

University of Durham

Provider's UKPRN: 10007143

STUDENT PROTECTION PLAN

1. Introduction

1.1. Summary

1.1.1. This **Student Protection Plan** is relevant to current and future students. Its purpose is to:

- provide transparent and accessible information on the likelihood of substantial course change or closure at Durham, and on the action which we will take in the event of substantial course change or closure;
- outline how we will work with you, our students, ensuring you are consulted on, and kept informed of, substantial course change or closure;
- enable us to ensure that your interests are protected in the event of substantial course change or closure, preserving the quality – and, wherever possible, the continuation – of study for all.

1.1.2. Our **Student Protection Plan** is published online¹. The location is highlighted on our student landing page, alongside the institutional regulations which form our Terms & Conditions, and in our offer letters to prospective applicants.

1.1.3. Our staff guidance on changing and withdrawing modules and programmes, and our curriculum development system, both link to this **Student Protection Plan**; it is a reference point in our training for staff who manage and support curriculum development processes. This ensures that our staff are aware of its implications where course closure, or significant changes, are considered or proposed.

1.2. What do we mean by substantial course change or closure?

1.2.1. At Durham University, we are committed to helping you achieve the best possible academic outcomes from your studies. We regularly review and update our modules and programmes to reflect the latest developments and research in subject areas, and to respond to feedback from students, external subject specialists, employers and professional bodies. We have clear timelines for making changes to our curricula, which, depending on the nature of the change, will take place in advance of the delivery of programmes, levels and/or modules.

1.2.2. The Student Protection Plans covers instances where students' Continuation of Study is put at risk², i.e. where programme change or withdrawal means that students are not able to complete their academic programme. We believe that such changes are unlikely; however, occasionally events may occur which mean that substantial changes may have to be made to our

¹ <https://www.dur.ac.uk/about-us/governance/governance-documentation/programme-regulations/student-protection/>

² For more information on the Office for Students' (OfS) definition of 'Continuation of Study', see [Securing student success: Regulatory framework for higher education in England](#), Condition C3 pp.100-102

programmes. We may need to respond reactively to changes in circumstance or the external environment, or we may identify problems with provision and take proactive steps to implement improvements. It is possible that, in some circumstances, delivery of a programme – or substantial aspects of a programme – may not be feasible. We may need to discontinue or combine programmes, or to vary the campus location of a course, after delivery has begun. This Student Protection Plan is designed to provide guidance in instances where we reasonably consider such changes to be necessary. Mitigating the impact upon students will be our primary consideration when substantial changes or closures are required.

- 1.2.3. This plan does not apply to more minor changes which may occur (such as late and/or unforeseen changes to individual module options or timetables in light of, for example, student feedback or staff illness/unavailability) where we have separate policies and practices for mitigation, and for communicating changes. Similarly, it is not designed to cover situations where circumstances beyond the University's control (for example, flooding or industrial action) interfere with our ability to deliver modules or other services in accordance with the descriptions provided. In such instances, however, we are committed to using all reasonable endeavours to minimise disruption as far as it is practical to do so.

1.3 How likely is course change or closure?

- 1.3.1 Substantial changes to, or the closure of, programmes of study are exceptional. In general, we believe the risks of substantial change at Durham are **low** or **very low**.
- 1.3.2 **Section 2** of this Student Protection Plan contains a more detailed assessment of the risk that your course might close or change unexpectedly.

1.4 What happens if my course changes substantially?

- 1.4.1 We have identified a series of measures designed to preserve continuation of study in the event that your course does change substantially. These measures are focussed in particular on those areas where we have identified a higher risk of change.
- 1.4.2 The measures outline what we **have done** (in relation to the transfer of programmes from Queen's Campus to Durham, and the closure of the School for Medicine, Pharmacy & Health) or what we **will do** (if we have to contend with other unforeseen changes in the future).
- 1.4.3 **Section 2** of this Student Protection Plan contains a more detailed outline of the mitigation which we have, and will, put in place to support you in the event of unforeseen change.

1.5 What happens if it is not possible to preserve continuation of study?

- 1.5.1 If we take the decision to close an academic programme and to cease admission to it, we will aim and expect to teach you to the end of your programme ('teach out'), enabling you to complete your studies for a Durham award. This is what we have done with every programme closure undertaken to date.
- 1.5.2 In the unlikely event that we closed your programme, and were not able to 'teach out', we would offer you the opportunity to transfer to another suitable programme at the University. We would also provide support (for example, transcripts and records of study undertaken to date) to help you to transfer to a suitable programme at another UK higher education provider.
- 1.5.3 In the event that continuation of study is not possible, or if continuation of study is preserved but at additional cost, the University has processes for considering compensation. For more specific

detail, please refer to our Student Compensation Policy (Continuation of Study)³. This policy is underpinned by the University's unrestricted reserves, as detailed in our annual financial statements⁴.

1.6 How will I know if my course needs to change?

- 1.6.1 Expected and routine changes (e.g. to individual optional modules) are published annually as we enhance your programmes in response to student feedback and developments in research, pedagogy or practice. Information on minor changes will normally be available from your academic department in the first instance.
- 1.6.2 Where substantial course closure or change becomes necessary, **we will inform you as soon as we are able to do so**. This will normally be in advance of the academic year in which change is due to take place. In the unlikely event that this is not feasible (if, for example, the need for major change only becomes apparent mid-year), we will inform you as soon as we are able to do so.
- 1.6.3 **When dealing with course closure or change, we will consult affected students, and will keep you informed as we implement change**. For example, when considering the implications of the repurposing of our Queen's Campus, we consulted with the Students' Union and the Student Presidents of the Queen's Campus Colleges, and held town hall meetings with students affected by the changes. Consultation will be undertaken in person and in writing. Where change affects students studying remotely, consideration will be given to holding virtual and remote consultations to maximise the opportunity for student participation and involvement.
- 1.6.4 In all instances, academic support will be available from your academic departments, and welfare support and guidance will be available from the University's Student Support and Wellbeing services (in your college and/or centrally). In addition, the Durham Students' Union Advice & Support Centre provides "free, friendly and **independent advice** and information to all Durham University students"⁵.

1.7 What happens if I am not satisfied with the University's response to substantial change?

- 1.7.1 The University has a Student Complaints Process for students. This has an informal first stage, where we will work with you to try and mitigate and address concerns, and a second stage where, if you are unhappy with our informal action, you may submit a formal complaint to the University. If you are dissatisfied with the resolution of all the University's internal complaints processes, you may complain to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA), the independent regulator for higher education. A separate Admissions Complaints process is available to applicants. Further details of both processes are available online⁶.

³ <https://www.dur.ac.uk/about-us/governance/governance-documentation/programme-regulations/student-protection/>

⁴ <https://www.durham.ac.uk/about-us/professional-services/finance-service/about-us/financial-reports/>

⁵ <https://www.durhamsu.com/advice-and-support/about/>

⁶ <https://www.durham.ac.uk/colleges-and-student-experience/student-support-and-wellbeing/student-conduct/student-complaints/>

1.8 How is this plan developed and reviewed?

- 1.8.1 This plan has been developed in consultation with Durham Students' Union, and in light of our experience of supporting students through the changes necessitated by the repurposing of Queen's Campus, and the closure of the School for Medicine, Pharmacy & Health. That experience was itself informed by consultation with the Students' Union, College JCR Presidents, and affected students.
- 1.8.2 The plan will be reviewed annually through our Education Committee, with any proposed changes reported to our Senate and Council as necessary. Students are represented at each of these committees, and Durham Students' Union will be consulted directly on the plan as part of each review.⁷

2. Risk and Mitigation

2.1. Institutional Risk

- 2.1.1. We are confident that the risk that Durham as a whole is unable to operate is **extremely low** due to:
- our healthy and sustainable financial position;
 - our clear strategic direction;
 - our rigorous, structured approach to risk management and business continuity planning;
 - the high quality of our programmes, academic standards, and student outcomes.
- 2.1.2. **Our financial position is healthy and sustainable.** Our annual financial statements⁸ show that we consistently generate an operating surplus, and our unrestricted reserves are sufficient to support planned investment while protecting student interests (i.e. are sufficient to enable us to deal with the financial implications of substantial change, if necessary).
- 2.1.3. **Our strategic direction is clear.** Acknowledging that we operate in a highly competitive and global environment, our *University Strategy 2017-2027*⁹ will provide us with long-term financial sustainability, while ensuring that we continue to deliver excellence in world-class research, education and the wider student experience.
- 2.1.4. **Our approach to risk management and business continuity planning is structured and rigorous.** Our Annual Report¹⁰ summarises our system of risk management, monitored by our Audit and Risk Committee and University Council, with key controls and mitigating actions designed to ensure business continuity in light of adverse circumstances. Operational risk registers operate at a departmental level; regular checkpoint reports on strategy delivery provide a mechanism for the escalation of any issues which might impact business continuity to our University Executive Committee (UEC), chaired by the Vice-Chancellor.

⁷ Note: a significant review of the SPP has been deferred to ensure it responds to the planned Office for Students (OfS) guidance in this area, when this guidance is released (it is currently pending).

⁸ <https://www.durham.ac.uk/about-us/professional-services/finance-service/about-us/financial-reports/>

⁹ <https://www.dur.ac.uk/strategy2027/>

¹⁰ https://www.durham.ac.uk/media/durham-university/professional-services/finance-service/2022_Annual_Report_CUR0222199_DIGI.pdf

2.1.5. **We provide a high-quality education, delivering excellent student outcomes while maintaining core academic standards.** The high quality of the education which we provide, and the rigour of our academic standards, are clear from our student outcomes, and the outcome of all recent external evaluations, minimising any risk to our degree awarding powers or university title. We passed both of our most recent external audits of education: our 2016 Higher Education Review, conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), and our 2017 Annual Provider Review, conducted by Hefce. Our external examiners routinely praise both the quality of the education which we provide, and the achievements of our students, and we are consistently ranked in the top 10 providers nationally in UK league tables. The previous Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) exercises noted that our teaching and learning was of outstanding quality, and that we consistently exceed rigorous national quality requirements; both our 'commendably low' rates of non-continuation and our outstanding levels of highly-skilled employability were also recognised. According to the most recent longitudinal DLHE employability survey, we have the highest rates of long-term employability in the sector.

2.2. Campus Risk

- 2.2.1. We have taken the strategic decision to repurpose our Stockton-based Queen's Campus, and consequently relocated programme delivery at our main Durham City Campus. This enabled us to consolidate teaching and support services, improving the effectiveness and critical mass of both, with the aim of enhancing both the student experience and student outcomes.
- 2.2.2. This decision means that we oversaw a phased relocation to Durham City of 1,900 students. Students previously based at Queen's Campus were more likely to be classified within widening participation categories (e.g. LPN, Acorn, SEC); analysis of hardship grants and loans indicated that students at Queen's Campus were not disproportionately represented in terms of the number of awards made. These factors were explicitly considered when developing plans for compensation and support, as were individual student circumstances (for example, students who had caring responsibilities).

Example 1: Mitigation to Preserve Continuation of Study, Campus Change

The decision to relocate programmes from Stockton was taken in 2016-17, as part of the development of the University Strategy 2017-2027; students were informed at this point. Discussions were held with the Students' Union and with the Student Presidents of the Colleges based in Stockton, and town hall meetings were held for affected students. Mitigation arrangements continue to be overseen by a dedicated Queen's Campus Transition Group, reporting to UEC.

The relocation is taking place in 2017-18 and 2018-19. Services and support continue at Stockton until 2017-18. From 2018-19, all programmes will be delivered at our main Durham campus (with the exception of some programmes formerly based within our School for Medicine, Pharmacy & Health, which is closing, and which are dealt with separately below, cf. 2.3.1-2).

Some programmes are being discontinued and taught out, and some programmes will continue recruiting at our Durham City campus. All students therefore have the opportunity to complete their original programme of study, albeit with a changed location.

Core staff with expertise in student financial support considered potential hardship issues for students affected by the change of campus, identifying a number of potential financial difficulties (including accommodation, travel and personal commitments e.g. part-time work, childcare), and a number of other, non-financial issues that need consideration as part of the transition.

This work was done proactively, and resulted in specific support being provided for disability/access, and for travel and accommodation costs (based on an analysis of regional rent

variation) for students who did not already reside in Durham City. £1.3m was set aside to ensure that affected students could be supported as necessary.

Transferring students completed their studies in 2020 and 2021, and we continued to monitor our support for these cohorts until the point of completion.

2.2.3. Consolidating the delivery of all our courses at our main Durham campus means that there is **no risk** of further Campus closure. The closure has also provided us with significant experience in ensuring student interests are protected, and continuation of study preserved, when undergoing major change. That experience has informed the development of this Student Protection Plan, and our Student Compensation Policy (Continuation of Study).

2.3. Risks to Subjects, Departments or Programmes

2.3.1. Repurposing the Queen's Campus lead to the closure of our School of Medicine, Pharmacy & Health, the only school based solely at the Campus. We are discontinuing all programmes in the School; we have therefore ceased recruitment to these programmes, and taught out all registered students.

2.3.2. When considering mitigation and support, student demographics and personal circumstances were considered explicitly (cf. 2.2.2). In addition, our programmes in Medicine and Pharmacy are accredited, and we consulted the relevant Professional, Regulatory and Statutory Bodies regarding the closure and mechanisms for student support.

Example 2: Mitigation to Preserve Continuation of Study, Department Closure

To enable students to complete the two years of the MBBS programme delivered at Durham, and our one-year Health MScs, we have contracted a partner organisation to provide additional teaching support, ensuring full continuation of study can be provided (with no change in location). Students on Medicine & Health programmes are scheduled to complete their studies with us in 2017-18.

For our MPharm Pharmacy, we worked with Newcastle University and the General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC) – the independent regulator for pharmacists, pharmacy technicians and pharmacy premises, and the accrediting body for MPharm programmes – to facilitate a full transfer of provision (students, resources and staff) to Newcastle, providing continuation of study (leading to a Durham degree) for students, albeit with a changed location. A small number of students elected to transfer to cognate programmes in Durham.

Matters of finance and support were considered on the same basis as for other Stockton programmes, with compensation provided as necessary. Students on our Pharmacy programme completed their studies by 2020, and we continued to monitor our support for these cohorts until the point of completion.

2.3.3. The risk that we are otherwise unable to deliver courses in particular subject areas or departments is **low**. Although we will consider future closures should the need arise, any such a decision would not be taken lightly; the closure of our School for Medicine, Pharmacy & Health is the only such closure in the last decade.

2.3.4. Sustainability is core to programme approval, curriculum development and departmental planning. Our programmes do not rely on individual staff for core provision, and are designed to be delivered by academic teams. In the event that we faced particular staffing challenges, we would seek to make use of our relationships with other educational providers in the region, as we have done with the repurposing of Queen's Campus, and the closure of the School for Medicine, Pharmacy & Health. The majority of our programmes are delivered on a full-time basis. We have a small number of bespoke part-time and distance learning programmes, often delivered for or with employers; these are appropriately resourced and supported. The risk that

we are unable to deliver specific programmes – or material aspects of specific programmes – is therefore **low**.

- 2.3.5. In the event of department, subject or programme closure, we will seek to ensure that students can be taught out to complete their programme as expected. In the unlikely event that a teach out is not possible, we will offer students the opportunity to transfer to another suitable programme at the University. When considering the impact of programme closure, particular attention will be paid to the potentially different needs of students sharing particular protected characteristics (for example, the impact of delivery location on students requiring reasonable adjustments).

2.4. Risk to Specific Student Groups

- 2.4.1. We maintain Highly Trusted Sponsor status with the Home Office, which enables us to recruit and support international students in the UK. The risk of any change to this status (i.e. the risk that we would no longer be able to recruit or teach international students) is therefore **very low**. We have a dedicated team of staff who understand the Home Office regulations and who ensure compliance across the University. We are significantly below the 10% visa refusal threshold set by Home Office, and have successfully passed all previous Home Office compliance audits. We have recently been accepted onto the Home Office Master's Programme pilot scheme, which has only been made available to institutions that the Home Office considers "low risk".

2.5. Risks to Students at Partner Institutions

- 2.5.1. **Sub-contractual, dual- or joint-award programmes:** sustainability and risk are critical considerations within our partnership approval and renewal processes, and we would not enter into arrangements with a partner where we identified a high risk that a programme was not sustainable, or would not be of appropriate quality. This ensures that the risk that we will no longer be able to deliver collaborative programmes is **low**.
- 2.5.2. Nonetheless, for each of our current joint- and dual-award programmes we offer an equivalent Durham-only programme, ensuring that we can provide students with continuation of study even if our partners are no longer able to deliver their agreed elements of provision. For our sub-contractual provision – aside from arrangements with Newcastle to support the teach out of students in Medicine, Pharmacy and Health – we have identified a substantial number of alternative providers with whom we would seek to work with to ensure continuation of study could be provided, in the unlikely event that current partners could no longer deliver provision.
- 2.5.3. **Study Abroad:** a majority of undergraduate programmes include optional opportunities available to students who are able to secure places at international institutions or other organisations (and meet any necessary academic or professional requirements); however, Durham does not typically recruit directly to programmes which require study or employment overseas. We maintain a large number of partnership arrangements for study abroad; these are being considered specifically in the context of Brexit, ensuring that the risk that we are no longer able to offer study abroad opportunities is **low**.
- 2.5.4. All study abroad programmes have direct equivalents, to which students can transfer in the event that they are unable to secure a placement, ensuring continuation of study for students even if they are unable to secure study abroad opportunities.
- 2.5.5. **Validated Programmes:** Validated students are registered with our partner higher education providers, rather than with Durham University itself, and are therefore not subject to the

provisions of this plan. However, sustainability and risk are critical considerations within our partnership approval and renewal processes for validated partners, and we would not enter into validated arrangements with a partner where we felt that was a high risk that a programme was not sustainable, or would not be of appropriate quality.

- 2.5.6. We currently work with a large number of partner organisations, all of whom offer programmes in Theology, Ministry and Mission. In the event that one provider could no longer provide continuation of study, we would seek to work with that partner to facilitate student transfer to other partners delivering the same programme(s).