic advising to take part in a mental health first aid course.
- Durham Students’ Union must work with the University to use existing networks to link up willing students with mentors that can help them succeed