

Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy

2022 - 2025

The Durham Union



Introduction & Value Statement

1. Introduction

The Durham Union Society is Durham's oldest and largest student society, founded in 1842 and with over 3,000 members. Founded to stimulate debate amongst its members, and provide them with a forum in which to express their views, the Union has been at the heart of Durham University for 180 years. Championing free speech on campus, membership of the society gives inquisitive student minds access to world-class speakers and participation in weekly debates on the most pressing issues of the day.

The Durham Union Society recognises a number of stakeholders beyond our membership, including the wider university community and the local Durham community. Our outreach programmes seek to promote our values to our stakeholders and act as a positive influence on campus.

2. Value Statement

Our central charitable aim is to provide a forum for members to express their views, under which the Union seeks to promote free speech and debate on campus through use of our meetings. Promoting a culture of respect and inclusion furthers this aim by ensuring that everyone feels safe and able to contribute to the Union. Free speech is an essentially egalitarian principle and ensuring that people from all backgrounds can contribute to free speech at the Union will only enhance the rigor and variety of debate.

Therefore, the Union is committed to being an open and inclusive environment free from prejudice. This can be ensured by:

1. Engaging with the wider Durham University Community to promote the Union's values, demonstrating our commitment to being the forum for free speech and debate on campus for all.
2. Seeking to draw membership from the fullest array of groups possible. The Union should seek to eliminate any perceived or real barriers to involvement on the basis of sex, race, gender, class, or political and religious philosophy. Economic barriers to involvement should be mitigated as far as financially feasible.
3. Maintaining the highest standards of transparency and accountability. Misconduct and bigotry are anathema to the Union's aims. The Union's stakeholders must be confident that incidents of either are to be dealt with transparently and equitably, and that active systems exist to discourage and limit such incidents.

Challenges to EDI at the Union

3.1. General Challenges

Cost of entry and participation – As an independent charity, the Durham Union Society must rely primarily upon income from membership fees. Furthermore, headline social events such as balls and galas must make a profit so that they can subsidise the free events offered by the Union throughout the rest of the year. Therefore, while the Union charges competitively priced membership and social fees, these costs still pose a potentially significant financial barrier to prospective members from lower income backgrounds.

Representation – The Union has never collected demographic data on its membership. On general consultation with the Equalities Committee, the suggestion has been that while the membership itself is diverse in background and political outlook, it is often geographically limited to the Bailey Colleges. Furthermore, participation in the General Committee is not reflective of the wider membership, with many minority groups being historically underrepresented in comparison with the wider Durham campus.

Culture – Related to the issue of representation, the Union has historically run the risk of being perceived as elitist and exclusionary. The customs of the society, the price of entry, and the political nature of the General Committee threaten at times to overshadow the charitable and open aims of the Union. Furthermore, the behaviour of those who benefit from the privileges that come with volunteering with the Union has often fallen short of the expected standard, and bleeds over into bringing the society into disrepute.

3.2. Boycott and Disaffiliation

In 2020, the Union was hit with allegations of bigotry, bullying, and malpractice by volunteers at the society. Claims of bigotry were later substantiated by the disclosure of private messages between a number of members of the General Committee and resulted in the forced resignation of a member of the Standing Committee due to their involvement. This scandal resulted in extensive coverage in the student press and the disaffiliation of the DUS's debating programme from the charity and assembling as a student group under the Durham Student Union (DSU).

Since 2020, the Union has engaged in a grassroots effort to reform itself so it can be an open and inclusive environment free from prejudice. This effort resulted in the debating programme returning from the DSU and reaffiliating with DUS, with their president citing the “much needed changes made

by the Durham Union Society and the strong values of those who now run it gives us confidence that the DUS values are compatible with those of the Debating Society”.¹

This plan seeks to codify and entrench the changes made over the past two years, and ensure that the progress made is built upon over the coming three years this plan covers. The value statement given at the start of this plan seeks to be the guiding principle by which this change will be brought about.

3.3. Identified Aims

1. **Respect and Inclusion** – To ensure that the Union is an open and inclusive environment free from prejudice.
2. **Accountability and Trust** – To ensure that the Union’s systems of governance are transparent, legible, and command trust from its membership and stakeholders.
3. **Access and Culture** – To ensure that the Union’s culture is a positive influence on campus and the Union is accessible to all.

¹ <https://www.palatinatate.org.uk/debating-society-votes-to-leave-durham-students-union/>

Respect and Inclusion

4.1 What has been done

Equalities Committee – In January 2022, the Union’s General Committee created a full Equalities Committee for the first time in its history. The Committee is directly elected by and from the student membership, and is composed of the Equalities Officer, two ordinary members and five Equalities Representatives.

The Equalities Representatives represent specific historically underrepresented groups at the Union, and are: the LGBT+ Representative, the People of Colour Representative, the Disability Representative, the International Members Representative, and the Women’s Representative. They provide a point of contact for those they represent looking to raise concerns, suggestions, or seek help navigating the Union. Sitting on the General Committee, they also ensure that these voices are represented in the Union’s constituent committee.

Meeting regularly throughout the year, the Equalities Committee discusses policies, practices, and public relations initiatives that will promote an open and inclusive environment at the Union free from prejudice. These are then recommended to the Standing Committee to adopt or action, or proposed as amendments to the constitution at a meeting of the General Committee.

Equalities Officer Election – In November 2021, the position of Equalities Officer was amended to allow election from the student membership. Previously the Equalities Officer was elected from an existing member of the General Committee. The Equalities Office remains elected by the General Committee.

Equalities Officer Reports – In December 2021, the role of Equalities Officer was further expanded to include a right to attend the Standing Committee meetings for the purpose of briefing the committee on issues relating to inclusion or discrimination within the Union. The Standing Committee may then take action on the report by either voting to adopt a resolution, referring an issue to the Complaints Panel, or in severe cases furthering the report to the trustees.

4.2 Identified Issues

Equalities Committee Outreach – As a new committee, the Equalities Committee is still seeking to define how it can operate effectively, particularly in regard to its function as Outreach. In consultation with the Equalities Committee, this plan will outline how this might be achieved in Section 7: Outreach.

Officer’s Code of Conduct – The Officer’s Code of Conduct outlines the fundamental duties of every officer of the Union. However, three concerns regarding the Code of Conduct have been raised in consultation with stakeholders and the Equalities Committee:

Inclusion training – The Officer’s Code of Conduct recommends training on the now defunct University webservice duo, particularly the courses Unconscious Bias, Equality, Diversity & Inclusion, and Respecting Others. These recommended courses are now no longer available to students. Furthermore, there is limited anecdotal evidence of that any officer in recent history has completed any of this training.

Negative duty towards respect and inclusion – The language used by the Code of Conduct in regard to respect and inclusion creates only a negative duty for officers. Currently, officers must “maintain respect” and “be aware of” issues surrounding equality, diversity, and inclusion.

“Disrepute” as a gagging clause – Significant concerns have been raised as to potential interpretations of provisions in the code of conduct and elsewhere in the constitution against individuals “bringing the society into disrepute”. This has been occasionally interpreted to include whistleblowing or acknowledgement of historic failings or grievances at the Union.

4.3 What is to be done

Inclusion training – Following discussion with the Head Trustee, this plan recommends that mandatory inclusion training should be required for a number of officers. These are:

1. The President and President-Elect, as the current and future student heads of the Union.
2. Custodian, Assistant Custodian, and Steward, as the officers responsible for managing the Union’s premises.
3. Complaints Panel, to ensure understanding of the issues and sensitivities surrounding Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion.

4. The Equalities Officer.

The form of this inclusion training is still to be determined, and discussions are ongoing with the University to determine if they could offer a suitable programme.

Positive duty towards respect and inclusion – In order to align the Officer’s Code of Conduct with the Union’s value statement, this plan recommends that it should be amended so that officers have a positive duty to promote an open and inclusive environment at the Union free from prejudice.

Whistleblowing – Following consultation with the Equalities Committee, this plan recommends that a statutory defence against accusations of disrepute on the grounds of whistleblowing be included in the constitution.

Strengthening of Equalities Officer Reports – Following the initial success of Equalities Officer Reports, this plan recommends that the practiced application of the reporting system is codified into the constitution. This includes the creation of defined stages of reporting.

The Equalities Committee have furthermore suggested the creation of an initial reporting stage. This is when the Equalities Officer is first made aware of the issue, and under these proposals, can then choose to address the person or persons involved and seek an informal remedy, such as an apology. Any initial report would nevertheless have to be recorded at the next meeting of the Equalities Committee. This would also have the effect of limiting the volume of incidents being escalated to Complaints that could be resolved through less severe measures.

Accountability and Trust

5.1 What has been done

Online Reporting – In Epiphany term 2021, an online reporting function was added to the frontpage of our website. This allows members to report complaints directly to the Office Manager without any student involvement.

Complaints Panel Impartiality – In December 2021, an amendment was passed barring student members of the Complaints Panel from joining election campaigns.

Turnover of student Complaints Panel members – A significant impediment to timely meetings of the Complaints Panel was the turnover of student Complaints Panel members. The positions available to students are subject to strict requirements of experience and impartiality, and as a result the pool of candidates are limited. Previously student Complaints Panel members were elected fresh every term. This meant that the Complaints Panel was regularly unable to convene in the first few weeks of every term, as it lacked a quorate membership. In January 2022, this was amended so student panel members are elected for an entire academic year.

5.2 Identified Issues

Minuting – The Officer’s Code of Conduct requires that all committee meetings should be minuted and published for all members to access. This has not been the case and the archival copies of minutes on the Union’s website frequently experience digital depreciation where they become inaccessible. Transparent and accessible minuting is required to ensure that the Union’s committees remain accountable to the general membership.

Accountability – The current complaints framework only applies outside of Durham Union events and premises to officers. Members of the General Committee are not held to the same standard, as the constitution takes the view that they are not viewed to represent the Union to the same capacity as officers. However, this view is not reflected by public perception, where General Committee members are viewed as representing of the Union and representative of its culture. Instances of disreputable behaviour by members of the General Committee have materially brought the Union into disrepute and contributed to a toxic culture, but they cannot be held accountable for their actions because the complaints framework does not apply to them outside of

24 North Bailey Cameras – In Michaelmas 2021, the Reading Room of 24 North Bailey was refurbished and opened as part of the bar. However, there is no CCTV coverage of this space and the Standing Committee is aware of incidents where potential harm occurred in the Reading Room but was unable to be substantiated due to the lack of CCTV.

5.3 What is to be done

Minuting – This plan recommends that a system be put in place that ensures there is accountability in ensuring the recording and publication of minutes. This could take the form of the Secretary being responsible for ensuring that minutes are being recorded and published. The Secretary and President could then sign-off that minutes have been taken and published on a public bulletin displayed on the board outside the chamber. The Technologies Officer should investigate methods for creating a minute archival system that is less susceptible to digital depreciation such as link rot.

Inclusion Training for Complaints – In order to promote confidence from historically underrepresented groups in the complaints process, the plan recommends that members of the Complaints Panel undertake the inclusion training outlined in 4.3.

Equalities Representation on Complaints – In consultation with the Equalities Committee, this plan recommends that there be created a representative from the Equalities Committee on the Complaints Panel, so that historically underrepresented perspectives are present on the panel.

Accountability – This plan recommends that the Union, with particular involvement of the Trustees of the charity, conduct a review into the scope and applicability of the complaints framework to members of the Union. See 8. Conclusion for the recommended form of this review.

24 North Bailey Cameras – CCTV cameras must be installed in the Reading Room of 24 North Bailey as a matter of urgency.

Access and Culture

6.1 What has been done

Access Membership – In Michaelmas 2021, the Union launched its access membership scheme. Discounted access membership allows those receiving the maximum Durham Grant award or who have successfully applied for a University, College, or JCR hardship fund in the last twelve months to join the Union as a life member for only £42 (compared to £65 without access membership).

Access Tickets – For the Epiphany 2022 Ball, access tickets were offered to access members. These tickets were discounted by £10 compared to regular member tickets, and £20 compared to non-member tickets. Making up 4% of ticket sales, Standing Committee has judged their launch to be a success and will ensure access tickets are offered at all future balls.

6.2 Identified Issues

Sustainability of Access Membership and Tickets –The Union’s value statement as set out in this plan commits us to mitigate economic barriers to involvement as far as financially feasible and access membership and tickets have proven successful in helping many of those who previously struggled with the cost of participation. However, the programmes come with significant cost that the Union should look to offset through direct fundraising.

Privileges – In consultation with the Equalities Committee, it is understood that through lax enforcement of privileges for officers and past officers leading to their extension to non-officers a perception is risked that the Union suffers from favouritism and cliques. Clarity must be given to the general membership to assure them that officer privileges are codified in our constitution and not arbitrarily dispensed in a grace-and-favours arrangement.

24 North Bailey Residence – The private residence of 24 North Bailey is a regular gathering place of Union members at the invitation of the tenants, but the regulations surrounding accountability for guests and their behaviour can be unclear. As a result it has been identified as a locus of poor behaviour at the Union. Recent complaints, including one in which a member used a racial slur against another member, brought this to the attention of Standing Committee and the Office Manager. As a result, Equalities Committee expressed that members, in particular racial minority and female members, of the Union can find the culture and perception surrounding the Armistice Room to be unwelcoming. This ‘grey area’ in enforcement of the Code of Conduct makes this space a challenging

one to govern, hence the enforcement of regulations in the tenancy agreement should to be a priority.

6.3 What is to be done

Alumni Funding – Following the launch of the Union’s alumni platform in June 2022, the Technologies Officer and their deputy will look to integrate a fundraising mechanism into the platform so that the Union can facilitate easier alumni donations. These donations could go directly to the subsidising of access membership and tickets, and later extended to support access to debating competitions by debating members (by covering travel cost or registration fees).

24 North Bailey – This plan recommends that the Union, with particular involvement of the Trustees of the charity, conduct a review into the management, access policies, and enforcement of rules at the 24 North Bailey private residences. See 8. Conclusion for the recommended form of this review.

Privileges – Annex I: Conventions of the House should be amended so that the sitting of officers is not at the president’s discretion (and therefore open to favouritism), but rather dictated by the long-standing convention of only officers being able to sit on the front benches. The Steward’s responsibilities should be amended to include the enforcement of Annex I – Conventions of the House.

Officer Identification – The Union should review methods to ensure that the impersonation of officership cannot occur. Suggests put forward by the Equalities Committee include developing a pin-badge or clip for officers to wear to make them identifiable at events. This will also have the effect of making officers more easily approachable by ordinary members who may wish to raise any concerns but do not know who is an officer and who is not.

Outreach

7.1 What has been done

Charitable Fundraising - The Union regularly holds charity events and helps fundraise for local causes. The Union puts on charity events over the course of the academic year, these events can change year on year, reflecting the sort of fundraising events which members take an interest in putting on. Previous examples of fundraising events have included collections prior to events and collection in the bar.

24 Hour Charity Debate - Each Epiphany Term the Union puts on a twenty-four hour debate to raise money for a local charity. During the twenty-four hour debates a motion, often satirical in nature, is chosen for members to debate over the full twenty-four hour period. Members are encouraged to pick a timeslot and speak on the motion for a set length of time. The Union will set a monetary fundraising target for the event and use its social media and communication channels to circulate details about the charity being fundraised for an accompanying link to donate money. The Union uses our social media platform to circulate information about charitable causes when approached by external groups.

Outreach to other student groups - The Union also tries to work with other University student groups and societies when appropriate. On occasion the Union will open up some events to members of particular student groups when a topic or speaker may be particularly relevant to another society's interests. Speakers at the Union will often be invited to speak at other student societies or the give interviews with the student press while they are in Durham, and the Union remains happy to facilitate this if asked.

Secretary's Committee – The Secretary's Committee works to act as a link between the Union and the University colleges. The role of this committee is to represent issues unique to their Colleges in the General Committee, act as the first port of call for members of the Society within the Colleges, recruit members of the Colleges they represent to join the Union, and promote the Union within their college communities. The role of the committee is important in making sure that the Union remains an open and friendly environment for debate for people from all University colleges.

7.2 Identified Issues

Consistent Fundraising - Though the Union is happy with the effect that it has on the wider Durham community through fundraising efforts, there is a feeling that the Union could increase outreach in Durham, in a way that better reflect our everyday activity. It is felt that the Union society could make a more unique impact on wider Durham community if its outreach better represented the everyday running of the Union, as opposed to just fundraising initiatives.

Termly Election of Equalities Committee - Due to the fact that the Equalities Panel is relatively new, it still needs to regularise its habits and methods of ways actively working within the university community. It is predicted that the termly election of members of the Equalities Committee may cause difficulties in maintaining effective dialogue with organisations within the university community which work to represent historically under represented groups.

Ad hoc collaborations - It is not sustainable to give other societies access to our events all the time because it would necessarily undermine our funding and thus the quality of our events. Therefore, decisions like this have often been made sporadically and on an ad hoc basis.

College Relations - Certain colleges choose not to engage in dialogue with the Union and the Secretary's Committee. The fact that members of the Secretary's Committee are elected in Michaelmas and in Epiphany results in a high turnover of committee members can stymie the development of long-term dialogues with colleges. Committee members represent two colleges, only one of which they are a part of. Therefore not being a part of a college can place a barrier for effective dialogue with one of the college's that a committee member represents.

7.3 What is to be done

Charitable Initiatives - It is hoped that the Union will continue to hold charity events throughout the year. Such events would include but are not limited to, charity debates with the objective of raising money for local causes, collections for local causes in the bar, and collections for local causes prior to some events. The Union should continue to using our social media platform to circulate information about charitable causes when approached by external groups. A new collection box ought be procured.

Equalities Committee Outreach - The Equalities Committee should develop processes for working with organisations within the university which seek to represent historically underrepresented groups. In doing this, the Equalities Committee will need to build links and relationships with these groups. A review should also be carried out into the frequency of elections for this committee, considering the best way to consider how to best balance regular democratic mandates for the committee, while

ensuring that committee members are in place long enough to develop proper working relationships with relevant members of the university community.

Durham Secondary Education Outreach - The Union will look into establishing a new initiative of inviting local schools to some of our events. It is believed that opening up opportunities for local children will introduce them to formal debating as well as provide opportunities to hear experts and thinkers from variety of fields.

Secretary's Committee Outreach - It is hoped that continued positive work of our Secretary's Committee as well as persistent commitment to our values (stated above) will result in colleges, that do not already do so, opening up dialogue with the Union. The Secretary's Committee should consider how to reform itself so that it can strike the best balance between regular democratic mandates for the committee, while ensuring that committee members are in place long enough to develop proper working relations with each college. The committee should also consider the feasibility of having a representative from each college.

Conclusion - A Union for everyone

By the implementation of this plan, it is hoped that the Union can continue to reform so that our practice and activities align with our value statement. In pursuit of this aim, this plan recommends the following initiatives to be carried out over the next three years to augment its recommendations.

A Review of the Complaints System

Areas of review should include:

1. The coverage of the code of conduct and the potential to expand it to cover members who are not officers, such as members of the Equalities Committee or the entirety of the General Committee.
2. Methods to further ease the barriers to reporting. This should review barriers both from the perspective of those outside of the Union's General Committee and the perspective of those within it. The Standing Committee has expressed frustration at having to function as an investigative wing of the Union to assemble a case for the Complaints Panel when concerning rumours are raised but not properly communicated or filed as a complaint at first instance.
3. Many members of the General Committee who are interviewed by Standing or by the Complaints Panel express hesitation due to concerns of their choice to testify becoming common knowledge and having an effect on their political perception. A review of the complaints system must include an investigation into how to break this "grass" culture that prevents effective investigations.
4. Basic causes of disrepute, particularly illegal drug use, should be considered to be explicitly named and reminded to members. The Union should also consider running a zero-tolerance drug policy awareness campaign.

A Review of 24 North Bailey

Areas of review should include:

1. A review of the enforcement of the tenancy agreement for the private residences at 24 North Bailey. This could include including a binding Code of Conduct to part of the tenancy agreement of 24 North Bailey.
2. A review of the guest policy, to ensure that residents understand that they will be held directly accountable for their guest's actions. Guests must also understand that they cannot be in the Armistice Room without their host present, and cannot sleep in the Armistice Room overnight.
3. A review into the access of residents to the club area of 24 North Bailey. Incidents over the past two years have suggested that residents of 24 North Bailey have enjoyed unfettered access to the club area outside of opening times. Methods to ensure stricter control of the Custodian's set of keys should be considered.

Timeline

Action	Detail	Timeline for completion
A Review of 24 North Bailey	See above. This is the most urgent action because of the frequency and severity of the incidents occurring at 24 North Bailey, and because incidents at the premises reflect upon and directly create the public image of the Union.	1 Year (06/2023)
Secretary's Committee Outreach	The Secretary's Committee should seek to establish and normalise relations with the Durham Colleges. This should include initiatives such as walk-downs to Union events, and advertising in College JCRs.	1 Year (06/2023)
A Review of the Complaints System	See above.	2 Years (06/2024)
Equalities Committee Outreach	The Equalities Committee should seek to establish and normalise relations with the various student associations for minority groups on campus. This should then be translated into termly Equalities events that encourage wider participation at the Union.	2 Years (06/2024)
Further review of the Union's EDI Plan	This plan should be reviewed, evaluated, and superseded by a new EDI Plan by 06/2025. This should include a review of how many of its recommendations were implemented, an evaluation of how successful they were, and further recommendations to build upon the value statement and this plan.	3 Years (06/2025)

