
DURHAM **SU**

**Student
Submission
TEF 2022/23**

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1. Approach to evidence gathering

1. Durham Students' Union (Durham SU) represents the interests of Durham students through a variety of formal means, most notably through seats in the University's governing body (Council) and other significant decision-making spaces including Senate, and sub-committees of both Council and Senate. Informally, student representatives from across the SU, from course representatives to sabbatical officers, regularly meet with members of university staff to discuss improvements and raise concerns regarding the student experience at Durham.
2. The Durham student community has a strong democratic tradition, reinforced across the collegiate system, which is evident within Durham SU through the participation of students in our internal democracy, including running for five sabbatical officer positions, membership of SU Assembly and participation in hundreds of societies. Taken together these forms enable us to hear student voice in a number of different ways, many of which are represented in this submission.
3. This submission has been prepared by the officers and staff of the Students' Union.
4. Survey and research input comes from a wide range of student and University sources. Data ranges from 2022-23 back to 2018-19. These include:
 - i. **Academic Experience Survey (AES)**, December 2022 - 27 undergraduate survey respondents (of a possible 344 undergraduate academic representatives), featuring six quantitative (using a five-point ordinal scale) questions and three qualitative ones. Small sample size means this is not taken alone as an indicator, but only as a cross reference. Respondents from four academic years and 18 academic departments;
 1. Accounting
 2. Archaeology
 3. Classics and Ancient History
 4. Computer Science
 5. Earth Sciences
 6. Economics and Finance
 7. Education
 8. Engineering
 9. Geography
 10. History
 11. Law
 12. Mathematical Sciences
 13. Modern Languages and Cultures
 14. Music
 15. Physics
 16. Psychology
 17. Sociology
 18. Theology & Religion
 - ii. **Culture Commission (CC)**, October 2020 to December 2021 – over 200 participants in focus groups and interviews, however, were anonymous due to the nature of the work, and academic departments were specifically not asked for.
 - iii. **Mental Health Survey (MHS)**, April 2022 – 395 undergraduate survey respondents, across four academic years. Due to the nature of the

survey, it was conducted anonymously with academic department specifically not asked for. The survey was composed of 51 quantitative (using a mix of multiple choice and five-point ordinal scale) and 32 (optional, free text) qualitative questions. Some respondents also later took part in three focus groups and five interviews to provide further qualitative data.

- iv. **Decolonisation Interns Survey (DIS)**, April 2022 – 23 undergraduate responses (of a possible 51 Decolonisation Interns), featuring six quantitative and five (optional, free text) qualitative questions. Academic department was not asked for, however.
 - v. **Housing Experiences Survey 2022 (HES22)**, October-November 2022 – 41 undergraduate responses to a single-question qualitative (free text) survey. The majority (31) of respondents were 1st or 2nd year students, with the remainder 3rd, 4th, Foundation or Erasmus students. Academic department was not asked for. This was designed as a survey to gauge student feeling around the housing crisis that hit Durham in October 2022.
 - vi. **Private Rented Housing Survey 2019 (PRHS)**, November 2018-January 2019 – 444 undergraduate responses to a six-part survey featuring both quantitative and qualitative components. Academic department was not asked for.
 - vii. **Pincident** – an anonymous reporting platform for reporting sexual, racial and religious harassment and violence, maintained and run by the Students' Union. Due to the nature of the reporting, this is totally anonymous. Across the period 2017/18 to 2021/22 there were 217 reports by students.
 - viii. **SU Advice Centre** – this is not survey data, but anonymized data was used to inform some elements of this submission. Where it has been used time periods have been cited, however academic departments have been omitted due to the small number of cases referenced.
 - ix. Durham University Access and Participation Plan (APP) 2020/21 to 2024/25 is also referred to for data on specific access groups and continuation.
 - x. The TEF datasets made available by the OfS for the purposes of completing this submission are referred to throughout as “the TEF data”. In most cases, this will refer to full-time student data, with references to part-time students explicit. HESA data has also been used for cross-reference in some instances.
5. Of the above list, the Academic Experience Survey was conducted specifically for inclusion here. Originally a second, larger survey had been planned, but capacity posed a barrier to it being undertaken in time for inclusion in this submission.
 6. No optional courses are included here, and only taught, not registered students for practical reasons. In line with guidance, only undergraduate students and courses will be referred to here, however this will still be noted specifically in many cases as there may be both undergraduate- and postgraduate-relevant items in the same area in the University, for clarity.
 7. Assistance from the University has been limited to TEF data offered by the Curriculum, Learning and Assessment Service (CLAS), who have also helpfully shared iterations of the main submission throughout. There has been

no attempt to unduly influence the completion or content of a submission.

2. Student Experience

- 1.** We have a high level of confidence in the quality of the teaching and learning experience at Durham, as evidenced by TEF data, teaching at Durham performs well not only against benchmarks – failing to surpass benchmark only once in four years – but also against sector averages, and while responses as seen in the NSS has fallen slightly since Covid-19, it remains extremely strongly regarded by students.
- 2.** Teaching quality is praised in many parts of the University by students. For example, in the Academic Experience Survey (AES) 2022, 81.48% of respondents rated the teaching and learning in their department either “very good” (25.93%) or “good” (55.56%), while only 14.81% rated it as “neither good nor bad” and only 3.70% as “bad” – no undergraduate respondents rated their departments’ teaching and learning quality as “very bad”. Qualitative comments also strongly praised the Physics and Mathematical Sciences departments, with only the Accounting department receiving any negative comments.
- 3.** One element of the high quality of teaching and learning is the readiness of the University as a whole, and academic departments individually, to constantly examine, and update curricula to ensure not only that teaching is research led, but also that curricula enable students to thrive. For example, in the Decolonisation Interns Survey (DIS) 2022, 69.57% of respondents either “strongly agreed” (17.39%) or “agreed” (52.17%) that they were happy with the level of support they had received in their work from their academic department, which rose even higher when considering support from individual supervisors, to 78.26% overall.
- 4.** Work such as the decolonisation interns program referred to above, which is now in its second full academic year, illustrates a strong positive of academic departments working in partnership with students to design, reform and re-imagine both the teaching and learning experience. The projects, which are designed and undertaken by interns in cooperation with their departments at a local level, taking into account subject knowledge and relevance, contribute to the wider teaching and learning experience. They also offer a critical development opportunity for individual students to broaden not only their knowledge, but also their employment-relevant skills such as networking, working with committees and a variety of staff members. As noted in the Culture Commission (CC), this partnership approach fostered in part by decolonisation work can be critical to building a “stronger bond” between staff and students which is important to a productive learning environment, especially one where at times “students from underrepresented backgrounds reported feeling ‘marginalised’, ‘dismissed’ and ‘silenced’”.
- 5.** Across the period of 2018/19-2022/23, there have been several high-profile rounds of industrial action across UK higher education. This has impacted teaching at Durham, however on each occasion, the University has worked closely between departments, course representatives and SU officers to develop mitigations which work effectively for each discipline and on the whole. These mitigations have been effective in limiting the impact on

students, however there have still been complaints from students which the SU Advice Service has supported, with 6 explicitly regarding industrial action between 1 September 2018 and 24 January 2023.

6. Assessment and Feedback historically is an area where Durham has had some difficulty relative to its peers; this is evident from the TEF data which shows Durham's average, and most annual, scores to be below sector averages, recently dropping further from this average, and only twice bettering benchmarks in the last four years. Furthermore, subject-level breakdowns reveal there to be little pattern regarding a problem area in particular; there are better averages (79% - Physics) and worse ones (58.1% - Psychology) within the same area. One notable area of differential however is that students eligible for free school meals (FSM) reported significantly worse opinion of assessment and feedback (59.7%) than non-FSM students (68.5%). In the case of FSM students this also remains notably below the sector average for this group (66.8%).
7. This drop, and traditionally poorer response from students than in other areas, is evident in the AES, where Assessment and Feedback was the only question in which respondents rated their experience as "Very bad" (3.70%). While this is a small example, it is also telling that an equally small number rated their experience as "Very good" (3.70%) with the bulk of respondents finding their experience either "good" (44.44%), "neither good nor bad" (37.04%) or "bad" (11.11%).
8. In common with the drop in ratings on assessment and feedback from FSM students, the CC notes that "First-generation students" ... "are often frustrated with the use of 'flowery language' and 'obscure references'". While this is clearly not a sole explanation and should not be taken as an overriding culture across the whole University, this is not to say that it does not exist and that it does not impact the experience – particularly around feedback – of significant groups of students.
9. Academic Support is an area where there is a somewhat mixed picture. The TEF data illustrates this, with Durham's scores routinely lagging on the sector average by around 2%. While this is an issue which is more long term, with this evident to some degree in NSS data going back several years, it is also the case that the most recent decline (to 72%) corresponds with the sudden increase in undergraduate numbers from 14,640 to 16,090. HESA data, however, indicates this growth was common across the sector, and further examination suggests that this may be in part down to availability, rather than quality, of academic support available, as evidenced in paragraphs 5 and 6 below.
10. In our AES, respondents were broadly positive, with 66.67% rating academic support in their department as "very good" (29.63%) or "good" (37.04%), while 22.22% rated it as "neither good nor bad" and 11.11% as "bad". There were no qualitative comments on academic support provision, good or bad.
11. One consideration around academic support is the nature of Durham's collegiate system, which theoretically provides a clearer divide around academic and non-academic support requirements; one provided by academic staff in academic departments and one by non-academic college staff in colleges. However in practice this is not always so clear-cut, with some students either speaking to academic staff about non-academic support issues, partly due to the profusion of points of contact; though evidence from the Mental Health Survey (MHS) suggest that this is a relatively minor

problem, with only 20.25% of respondents reaching out to an academic advisor for mental health support and 15.70% reaching out to the department in general. Where respondents did reach out, they said that they would “definitely”, “probably” or “possibly” reach out again to their academic advisor in 67.50% of cases, and to their department in 82.26% of cases; illustrating a strong degree of satisfaction in mental health advice even where academic departments are not expected to be primary route for seeking such advice.

- 12.** This is again highlighted in the Culture Commission (CC) where the “many avenues for student support” across the University were highlighted, but also that sometimes students felt that they were “being bounced around a disjointed university support structure with inadequate signposting”; with the latter being an area which should be examined. The culture of support is one which we recognize that the University is investing in, such as with the Student Support Review currently in progress, which has taken on board the feedback from multiple years’ worth of student representatives, and looks to improve access to, and signposting of, support across the University.
- 13.** The area of Learning Resources is one which has received a recent boost across the last four-year period, as while the average (80.1%) is behind that of the sector, the recent trend has been ahead of sector improvements (currently 82.2% as against 80.9%). In common with academic support, there is also a notable difference in some demographic groups’ responses relative to the majority of both Durham responses and sector responses; notably from FSM students and students over the age of 31, though it should be noted that the latter is an extremely small demographic group at Durham. In both cases, the groups scored Durham lower than the average and the sector average by more than 6%; FSM students at 74.4% and students aged 31 years and over at 72.9%.
- 14.** Throughout the last four years there has been a notable shift, as a direct result of Covid-19, from physical space requirements to digital resources, and most recently to a mix of those. Prior to the pandemic, the University’s relatively recent adoption of lecture capture technology (locally known as Encore) was something which had been formally adopted in the 2018-19 academic year after years of student pressure, but that was being established; these digital spaces are critical to continuation and development of learning, especially taken together with the recent replacement of the University’s virtual learning environment (VLE).
- 15.** However, these resources, specifically the digital spaces, have also not been without their complications. Qualitative responses from students in the MHS noted that “the transition from online learning to in person learning is complicated”, especially for students who started in the 2020-21 academic year and thus had limited experience of in-person learning. Several respondents noted anxieties relating to the use of learning resources, mainly around access (in particular during time abroad) as well how to best utilize Encore in learning.
- 16.** Physical learning spaces have been under increased pressure due to rising student numbers as noted previously, despite Durham’s colleges adding a significant amount of learning spaces due to each college possessing a library and/or other shared learning space, and recent construction or renovation of new spaces such as the Teaching and Learning Centre; however student number growth had outpaced the creation of new spaces, which has left space at a premium.

- 17.** These spaces, along with the contributions of academic staff and groups, create an educational environment which is, on the whole, positively received by students. In the AES, respondents overwhelmingly rated the educational environment in their departments to be either “very good” (25.93%) or “good” (62.96%), with the only other response being “neither good nor bad” (11.11%).
- 18.** Library resources have evolved throughout the years of the pandemic too, with both the spaces changing to ensure greater access to desk space and power, but also initiatives in the Bill Bryson library to “Liberate my Library” which aims to “diversify our collections and increase representation from groups including BAME, gender and identity, LGBT+ and disability”. Not only does such an initiative sit well alongside growing decolonisation work, but it also enables students who are all too often underrepresented in Durham’s community to increase role and visibility within learning communities which may help to tackle the problem of “imposter syndrome” which was identified by some participants in the CC.
- 19.** TEF data indicates that Durham’s performance in the area of Student Voice is below both average and benchmark, declining further away from the sector average more recently. Examining NSS data in more detail we see that this decline has been notable since Covid-19, before which results in Student Voice had seen gradual improvement. In particular the gap in outcomes across the three questions in the student voice section, with a drop around “it is clear how students’ feedback on the course has been acted on” is notable: around 20% in most years, growing to 25.6% in 2021-22.
- 20.** Student Voice is somewhere that Durham has an ostensible advantage due to the collegiate system, however this has little academic role, with academic representation sitting with the 300-350 (344 in 2022-23) undergraduate course representatives. These reps are elected using a system administered by the Students’ Union in cooperation with academic departments, and are trained by the Students’ Union, sitting on staff-student consultative committees (SSCCs) in departments along with academic staff. In addition to the course representatives there are also eight undergraduate faculty representatives, two per faculty, which represent students on Faculty Education Committees, with four faculty reps self-selecting to sit alongside Students’ Union officers on University Senate. Faculty Representatives are often former, or in some cases current, Course representatives, and are encouraged to network together to increase effectiveness through raising issues at multiple levels where relevant.
- 21.** The Student Consultation Framework (SCF), created by the Students’ Union, but agreed with the University in 2018-19, and in the process of review during 2022-23, creates specific levels of student consultation which should be undertaken, depending on the impact upon students of a decision, ranging from “minor” impacts through “moderate” to “major”, each defined in the document. The SCF also lists both required and optional consultation steps, giving relevant University decision makers a short list of go-to actions prior to taking certain decisions. It has been successfully built into university documents and processes, though these have not always been undertaken in the way envisioned.
- 22.** In addition to elected representatives, there are also hired interns in many positions across the University around student voice, such as the aforementioned Decolonisation interns, with multiple per department and one

per faculty, increasing student role in moving forward decolonisation work. The University also incentivizes student voice in projects – most recently for focus groups in the Creating an Integrated Student Experience (CISE) IT program.

3. Student Outcomes

- 1.** TEF data demonstrates extremely strong continuation (5.9% above sector average), completion (8.9% above sector average) and progression (10% above sector average) at Durham. Each of these outcomes also holds under more granular examination, where we find that FSM students, IMD quintiles 1&2 students and BAME students are all, on average, more likely to continue in, complete and progress from their studies at Durham, in some cases by large margins; this is also evidenced by Durham’s consistently strong performances in each of these areas against benchmarks too, as well as the relatively small dip in each metric during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 2.** One factor relevant in the high continuation at Durham, as well as to a lesser extent linked to completion and progression, is the number of support systems present across the University, in academic departments, as discussed in section 2, as well as in students’ colleges. This is evidenced in the MHS where, of 395 undergraduate survey respondents, 134 said that they had reached out to university support services for help with their mental health, with 88 of those who had reached out (65.7%) reaching out to their college support staff. Of these 88 who used college support services, 46.59% were “completely satisfied” (12.5%) or “very satisfied” (34.09%), while 44.32% were “moderately satisfied” (31.82%) or “slightly satisfied” (12.50%), and only 9.09% responded that they were “not at all satisfied” with the support received. This made colleges support staff the second-most chosen support route after the Counselling Service (101 respondents), with only Disability support and college welfare teams being more highly rated in terms of satisfaction, and both from a smaller sample of 55 in each case. This is further reinforced in the CC, where participants note that “I can always find someone to help” between staff and peer-support groups, and that there are “many avenues for support” despite the, at times, “disjointed” approach noted earlier.
- 3.** Another important aspect of student support that Durham University has demonstrated a progressive approach towards, which is likely to have contributed to positive continuation, completion and progression rates, but in a way which is difficult to measure, is a highly developed response to sexual violence. For example, the University has not only reformed its approach to identifying and taking action against perpetrators, but has also undertaken a selection of programs, in partnership with the Students’ Union, to tackle not only the perpetrators, but also the cultures that enable them to thrive. This includes the co-development of an Active Bystander program with University staff which aims, in a peer-led manner, to support members of the community to support each other against sexual, racial and religious harassment and violence, and an anonymous reporting system, Pincident, developed by the Students’ Union, which delivers data to the University’ oversight group so that they can be act appropriately. From the 2017/18 to 2021/22 academic years, there have been 217 anonymous reports to pincident from students.
- 4.** Careers preparation is an area where Durham has consistently been high quality, bolstered by the large number of extra-curricular opportunities that are

beneficial in terms of personal development available to students, both within their academic departments and beyond them.

5. In academic departments, respondents to the AES found that career development opportunities were on the whole good, with 70.37% of respondents rating them as “Very good” (18.52%) or “good” (51.85%), while a portion of respondents stated that they were “neither good nor bad” (25.93%) only a very small number rated the opportunities on offer “bad” (3.70%), and no respondents rated them as “very bad”.
6. The culture of participation which exists across the University from academic departments to colleges and student societies also has indirect career benefits; for example there are 37 SU societies which exist for professional development of students, ranging from several legal groups to those which look to raise participation in certain areas, such as Women in STEM and Women in Business, many of them with direct links to both the University’s careers service but also to academic departments. In addition, there are also 40 SU academic societies, many of which have support from their equivalent academic departments, which can also serve as career-boosting organisations. These are only two examples, there are other societies local to colleges, and other aspects of the University including the Enrichment directorate which also support both personal and career development of students in an extra-curricular manner, including leadership opportunities, and paid sabbatical roles, across the University community.
7. The University’s Access and Participation Plan (APP) was created with input from across the University, including from Student Representatives. Areas of particular interest to students which have been included in the most recent iteration are an increase in the number of BAME students, local students and a re-examination of financial support among other things. It can be found in the most recent addendum data that continuation for students on a variety of access schemes (including foundation year, guaranteed contextual offer and supported progression programs) is broadly comparable to that of students who enter without access schemes, and while foundation year students remain at the highest risk of non-continuation (17.11% failed to progress to Level 2 in 2020/21), this rate has been falling consistently since 2015/16.
8. An important element in this success is cultural inclusion and increasing a sense of belonging, something which has been noted in some student voice work, most notably in the CC, as an issue for some groups of students. In the CC students from the local area were reported as feeling like “outsiders”, something which was also noted as extending to students of working class backgrounds and non-white students, both of which are a minority in Durham.
9. A barrier to student outcomes which is a growing issue at Durham is the cost of attending. This is noted in several sources, most recently in the Housing Experiences Survey 2022 (HES22) where costs were the dominant theme, being present in 23 of 41 (56.09%) responses, and impact on study clearly noted in 16 of 41 (39.02%) of responses. A selection of responses including:
 - i. “This has a severe impact on me mentally, left me feeling more isolated and has made me contemplate dropping out” (2nd year Undergraduate)
 - ii. “This is ridiculous, I simply can’t afford it” (2nd year Undergraduate)
 - iii. “I’ve been physically ill, struggling to engage with lectures and get all my homework in on time” (1st year Undergraduate)

10. These responses reinforce a previous survey, the Private Rented Housing Survey (PRHS), which highlighted cost as the main concern for respondents (37.3% of respondents ranked this first), with 10% of respondents reporting that they spent more than 80% of their monthly income on rent. In the interests of continuing their studies, respondents had cut back spending in many cases in order to pay rent, with 35% reporting cutting back on food, and 21.6% cancelling participation on student group events. Both of these elements are relevant in that student continuation and competition are influenced by the ability of students to afford to continue.
11. Since the above result, and the intervening Covid-19 pandemic as well as the cost of living crisis, Durham University has increased the Durham Grant Scheme, which aims to support students from low-income households, by 13.6%; this is a welcome boost to students with the smallest amount of financial resources. It should be noted however that University accommodation costs, and those across the city, continue to grow at a similar rate, and as a result the financial pressures on students created by accommodation are the same, if not worse, than in the past.

4. Conclusion

1. This submission has demonstrated how Durham's students have an active and vibrant academic experience while at Durham, composed of multiple components from high quality teaching and learning to positive career development through departments and societies, supported by the University in the process.
2. It also highlights that at Durham, while there has been improvement in the experience for students from minority backgrounds (most notably Black students and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds), there is still some way to go here, most prominently in terms of culture change, though also in terms of some of the financial challenges faced by students to both attend, and participate fully in, the Durham experience.
3. Coordination is an issue which arises in terms of both experience and outcomes, identified in discussions above around academic and non-academic student support; a wide range of high-quality options are open to students, but communication as to which is the most appropriate option is often a barrier.
4. Issues which have been raised by students for some time at Durham also need to be conclusively solved; assessment and feedback issues, for example have been identified in NSS every year, which is unfortunate when teaching quality – and increasingly the learning resources available to students – are so well received across the University.
5. Student Voice opportunities, though plentiful, need be more effective, and their outcomes more effectively communicated by a university which, through its partnership approach evident in work on decolonisation and sexual violence, clearly does care deeply about its students, but is all too often not seen to in some spaces.
6. Durham continues to provide a high-quality educational experience, despite some of the issues raised above, however, to provide for the future it must continue to diversify its student body, as well as developing the academic experience and ensuring that students across the University of all backgrounds can afford to fully engage with that experience.