

Students' Experiences of Inclusion and Exclusion at Durham University

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Context and The “Belonging” Project



Durham University is a highly selective, elite university in North East England. The North East has one of the lowest university participation rates in England. Approximately 6% of undergraduates at Durham are from the North East.

Several members of the Anthropology FGS group – especially “working class” and “Northern”/“local” students – have experienced exclusion at DU and made to feel like they don’t “belong”. This has affected their experience at University and, in some cases, has led to withdrawal.

A student led research group wanted to get a sense of how widespread these experiences are across the University and, if they are widespread, to change things.

We obtained a small grant from the University’s EDI Fund to conduct a large-scale survey of students across the University + follow-up focus group

Methods and materials

2,052 students responded to our online survey (summer 2022), which included agree/disagree questions on experiences of University life across 7 domains:

- Overall sense of belonging at DU (e.g. “I sometimes feel DU isn’t for people like me”)
- Social inclusion (e.g. “I sometimes feel ashamed or embarrassed about the way I speak or dress”)
- Department inclusion (e.g. “I feel comfortable contributing to discussions in seminars & tutorials”)
- College inclusion (e.g. “I feel like I can be myself at college”)
- College support (e.g. “My college deals with problems fairly”)
- WSE inclusion (e.g. “I feel welcome in the clubs and societies I belong to”)
- Financial inclusion/exclusion (e.g. “I often find it hard to afford the costs of organised social events”)

The survey also included: 2 free-text questions re incidents that made students feel included or excluded at DU, questions on mental wellbeing (SWEMWBS) + background characteristics.

Seven focus groups were convened with students sharing similar socio-demographic characteristics (N=27)

Variables and statistical procedures

Of the survey respondents, 1220 were home students and 800 were international.

Home students were classified into “more-advantaged” (N=713) and “less-advantaged” (N=514) using latent class analysis based on 5 variables:

- School type (state/private, selective/non-selective)
- Parental education (FGS or not)
- Self-defined social class (working class vs middle or upper class)
- Recipient or not of Durham Grant
- Term-time employment for financial necessity

UK region of origin was classified as: Northeast, other Northern England, English Midlands, Southern England, and Scotland/Wales/N. Ireland.

Principal components analysis was used to generate variables capturing each “domain” of belonging.

Multiple linear regression was used to establish impacts of background characteristics on domains of belonging.

(1) Overall belonging at DU

Table 1: Linear Regression for DU Belonging Overall Score			
	Bivariate analysis (Student Group)	Bivariate analysis (home region)	Multivariate analysis (controlling for other characteristics)
	B (95% confidence intervals)	B (95% confidence intervals)	B (95% confidence intervals)
Student Group			
More-advantaged home (N=713)	Reference		Reference
Less-advantaged home (N=54)	-0.639 (-0.743, -0.535)***		-0.586 (-0.696,-0.476)***
International (N=800)	0.406 (0.313, 0.499)***		0.164 (0.041,0.288)**
UK Region (home students only)			
South England (N=468)		Reference	Reference
North-East England (N=218)		-0.547 (-0.706,-0.387)***	-0.268 (-0.443,-0.094)**
Other Northern England (N=291)		-0.317 (-0.461,-0.173)***	-0.181 (-0.33,-0.032)*
English Midlands (N=141)		-0.058 (-0.243,0.128) ^{NS}	-0.039 (-0.227,0.148) ^{NS}
Scotland, Wales or N. Ireland (N=61)		-0.181 (-0.43,0.069) ^{NS}	-0.168 (-0.413,0.076) ^{NS}

“Being asked, ‘how did you even get into Durham, they shouldn't let locals in!’” (LAH, St Mary’s)

“Being in a seminar where a student stated that non-privately educated working class people should study at non-Russell-Group universities.” (LAH, Trevelyan)

“I was told I should be embarrassed I got a place at Durham through a contextual offer as ‘someone else deserved it more.’” (LAH, Josephine Butler)

“Senior university staff asking why I have attended a guest speaker lecture, and if I’m sure I’m in the right place. Based on the way I dress and my thick Northern accent.” (LAH, Aidans)

(2) Social inclusion

Table 2: Linear Regression for Social Inclusion Score			
	Bivariate analysis (Student Group)	Bivariate analysis (home region)	Multivariate analysis
	B (95% confidence intervals)	B (95% confidence intervals)	B (95% confidence intervals)
Student Group			
More-advantaged home (N=713)	<i>Reference</i>		<i>Reference</i>
Less-advantaged home (N=54)	-0.466 (-0.554,-0.355)***		-0.397 (-0.513,-0.282)***
International (N=800)	0.143 (0.044,0.241)**		-0.175 (-0.305,-0.044)**
UK Region (home students only)			
South England (N=468)		<i>Reference</i>	<i>Reference</i>
North-East England (N=218)		-0.302 (-0.469,-0.136)***	-0.138 (-0.323,0.047) NS
Other Northern England (N=291)		-0.199 (-0.35,-0.049)**	-0.112 (-0.269,0.046) NS
English Midlands (N=141)		-0.101 (-0.294,0.093) NS	-0.071 (-0.269,0.127) NS
Scotland, Wales or N. Ireland (N=61)		-0.186 (-0.444,0.073) NS	-0.237 (-0.495,0.021) NS

“The first words spoken to me by my neighbour in college were to make fun of my accent.” (MAH, Grey)

“Being told countless times by a flatmate that I seem the 'most chavy'.” (LAH, Collingwood)

“People being rude about my scouse accent and connecting it to my upbringing and education.” (LAH, college unspecified)

“Being called poor during freshers’ week and laughed at for where I’m from.” (LAH, Grey)

“Freshers week was the worst. Everyone I met through college would first of all ask me what school I went to and/or what my parents do. I’d tell them and they’d proceed to tell me about their boarding/private school and their rich parents with big jobs and I just couldn’t relate.” (LAH, Castle)

(3) Academic Inclusion

Table 3: Linear Regression for Academic Inclusion Score			
	Bivariate analysis (Student Group)	Bivariate analysis (home region)	Multivariate analysis
	B (95% confidence intervals)	B (95% confidence intervals)	B (95% confidence intervals)
Student Group			
More-advantaged home (N=713)	Reference		Reference
Less-advantaged home (N=54)	-0.31 (-0.422,-0.197)***		-0.277 (-0.402,-0.153)***
International (N=800)	0.117 (0.017,0.217)*		-0.071 (-0.212,0.069) ^{NS}
UK Region (home students only)			
South England (N=468)		Reference	Reference
North-East England (N=218)		-0.169 (-0.338,-0.001)*	-0.087 (-0.288,0.113)
Other Northern England (N=291)		-0.23 (-0.383,-0.077)**	-0.184 (-0.355,-0.013)*
English Midlands (N=141)		-0.103 (-0.3,0.094) ^{NS}	-0.079 (-0.294,0.136) ^{NS}
Scotland, Wales or N. Ireland (N=61)		-0.231 (-0.496,0.034) ^{NS}	-0.268 (-0.55,0.015) ^{NS}

“I had a class where I was told that my accent was the same as the people who served their food. It was laughed and joked about that I was from the local area.” (LAH, Sociology)

“Feeling unable to speak in seminars because of my accent.” (LAH, Geography)

“A lecturer making a comment about not being able to understand an IT technician who had a Northern accent, as I also have a Northern accent.” (LAH, Psychology)

BUT: “Talking to some of the lecturers who have made me feel like I deserve to be here.” (LAH, Sociology)

(4) College Inclusion

Table 4: Linear Regression for College Inclusion Score			
	Bivariate analysis (Student Group)	Bivariate analysis (home region)	Multivariate analysis
	B (95% confidence intervals)	B (95% confidence intervals)	B (95% confidence intervals)
Student Group			
More-advantaged home (N=713)	Reference		Reference
Less-advantaged home (N=54)	-0.52 (-0.632,-0.408)***		-0.424 (-0.547,-0.301)***
International (N=800)	0.078 (-0.021,0.178) ^{NS}		0.028 (-0.111,0.167) ^{NS}
UK Region (home students only)			
South England (N=468)		Reference	Reference
North-East England (N=218)		-0.696 (-0.872,-0.52)***	-0.421 (-0.628,-0.214)***
Other Northern England (N=291)		-0.203 (-0.361,-0.045)*	-0.103 (-0.278,0.072) ^{NS}
English Midlands (N=141)		-0.113 (-0.315,0.09) ^{NS}	-0.162 (-0.381,0.058) ^{NS}
Scotland, Wales or N. Ireland (N=61)		-0.182 (-0.456,0.092) ^{NS}	-0.125 (-0.415,0.164) ^{NS}

“When I couldn't afford to go to formals, I felt excluded. I couldn't even be a part of the college.” (LAH, Hild Bede)

“Being told I look bad because of my suit for the formal, when I can't afford a new one” (LAH, Van Mildert).

BUT “During our college's County Durham formal I was asked to join high table and read an excerpt that was important to me and my background.” (LAH, Hatfield)

“Being told countless times by a flatmate that I seem the 'most chavy'...” (LAH, Collingwood)

“The first words spoken to me by my neighbour in college were to make fun of my accent. [...] This attitude was extremely common throughout freshers' week.” (MAH, Grey)

(5) College Support

Table 5: Linear Regression for College Support Score			
	Bivariate analysis (Student Group)	Bivariate analysis (home region)	Multivariate analysis
	B (95% confidence intervals)	B (95% confidence intervals)	B (95% confidence intervals)
Student Group			
More-advantaged home (N=713)	Reference		Reference
Less-advantaged home (N=54)	-0.162 (-0.275,-0.05)**		-0.097 (-0.22,0.027) ^{NS}
International (N=800)	0.424 (0.324,0.524)***		0.224 (0.085,0.363)**
UK Region (home students only)			
South England (N=468)		Reference	Reference
North-East England (N=218)		-0.265 (-0.432,-0.098)**	-0.195 (-0.392,0.002) ^{NS}
Other Northern England (N=291)		-0.065 (-0.214,0.084) ^{NS}	-0.04 (-0.206,0.126) ^{NS}
English Midlands (N=141)		0.017 (-0.174,0.207) ^{NS}	-0.002 (-0.21,0.205) ^{NS}
Scotland, Wales or N. Ireland (N=61)		-0.08 (-0.341,0.182) ^{NS}	-0.002 (-0.278,0.275) ^{NS}

“When college staff - the catering team as well as college office - began to recognise me and know my name.” (LAH, Castle)

“I used to get late dinners a lot due to sports and I always put a smiley face on my order and the kitchen staff knew who I was because of that, and they were so nice and welcoming which was lovely too.” (LAH, Mary’s)

“I don’t feel like I belong at the university, but I wholeheartedly feel like I belong within my college. The welfare team go above and beyond for me.” (LAH, Stephenson)

BUT a few cases where college support had reportedly been less helpful.

(6) WSE Inclusion

Table 6: Linear Regression for WSE Inclusion Score			
	Bivariate analysis (Student Group)	Bivariate analysis (home region)	Multivariate analysis
	B (95% confidence intervals)	B (95% confidence intervals)	B (95% confidence intervals)
Student Group			
More-advantaged home (N=713)	Reference		Reference
Less-advantaged home (N=54)	-0.573 (-0.685,-0.461)***		-0.486 (-0.608,-0.363)***
International (N=800)	-0.139 (-0.239,-0.039)**		-0.063 (-0.202,0.076) ^{NS}
UK Region (home students only)			
South England (N=468)		Reference	Reference
North-East England (N=218)		-0.728 (-0.896,-0.559)***	-0.437 (-0.634,-0.241)***
Other Northern England (N=291)		-0.286 (-0.439,-0.133)***	-0.191 (-0.359,-0.024)*
English Midlands (N=141)		-0.075 (-0.272,0.121) ^{NS}	-0.041 (-0.252,0.17) ^{NS}
Scotland, Wales or N. Ireland (N=61)		-0.263 (-0.528,0.002) ^{NS}	-0.297 (-0.573,-0.02)*

“Finding other people just like me when I joined a DU sports team.” (LAH, Collingwood)

“Joining a Durham University sports team [...] There were more people like me from a similar background who faced the same problems accessing college balls/events.” (LAH, Castle)

BUT: “Not being able to afford to join societies, particularly sports, which is a big part of college and DU.” (LAH, Hatfield)

“Hockey subs [...] cost £40 which is far more than i can afford. It makes me feel excluded from a sport i love.” (LAH, Butler)

“First social with my society, I say one word and the first thing someone says is ‘wow you’re Northern’.” (MAH, Hatfield)

AND: “They all revolve around the drinking culture...” (LAH, Collingwood)

(7) Financial Exclusion

Table 7: Linear Regression for Financial Exclusion Score			
	Bivariate analysis (Student Group)	Bivariate analysis (home region)	Multivariate analysis
	B (95% confidence intervals)	B (95% confidence intervals)	B (95% confidence intervals)
Student Group			
More-advantaged home (N=713)	Reference		Reference
Less-advantaged home (N=54)	-0.861 (-0.967,-0.754)***		-0.848 (-0.965,-0.73)***
International (N=800)	-0.095 (-0.19,0) ^{NS}		-0.164 (-0.297,-0.032)*
UK Region (home students only)			
South England (N=468)		Reference	Reference
North-East England (N=218)		-0.728 (-0.896,-0.559)***	-0.026 (-0.212,0.16) ^{NS}
Other Northern England (N=291)		-0.286 (-0.439,-0.133)***	0.012 (-0.146,0.17) ^{NS}
English Midlands (N=141)		-0.075 (-0.272,0.121) ^{NS}	-0.055 (-0.255,0.145) ^{NS}
Scotland, Wales or N. Ireland (N=61)		-0.263 (-0.528,0.002) ^{NS}	-0.091 (-0.354,0.172) ^{NS}

“I can’t afford to attend events or nights out as other people so i feel a bit like i miss out a lot.” (LAH, St Cuthbert’s)

“Things like tickets for events get quite expensive and I have had to decline invitations as a result, but for some students this is not an issue, so you can feel a bit excluded.” (LAH, St Mary’s)

Quantitative findings: summary

Across all but one domain (college support), LAH students reported significantly greater levels of exclusion than either MAH or INT students, controlling for other background variables. The effect sizes were large.

Students from Northern England, and especially the North East, reported greater levels of exclusion across multiple domains. Some of these effects can be explained by social class differences, but being from a more privileged background is not enough to counteract all the negative experiences faced by local students at Durham University.

These findings suggest overwhelmingly that socio-economically disadvantaged students, and students from North East England, face systemic exclusion at Durham University, extending across almost all domains of University life.

Particularly ironic that students from the local area were the most likely to report feeling that “Durham University isn’t really for people like me.”

Several protected characteristics were also associated with experiences of exclusion, especially being female, identifying as LGBTQ+, and having a disability. But the MAH/LAH distinction was the single biggest predictor of experiences of inclusion/exclusion at DU.

Qualitative findings: summary

There appears to be a pervasive culture across the University of discrimination against “Northern” or “local” students, and students from less-privileged backgrounds, which is going largely unchallenged.

- Many students apparently felt it was okay to tell their peers that they “looked chavvy”, to make fun of their accents, or to joke about “the locals” as being “uneducated” and “rough”.
- Some staff may fail to call out such behaviour and make problematic assumptions about “Durham students.”

Intersectionality is important, especially intersections between socioeconomic background and home region.

- Gender also features, e.g. “In a seminar I was once completely shut down. I was not sure whether this was due to my gender/accent as I am female and northern and was shut down by a man with a southern, fairly posh accent.”

Some structural features of Durham University life may perpetuate and reproduce socio-economic and regional divides.

- Prohibitive costs of some societies and activities
- Some “traditions” and expectations about dress codes, Latin graces, knowing which cutlery to use, etc.
- College accommodation, especially in first year: being the *only* “Northern” or state-school student in a flat can feel very isolating.

Conclusion

Socio-economically disadvantaged students, and students from North East England, face systemic exclusion at Durham University, extending across all domains of University life.

Social class and region are not protected characteristics and can therefore be overlooked in EDI initiatives.

Widening access to Durham University *must* go hand-in-hand with ensuring that students from “non-traditional backgrounds” can participate fully in University life and flourish.

Impact

A robust APP with a generous financial package to increase belonging through student led initiatives and projects

Durham University has committed to creating a Widening Participation Strategy to capture the groups of students who were missing from the APP, including care experienced and estranged students and FGS

A paper out in August in European Education Research Journal: Boliver, Vikki, Hampshire, Kate, Lambell, Andrea, Lewis, Abigail & Marley, Catherine. 2025. 'Inequalities in students' sense of social, cultural and economic belonging at a highly selective UK university', European Educational Research Journal (in print)