Belonging@Durham:

The role of social class and UK home region in students' experiences of inclusion at Durham University

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1. Executive summary

Durham University has done a lot of work over recent years to foster a diverse and inclusive environment for students and staff. However, the primary focus on protected characteristics has arguably obscured a serious consideration of how social class and region of origin might impact on the student experience. Supported by a small grant from the University's EDI Fund, the Anthropology First Generation Scholars (FGS) group conducted a large-scale online survey of Durham University students, with follow-up focus group discussions, to find out how students from less-privileged social class backgrounds, and those from northern England, experience student life at Durham University, and to establish an evidence base to underpin meaningful change.

This report focuses principally on data from the survey, which was sent to all students registered at the University. The survey contained a series of 5-point Likert-scale questions, with respondents asked to indicate whether they "agreed" or "disagreed" with various statements about their experiences at Durham University. It also included two free-text questions for respondents to share personal experiences of inclusion and exclusion; the Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS); and questions on socio-demographic background. Altogether, 2,052 students responded (just under 10% of the student population at Durham University). Around 60% of these were UK-domiciled ("home") students, who were categorised into "more privileged" (n=713) or "less privileged" (n=514) on the basis of five questions measuring economic and cultural elements of social class identity. Around two-fifths (38.1%) of the home student sample came from southern England, and a roughly similar proportion came either from the Northeast (17.8%) or other areas of northern England (23.9%), with the remaining fifth from the England Midlands or other UK nations.

For the quantitative analysis, outcome (Likert-scale) questions were grouped into seven domains: (1) overall sense of belonging at Durham University, (2) relationships with peers, (3) experiences in teaching and learning contexts, (4) experiences of college events and activities, (5) relationships with college staff, (6) experiences in clubs and societies, and (7) financial considerations. Descriptive and multivariate inferential statistics were used to determine the contribution of social class privilege, region of origin, and key protected characteristics (gender, LGBTQ+ identity, age category, disability, ethnic/racial identity, and religion) to experiences of inclusion and exclusion across each domain.

Of these, social class privilege exerted the strongest and most consistent effects across all domains of University life. Among other measures, home students from less-privileged backgrounds were more likely than either more-privileged home students or international students to feel ashamed about the way they speak, dress and express themselves, and to have felt targeted because of their backgrounds or personal characteristics. They were less likely than the other groups to feel comfortable contributing to seminar discussions and participating in other academic activities. They were more likely to feel excluded from college events/activities and from student clubs and societies, key elements of the University's wider student experience (WSE). These patterns held true after controlling for other sociodemographic variables in multivariate linear regression models.

Students from northern England, and especially the Northeast, also fared worse than those from other UK regions across several domains. There is a strong interaction in survey sample between social class and region of origin, making it difficult to fully separate these two effects. Nonetheless, even after accounting for social class and other variables, students from the Northeast (and, to a lesser extent, those from other regions of northern England) were significantly less likely than those from Southern England to feel that they belonged at Durham University as a whole, and to feel included in both college activities and the various student clubs and societies.

Taken together, these findings suggest that socio-economically disadvantaged students, and students from Northeast England (and, to a lesser extent, from other areas of northern England) face multiple forms of exclusion at Durham University. Some protected characteristics (including gender, LGBTQ+ identity, and disability) were also associated with experiences of exclusion, but only disability came close to the magnitude of effects explained by social class or region of origin.

These findings are confirmed by the qualitative analysis of survey free-text responses. While a handful of comments related to protected characteristics (most notably gender and race), the vast majority described experiences of exclusion based on (perceived) social class and/or UK region of origin, sometimes also intersecting with gender. The biggest set of issues reported concerned the behaviour of fellow students. Arguably, while it has become much less socially acceptable to be openly racist, homophobic or misogynistic, it appears that repeatedly drawing attention to someone's accent or social class background receives no such social censure. Some of these behaviours appear intentionally designed to exclude and belittle; others take the form of more mundane and thoughtless comments that, day in and day out, can gradually undermine the sense of belonging at Durham University. By contrast, comments about interactions staff (all roles and grades) were generally much more positive, with students from underrepresented backgrounds appreciating staff making an effort to get to know them personally and making them feel they deserved to be at the University. However, some staff were criticised for failing to challenge problematic comments and behaviours from other students, making them (and, by the extension, the University) appear complicit.

The qualitative data also point to some features of Durham University life that may facilitate and perpetuate socio-economic and regional divides among our community. These include (*inter alia*) events such as formal dinners and college balls, which were particularly polarising. For many students, these were a highlight of the Durham University experience, giving them a real sense of belonging and (college) identity. However, some others (especially those from less-privileged backgrounds and local students) experienced these same events as excluding and alienating. Likewise with university accommodation: when it works well, sharing a corridor or flat in the first year can provide a ready-made group of companions and an opportunity to mix with people from different backgrounds. However, finding oneself the "odd one out" (e.g., the only state-school or local student) can result in feelings of isolation that may ripple through other parts of university life.

The report concludes with a call to action. The first step, which we have already taken, is to acknowledge and own the problem (which is by no means unique to Durham University). The next step will be to work collaboratively with students and staff across the University to develop and implement targeted actions to address the issues raised in this report. To this end, we provide a series of recommendations for possible areas of action, including in student admissions, induction, academic study and progression, college institutions and activities, student clubs and societies, accommodation, and training for students and staff. But these recommendations are very much just starting points, and will need refining and revising as an ongoing collective process. We need to be bold and ambitious, and be prepared to commit the necessary time and resources over a sustained period, recognising that we might not always get it right first time. The process will also require humility and a willingness to be challenged, as we seek to ensure Durham University is a place where all students and staff can flourish, actively embracing and celebrating our diversity.

2. Introduction

Durham University has done a lot of work over recent years to foster an inclusive environment for students and staff. The Race Equality Charter and Athena Swan Awards, alongside excellent work on LGBTQ+, access and disability, have been key steps in making our University a place that embraces and celebrates equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

To date, the majority of EDI work in the University has focused on protected characteristics, that are protected by law against discrimination (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, and sexual orientation). However, the Anthropology First-Generation Scholars (FGS) Group felt there was something missing. Several members of the group from the local area and/or from a working class background have reported experiences within the University that made them feel uncomfortable, leading them to question whether they really "belonged" at Durham University. Neither social class nor region are protected characteristics, so can be overlooked in EDI work, but our FGS members' experiences suggested that they may play a key role in students' sense of belonging (or not) at Durham University, particularly given its elite status and geographical location in one of the most economically-deprived areas of the country. We therefore wanted to find out how widespread these experiences are across the University and establish an evidence base to underpin meaningful change. Supported by a small grant from the University's EDI Fund, we conducted a large-scale online survey of Durham University students, plus follow-up focus group discussions.

3. Methods and materials

The online survey was sent via individualised links to all students registered at the University. Via a series of 5-point Likert-scale questions, students were asked to indicate whether they "agreed" or "disagreed" with various statements about their experiences of University life, grouped into six broad domains: (1) overall sense of belonging at Durham University, (2) relationships with peers, (3) experiences in academic contexts, (4) experiences of college life, events and activities, (5) interactions with college staff, and (6) experiences in student clubs and societies. For example, the three questions measuring "overall belonging" were: "I never doubted that I would be accepted into Durham University"; "I feel like I belong at Durham University"; and "I sometimes feel that Durham University isn't really for people like me." The survey also included two free-text questions, where students were invited to share personal experiences of inclusion and exclusion in the University context; the Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS); and questions on socio-demographic characteristics, including key protected characteristics (gender, ethnic identity, sexual identity, disability, mature student status, religion) as well as indicators of socioeconomic background, UK region of origin (for home students), and parents' educational background. Statistical analysis of the quantitative data was performed using SPSS v26.0.

Seven online focus group discussions (FGDs) were then conducted, to drill down in more detail into students' experiences. The timing of the focus groups (during/after the summer exam period) limited the number of participants (27 in total, grouped according to shared socio-demographic characteristics). Thematic analysis was performed on both the survey free-text comments and on the FGD transcripts, using deductive and inductive coding[1].

[1] The majority of examples used in this report derive from the survey free-text comments; where a focus group extract is used, this is indicated by the symbol &.

4. Sample characteristics and analysis

4.1 Quantitative data

The survey yielded a total of 2,052 responses, equating to just under 10% of Durham University's student population. Of the full sample, almost two-fifths (39%) were international students. The majority reported being female (62.3%), not LGBT (67.3%), not having a disability (81.9%), not being religious (67.7%). "Hill" colleges (70.4%) were more represented than "Bailey" colleges, but with a broadly even split across faculties and levels of study. Among the home (UK) student sample, the majority identified as White British (82.4%), were not mature students (83.3%) and did not have caring responsibilities (91.3). Self-reported UK region of origin was classified as North-East (17.8%), other Northern England (23.9%), English Midlands (11.5%), Southern England (38.1%) and other UK nations (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, together 5.6%), with 2.6% missing data. Descriptions of the full sample and the UK-domiciled (home) students are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Five further variables for home students were used to measure various aspects of social class: school background (state comprehensive versus private/selective); engagement in paid work during term-time for financial necessity; self-identified social class; being in the first generation of family members to attend university; and receiving the (means-tested) Durham Grant. Unsurprisingly, these five variables showed a moderate-to-high degree of statistical association, so latent class analysis was used to derive a composite that captured both capture economic and cultural elements of social class/privilege. This produced two distinctive groups: "more privileged" and "less privileged" home students (55.3% and 42.7% respectively of the home student sample, with the remaining 2.0% unclassifiable because of missing data). Bringing in international students as a third category gives three broad groups of students: more-privileged home students ("MPH", n=713); less-privileged home students ("LPH", n=514) and international students ("INT", n=800), with 25 students unclassified owing to missing data. There is a clear statistical association among in the survey sample between home region and social class. Around three-quarters of students from the North-East were within the "less privileged" category, while the opposite was true for students coming from Southern England (three-quarters of students in the "more privileged" category, with other UK regions falling somewhere in between.

The *Full Report* contains a detailed account of the analytical procedures used. In brief, we began with descriptive statistics of each of the Likert scale questions, grouped into the six broad domains noted above (overall belonging, relationships with peers, etc.). These are disaggregated by international/home student status and then, for home students, by the social class privilege variable and reported UK region of origin. Principal components analysis (PCA) was then used reduce the number of dimensions and derive a single variable for each of the domains (e.g., one variable to capture overall belonging at DFU, another to capture experiences in teaching and learning settings, etc.). These composite variables were used in multivariate linear regression models to estimate the relative contribution of the various independent (sociodemographic) variables to each of these outcomes. These analyses were performed both for the whole sample, and for the home student sample only. In this report, we focus on the latter, because the measures of social class used do not translate very easily across different international contexts. The sociodemographic variables used in these models were as follows: level of "privilege", home region, self-identified gender, LGBTQ+ identification (yes/no), mature student (yes/no), disability (yes/no), religious faith (yes/no), ethnic/racial identity (white British or other), and level of study.

Table 1: Sample Descriptive Statistics: Whole sample

All respondents (N=2052)	Percentage	N
Home or international student		
Home student (UK-domiciled)	59.5	1220
International student (non-UK)	39.0	800
Missing	1.6	32
Gender		
Female	62.3	1278
Male	31.4	645
Other	2.3	47
Missing	4.0	82
LGBT		
LGBT	21.3	438
Not LGBT	67.3	1380
Missing	11.4	234
Disability		
Disability	12.3	253
No disability	81.9	1680
Missing	5.8	119
Religious faith		
Religious faith declared	22.2	456
No religious faith	67.7	1389
Missing	10.1	207
Level of study		
First year undergraduate	28.6	587
Second year undergraduate	19.8	406
Third or fourth year undergraduate	17.2	353
Postgraduate taught student	20.6	422
Postgraduate research student	11.5	237
Other/Missing	2.3	47
Faculty		
Business School	16.7	342
Arts and Humanities	19.5	400
Science	34.2	702
Social Sciences and Health	22.5	462
Missing	7.1	146
College		
Hill college	70.4	1444
Bailey college	27.1	557
Missing	2.5	51

Table 2. Sample Descriptive Statistics: Home Students Only

UK-domiciled respondents only (N=1252)	Column %	N
School type		
Non-selective state school	58.6	734
Selective state school	13.2	165
Private fee-paying school	25.2	315
Missing	3.0	38
Parental education		
First generation scholar	36.0	451
Not a first generation scholar	60.9	762
Missing	3.1	39
Social class background (self-defined)		
Working class	38.2	478
Middle or upper class	54.9	687
Missing	6.9	87
Financial aid status		
Durham Grant recipient	27.2	341
Not a Durham Grant recipient	68.5	858
Missing	4.2	53
Term-time employment		
Works during term-time through financial necessity	28.4	356
Does not work during term-time for financial necessity	67.2	841
Missing	4.4	55
UK home region		
North-East of England	17.8	218
Other Northern England	23.9	293
English Midlands	11.5	141
Southern England	38.1	468
Scotland, Wales or N. Ireland	5.6	69
Missing	2.6	32
Age group		
Mature student	12.6	158
Non-mature student	83.3	1043
Missing	4.1	51
Caring responsibilities		
Yes	6.8	85
No	91.3	1143
Missing	1.9	24
Ethnic identity		
White British	82.4	1032
Any minority ethnic identity	13.7	172
Missing	3.8	48

4.2 Qualitative data

Of the 2,052 survey respondents, almost two-fifths (810 individuals) provided a response to the free-text question inviting them to "recall a particular incident that made you feel *included* at Durham University or *increased your sense of belonging*". A similar number (801) provided a response to the other free-text question, inviting them to "recall a particular incident that made you feel included at Durham University or increased your sense of belonging". "Can you recall a particular incident that made you feel included at Durham University or increased your sense of belonging?" Responses to each of these questions, along with relevant focus group extracts, were analysed thematically, grouping responses that discussed similar topics.

5. Quantitative findings

5.1 Overall sense of belonging at Durham University

Three attitudinal items were used to measure students' sense of belonging at Durham University as a whole: (a) I never doubted that I would be accepted into Durham University, (b) I feel like I belong at Durham University, and (c) I sometimes feel that Durham University isn't really for people like me. *Figure 1* shows the Likert scale data for these three questions, with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The item marked # is reverse coded, so that a higher value always represents a more positive response. The respondents are grouped into seven categories. International students are represented by the dotted white bars at the top of each graph. Home students are classified by level of privilege and region of origin. The three solid (green, yellow and blue) bars represent less-privileged students from the Northeast, other areas of Northern England, and all other UK regions respectively. The three striped bars above represent more-privileged students from each of those same regions respectively.

Across all three items, the international students consistently reported more positive experiences than any of the groups of home students. Among home students, those from more privileged backgrounds (striped bars) reported consistently more positive experiences then less privileged students (solid bars). Moreover, within each group (more/less privileged), there was a clear gradient by home region. Students from Northeast England (green bars) had the lowest scores (worst experience), followed by those from other areas of Northern England (yellow bars), with students from all other UK regions (blue bars) reporting more positive experiences.

Principal components analysis (PCA) was performed to generate a single variable to capture the experience of belonging at Durham University as a whole. Only one component achieved an Eigenvalue of >1, accounting for 60.3% of the variance observed (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.773), which was then used in multivariate linear regression models. *Figure 2* shows the relative effect sizes (point estimates) with 95% confidence intervals for each sociodemographic variable (for home students only). Level of study was also controlled for but is not shown in the figure.

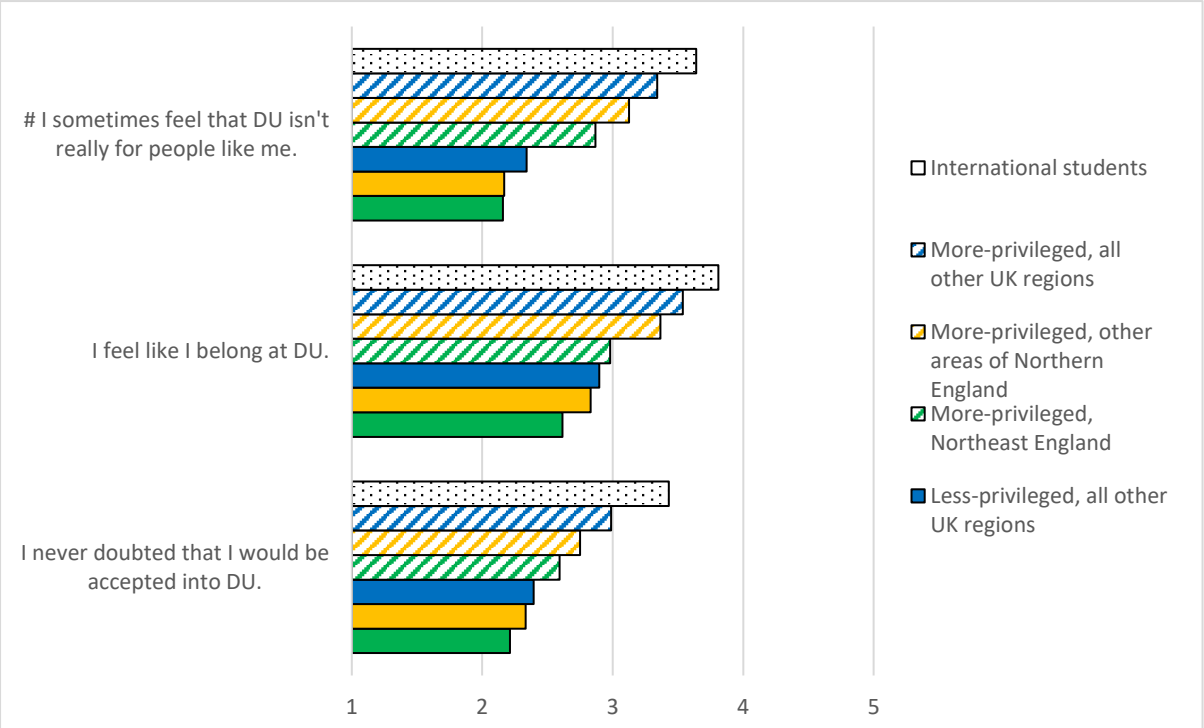
A brief explanation of the graph: For each sociodemographic variable, we identified a reference value (the category with the largest number of respondents), with which the other values are compared. (E.g., for gender, the majority of respondents identified as female, so this is the reference category; the responses of other genders – in this case, male and non-binary/other – are compared with those of females.) The dots represent point estimates: values below zero indicate more negative experiences and values above zero indicate more positive experiences, compared with the reference category (set at zero). The further away the point estimates from zero, the bigger the effect size (i.e. the stronger the association with the outcome variable). The error bars attached to each dot represent 95% confidence intervals. Where an error bar crosses zero, this indicates that there is no statistically significant difference from the reference category. But when the error bar

does *not* cross zero, this indicates that there a statistically significant difference from the reference category. The further the end of the error bar from zero, the more statistically significant the effect, i.e., the more confidence we can have in the result.

The interpretation of *Figure 2* is therefore as follows. Controlling for all other variables, students from less-privileged backgrounds, those coming from the northeast of England and from other regions of northern England, those identifying as LGBTQ+, and those with a disability, reported significantly poorer experiences of belonging at Durham University overall (on the aggregate variable) that the reference groups (respectively, more-privileged students, those from southern England, non-LGBTQ+, and those without a disability). On the other side of the graph, we can see that male students, and students with a religious faith, reported significantly *better* experiences of belonging at Durham University overall than their reference groups (i.e. females and students without a religious faith, respectively). The following groups had overall belonging scores that were not statistically different from reference groups: students from all over UK regions (English Midlands, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland); students with non-binary or "other" gender identity; mature students; and students from minority ethnic backgrounds (as a whole). We cannot necessarily interpret to mean there is *no* difference for these groups – simply that we cannot be confident, based on our sample, that any differences observed apply to the wider population of Durham students. In some cases (for example, students with non-binary gender identity) this may be because of the relatively low numbers of students in that category, which makes it harder to make definitive inferences (indicated by the wider confidence intervals).

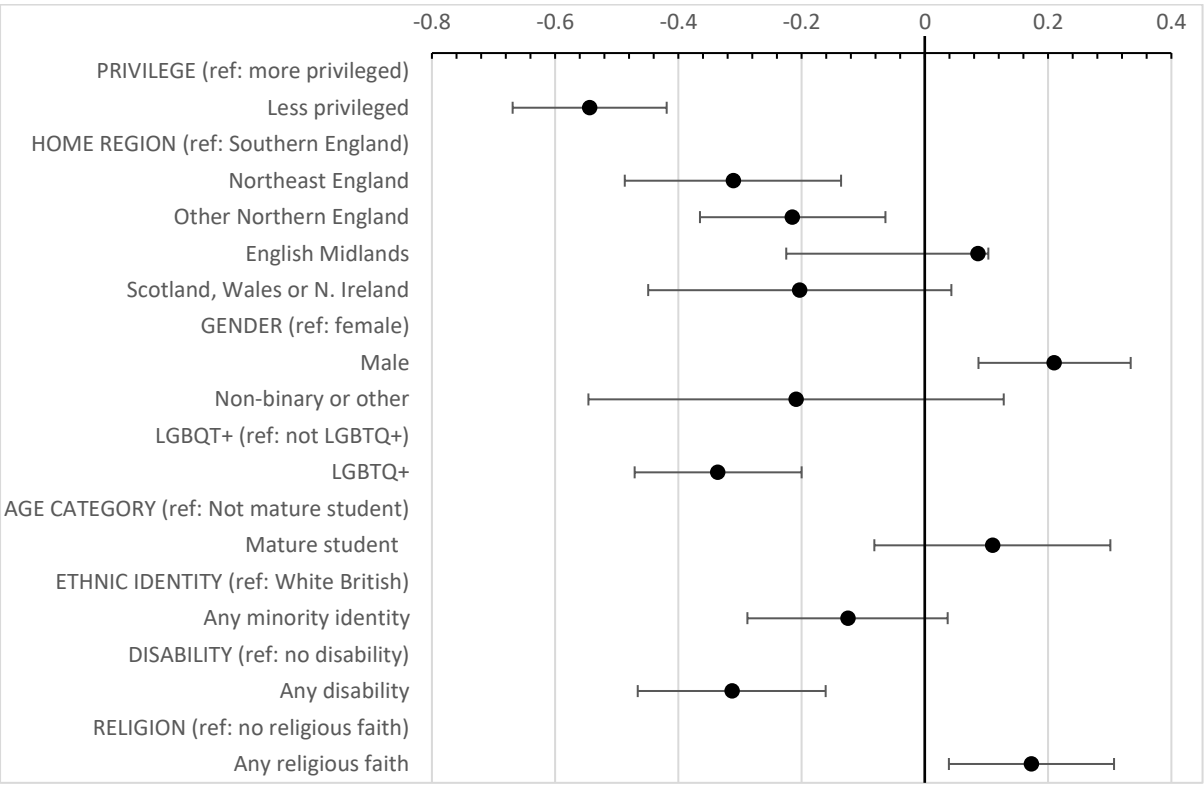
Figure 2 also shows the relative effect sizes of the different variables (how important they are in explaining differences in feelings of belonging at Durham University as a whole). By far the biggest effect size is social class privilege, with less-privileged students much more likely than more-privileged students to report feeling that they don't belong at Durham University (controlling for all other variables). The distance of confidence interval from the zero line also indicates a high level of statistical significance (i.e., we can be very confident in this result). Coming from Northeast England and disability had the next biggest effect sizes, followed by coming from other areas of northern England, gender and religious faith.

Figure 1: Mean Likert scale scores for overall belonging questions



Note: The item marked # has been reverse coded, so higher number indicates a more positive response.

Figure 2: Linear regression analysis of the aggregate overall belonging variable

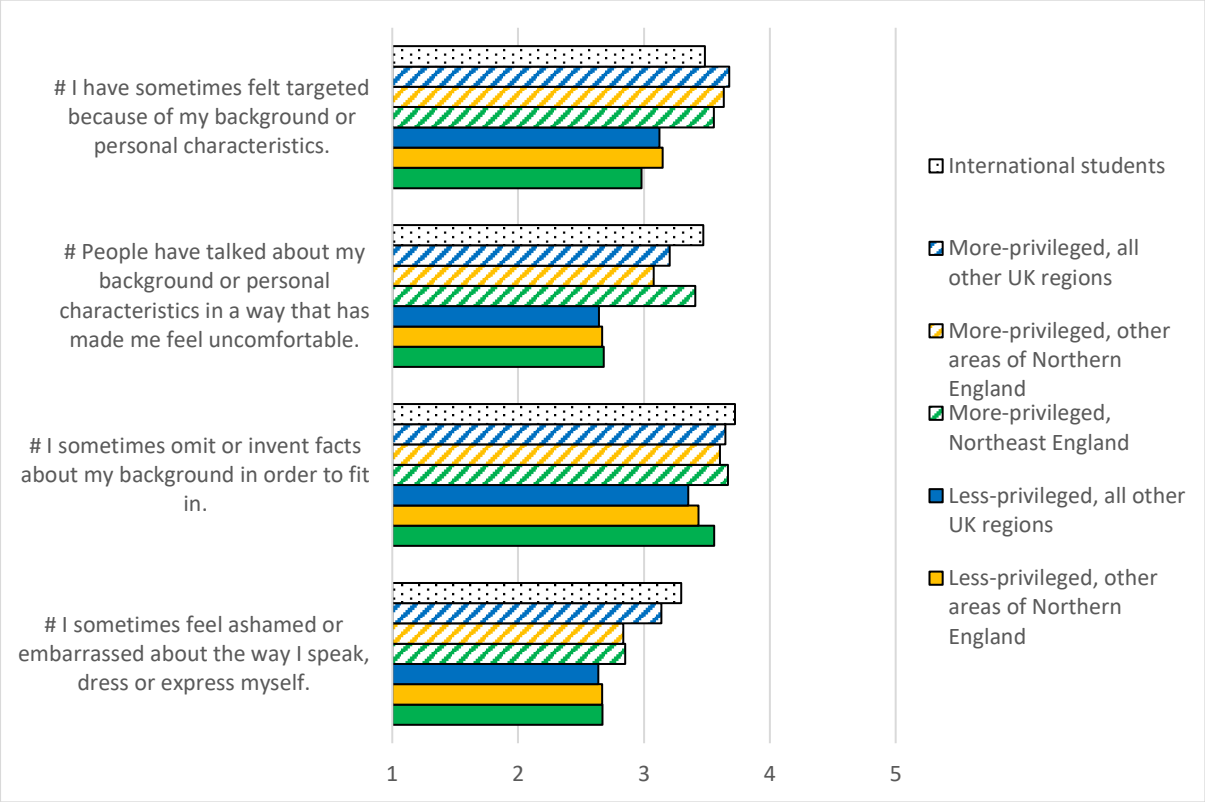


5.2 Relationships with peers (social inclusion)

The survey included four items used to measure students' sense of social inclusion and relationships with peers: (a) I sometimes feel ashamed or embarrassed about the way I speak, dress or express myself; (b) I sometimes omit or invent facts about my background in order to fit in; (c) People have talked about my background or personal characteristics in a way that has made me feel uncomfortable; and (d) I have sometimes felt targeted because of my background or personal characteristics. All were reverse coded, with higher values representing a more positive response. Likert scale data for these four items are shown in *Figure* 3, using the same categories as previously. Across all but one item ("I sometimes omit or invent facts…"), students from less-privileged backgrounds (solid bars) had lower average scores than those from more-privileged backgrounds (striped bars). The pattern by UK region was less clear, after accounting for social class differences.

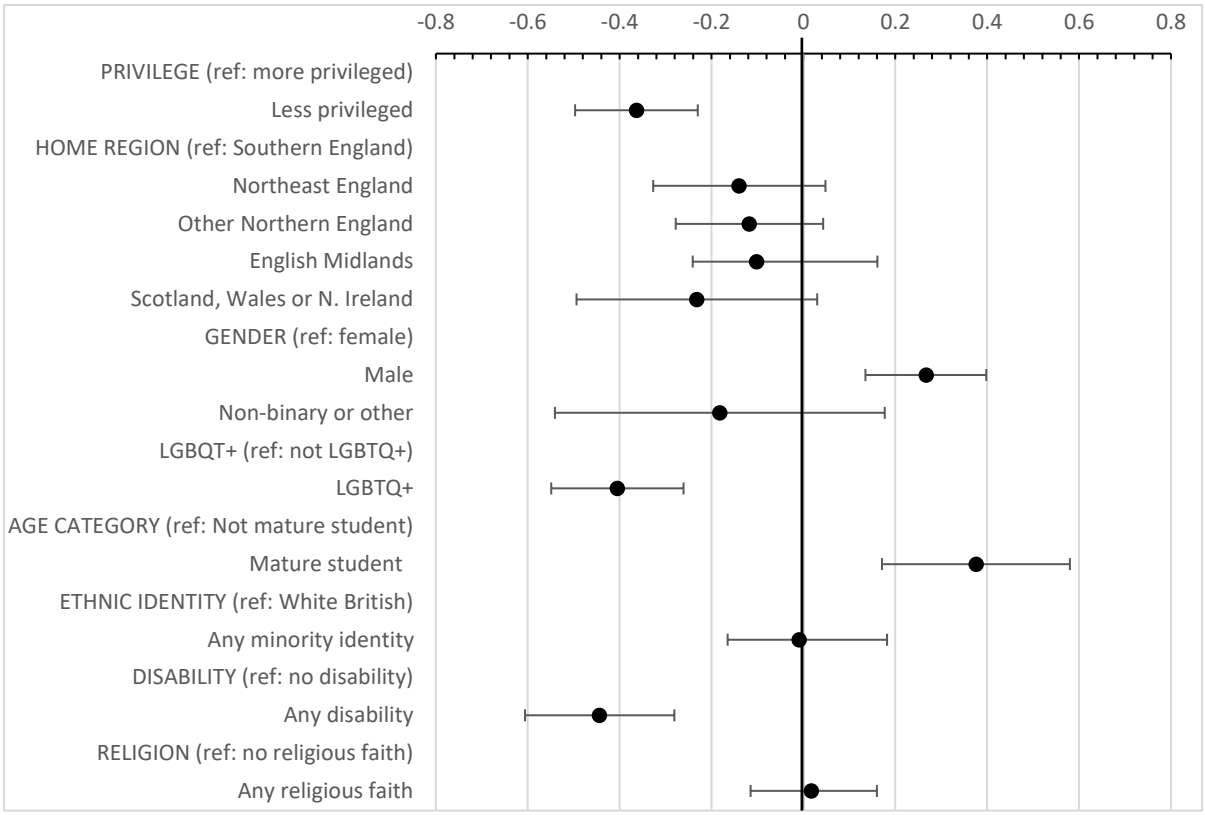
Again, a single variable to capture relationships with peers was derived using PCA. One component achieved an Eigenvalue of >1, accounting for 56.7% of the variance observed (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.742), which was used in multivariate linear regression models (*Figure 4*). This analysis confirms that socioeconomic privilege is a strong independent predictor of "fitting in" socially with peers, with a substantial effect size. Other characteristics associated with lower scores in this domain are (in order of effect size): having a disability, identifying as LGBTQ+, not being a mature student, and female gender. By contrast, neither UK home region, religious faith or ethnic/racial identity were associated with social inclusion, when other variables are controlled for.

Figure 3: Mean Likert scale scores for social inclusion questions



Note: items marked # are reverse coded, so that higher numbers indicate a more positive response.

Figure 4: Linear regression analysis of the aggregate social inclusion variable



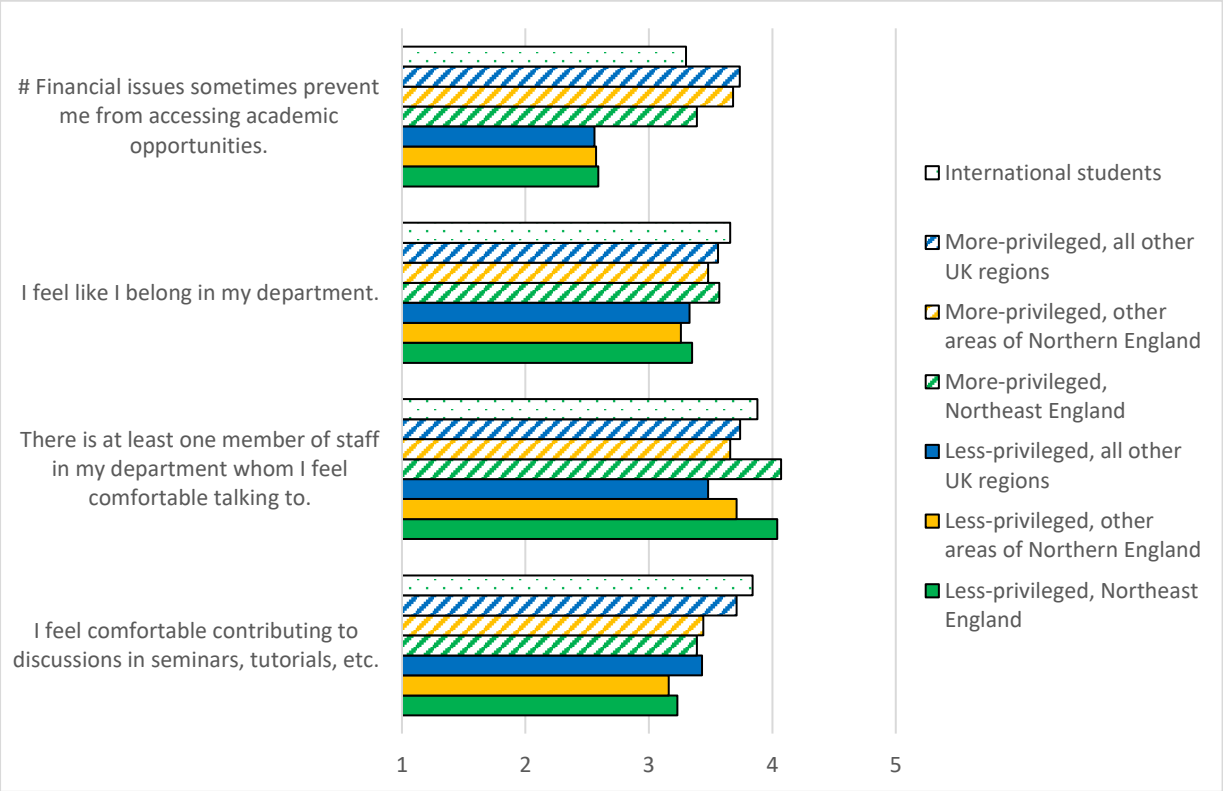
5.3 Experiences in learning and teaching contexts (academic inclusion)

The survey included four items used to measure students' sense of inclusion in learning and teaching contexts: (a) I feel comfortable contributing to discussions in seminars, tutorials, etc.; (b) There is at least one member of staff in my department whom I feel comfortable talking to; (c) I feel like I belong in my department; and (d) Financial issues sometimes prevent me from accessing academic opportunities (this latter reverse coded). As indicated in *Figure 5*, students from less-privileged backgrounds (solid bars) were much more likely than their more-privileged counterparts (striped bars) to report feeling excluded from academic opportunities because of financial issues. They were also somewhat less likely to feel comfortable contributing to discussions in seminars, tutorials, etc. and to feel like they "belonged" in their academic department. Overall, students from northern England (yellow bars), and particularly those from the Northeast (green bars), were less likely to feel comfortable contributing to seminar discussions than those from other UK regions (blue bars). By contrast, students from the Northeast were the most likely to say that there was a member staff in their department they felt comfortable talking to.

Again, PCA was used to derive a single measure of academic inclusion (one component achieved an Eigenvalue of >1, accounting for 60.0% of the variance observed; Cronbach's Alpha = 0.664), but the financial exclusion variable was not included as it lowered the model fit. Instead a separate PCA variable for financial exclusion was derived (see section 5.7). The results of multivariate regression analysis for home students (*Figure 6*) indicate that somewhat lower levels of academic inclusion were associated with: coming from a less-privileged social class background, coming from northern England (although not specifically the Northeast), being female, having a disability, and not having a religious faith. However, the effect sizes and level of statistical significance for these variables was generally small, in comparison with those for overall belonging and social inclusion. There was no

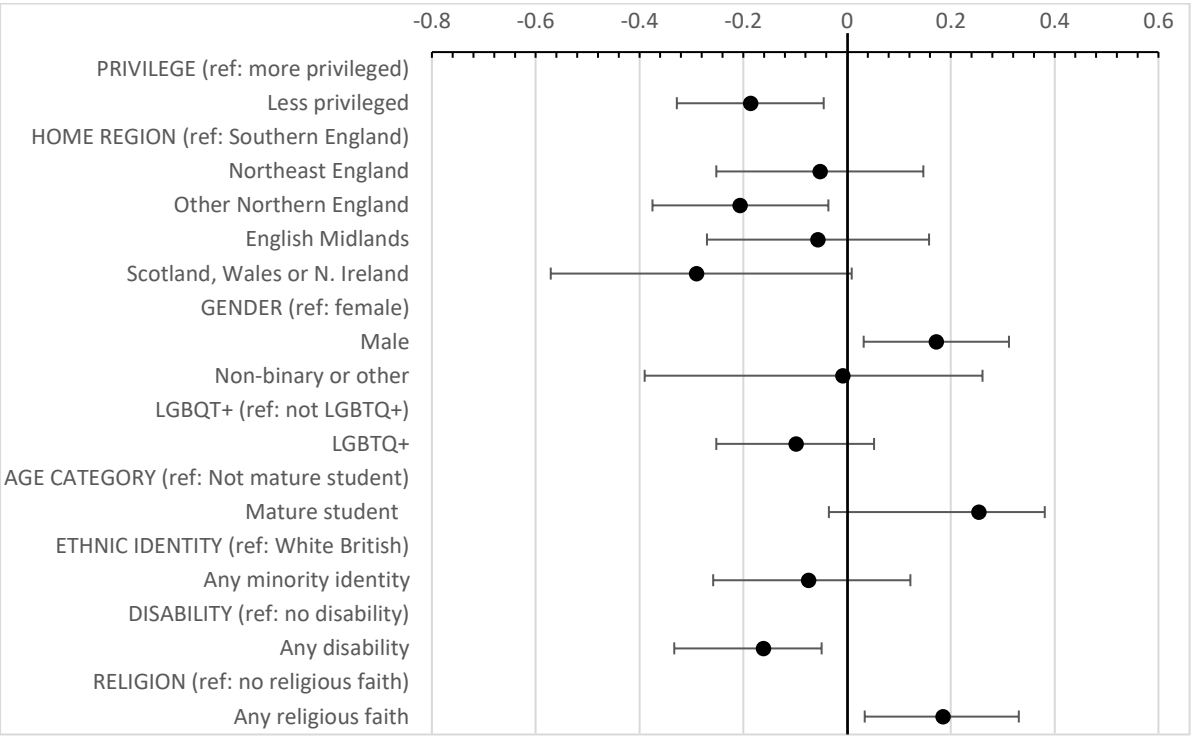
significant association between academic inclusion and either LGBTQ+ identification, racial/ethnic identity, or mature student status, when other variables were controlled for.

Figure 5: Mean Likert scale scores for academic inclusion questions



Note: The item marked # is reverse coded, such that a higher number indicates a more positive response

Figure 6: Linear regression analysis of the aggregate academic inclusion variable

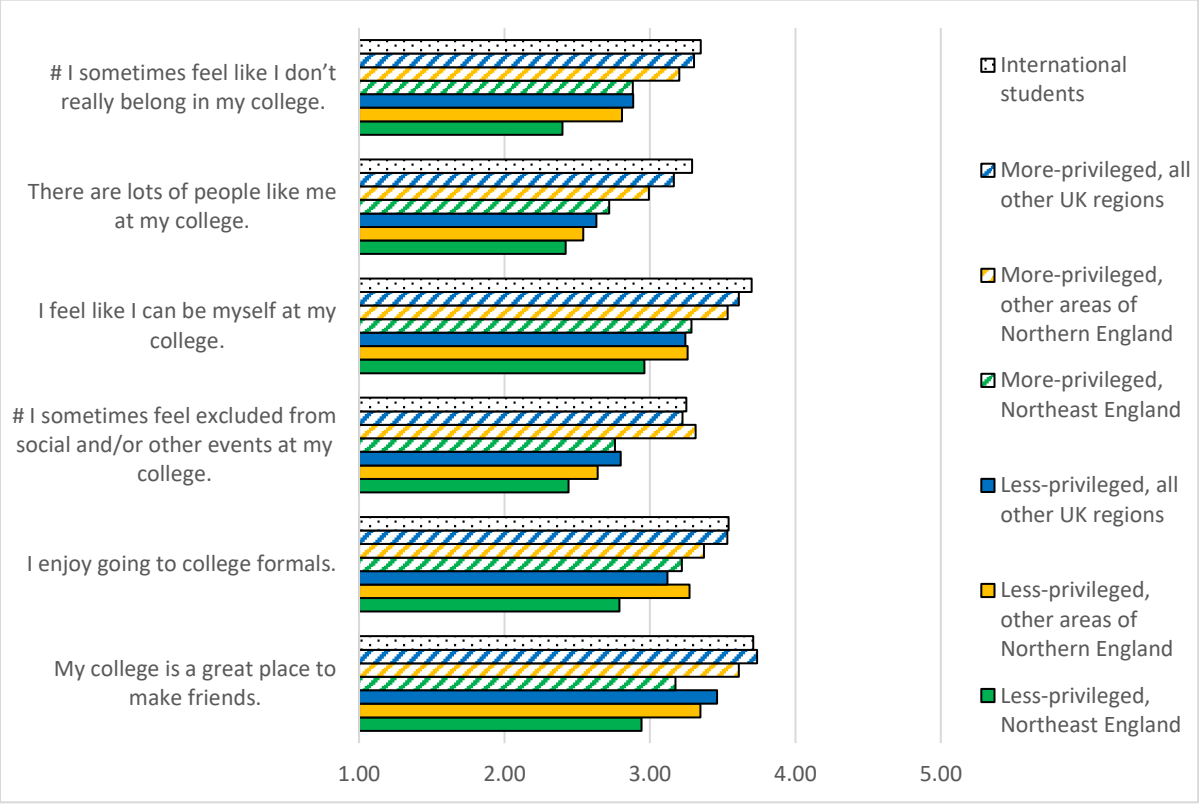


5.4 Experiences of college social life and activities (college inclusion)

The survey included six items used to measure students' sense of belonging and inclusion within their colleges: *Figure 7*. Again, international students scored relatively highly compared with UK students. Within the UK student group, both home region and level of privilege exerted sizeable influences on Likert scale scores. Students from more privileged backgrounds (striped bars) reported more positive experiences than those from less privileged backgrounds (solid bars). And those from the Northeast (green bars) reported much poorer experiences than those from other UK regions. The combined effect of these two factors meant that less-privileged students from the Northeast were doubly disadvantaged, scoring up to a whole point lower than more-privileged students from other areas of the UK on some items.

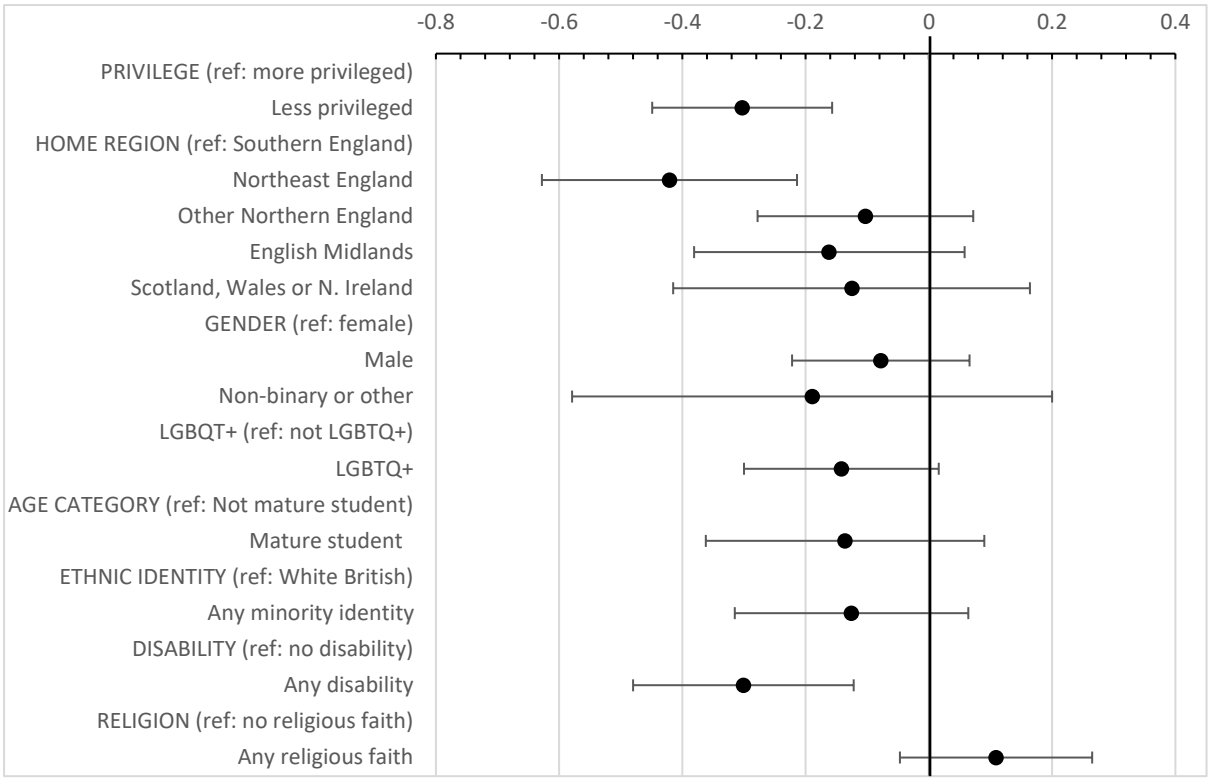
Using PCA, a single measure of college inclusion was derived (one component achieved an Eigenvalue of >1, accounting for 61.5% of the variance observed; Chronbach's Alpha = 0.873). Multivariate regression analysis of this variable (*Figure* 8) showed very clearly that (for UK students), both home region and social class exerted very strong effects on college inclusion. Controlling for other factors, being from a less-privileged background and coming from Northeast England were strongly and independently associated with lower reported college inclusion, and with relatively large effect sizes (especially for region). Disability was the only other variable associated with lower overall college inclusion. None of the other sociodemographic variables were associated with college inclusion to a level that reached statistical significance, when other factors were controlled for.

Figure 7 Mean Likert scale scores for college inclusion questions



Note: Item(s) marked # are reverse coded, such that a higher number indicates a more positive response

Figure 8: Linear regression analysis of the aggregate college inclusion variable



5.5 Interactions with college staff

Three further survey questions related to students' experiences of their interactions with college staff, and how well supported they felt in that context: *Figure* 9. Among home students, there were only very small differences in responses on the basis of social class background or home region, although students from the Northeast were slightly less likely than those from other UK regions to report that their college had made an effort to make them feel they belonged. However, international students were significantly more likely than any of the home student groups to report positive experiences. Multivariate regression of the PCA-derived variable for this domain (accounting for 75% of the variance, Cronbach's Alpha = 0.834) showed no statistically significant associations with any of the sociodemographic variables for home students (*Figure 10*).

Figure 9: Mean Likert scale scores for college staff questions

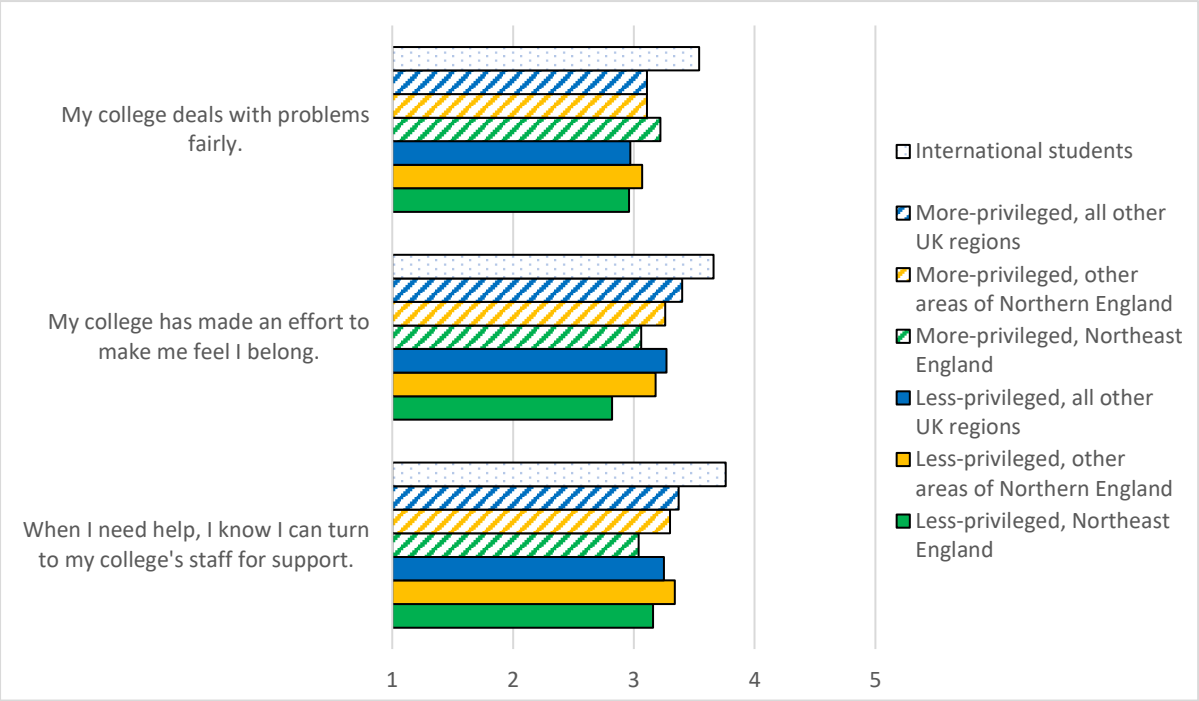
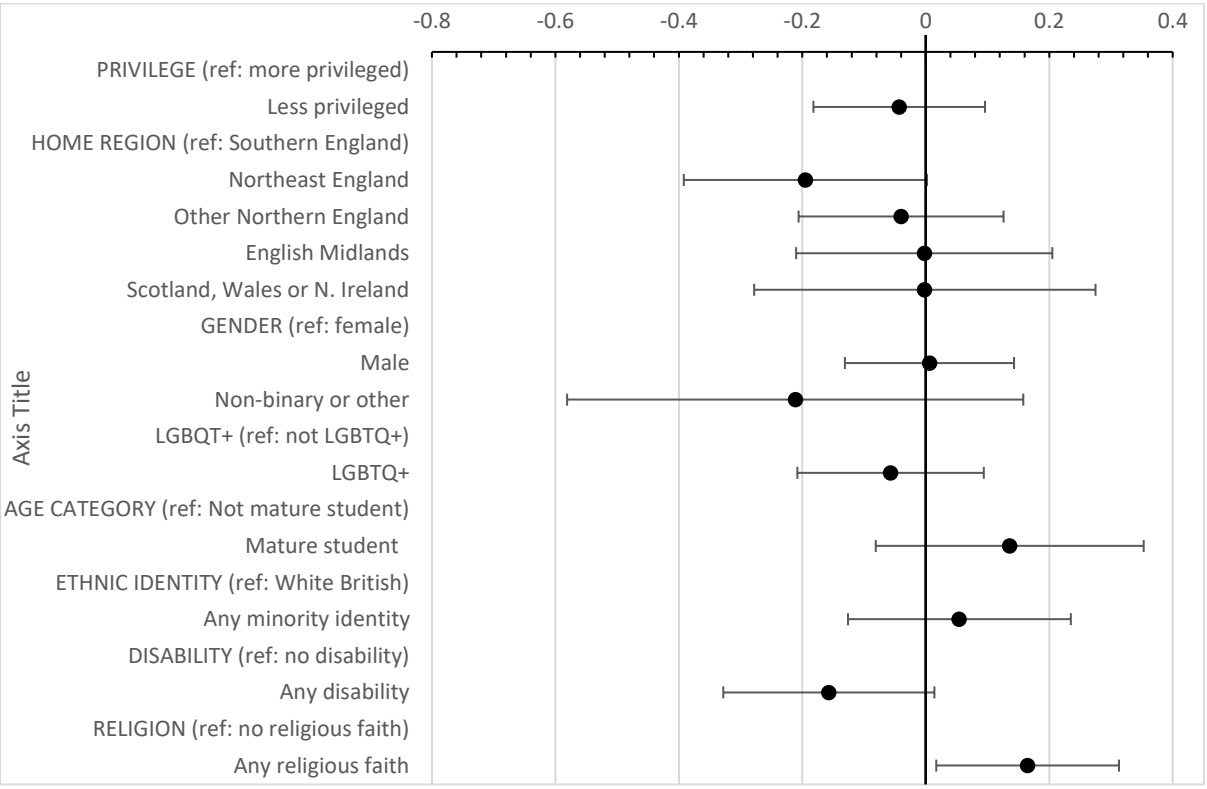


Figure 10: Linear regression analysis of the aggregate variable for interactions with college staff

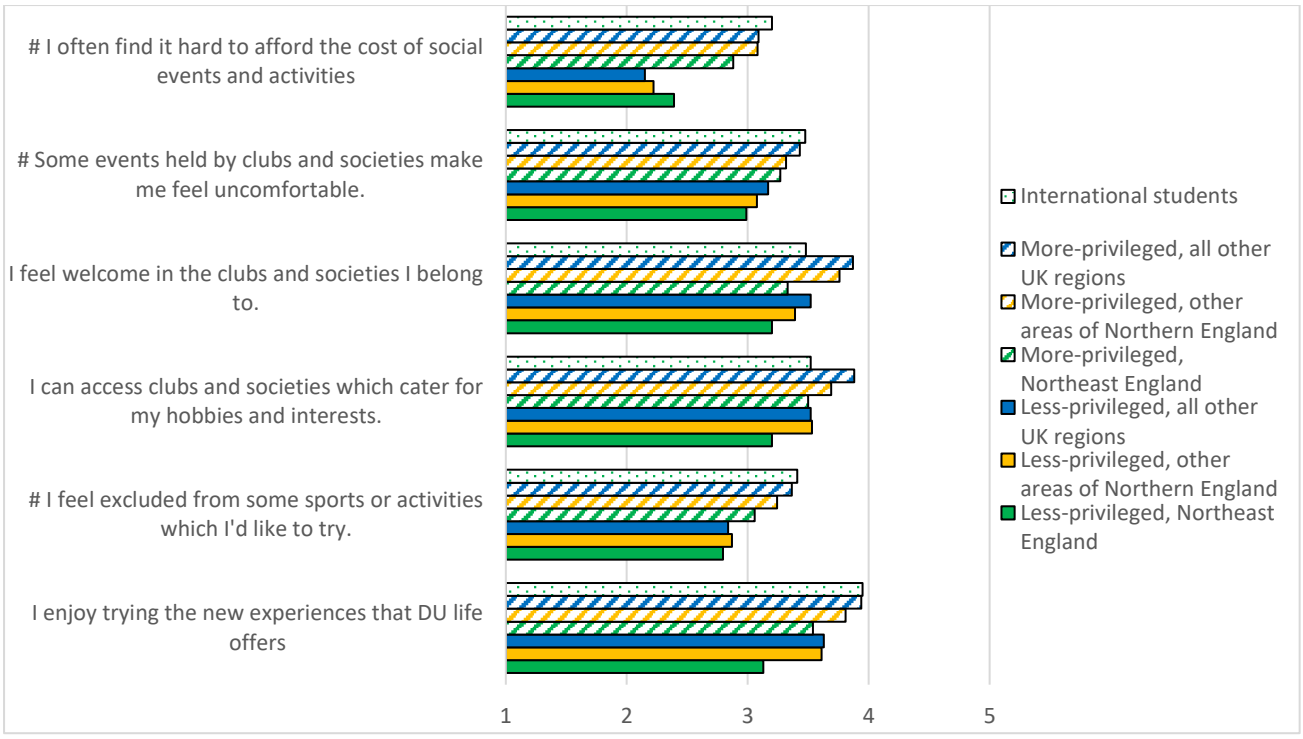


5.6 Experiences in student clubs and societies

Along with colleges, participating in clubs and societies forms an important part of the Wider Student Experience (WSE) beyond academic work. Five survey questions related to this area: *Figure 11*. Overall, UK students from more privileged social class backgrounds (striped bars) reported more positive experiences than those from less privileged backgrounds (solid bars), with a particularly large effect size for the question on financial exclusion. Moreover, across most of the items (all except financial exclusion), students from Northeast England (green bars) had lower scores, on average, than those from other UK regions, again with some large effect sizes. The picture was a little more mixed for international students, but their scores were broadly in line with the more-privileged home students.

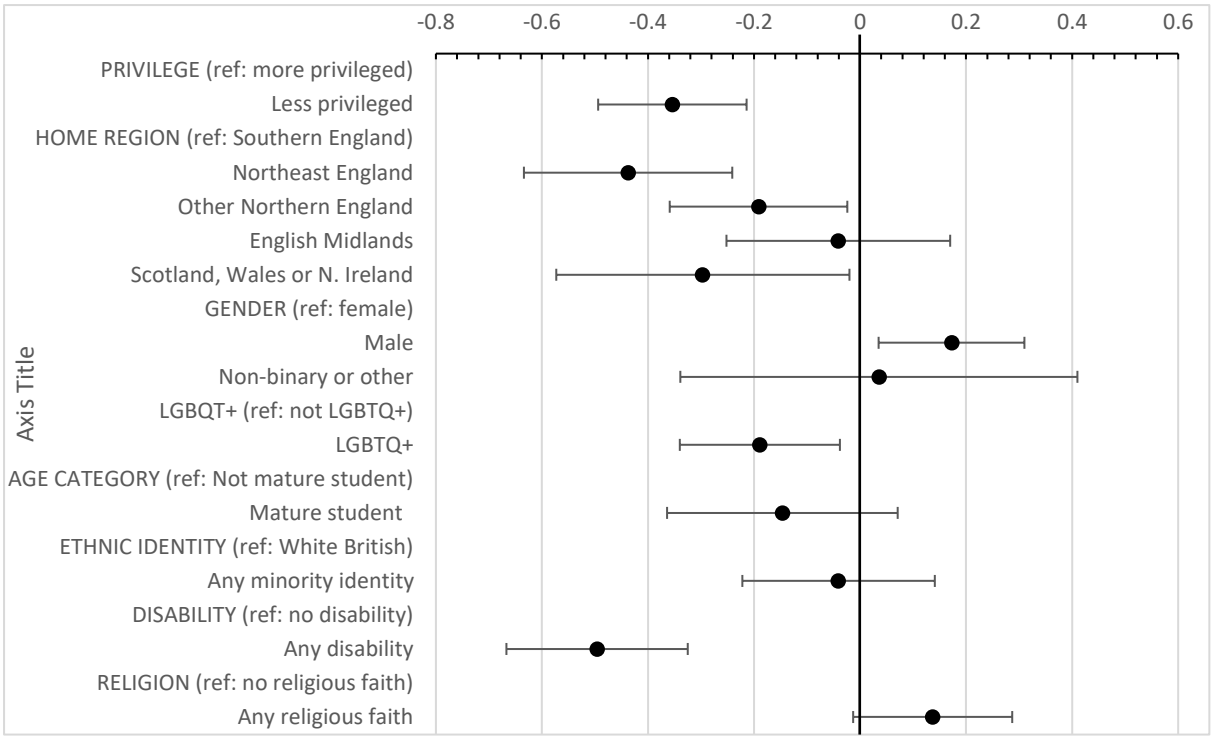
Again, PCA was used to derive a single measure of inclusion in clubs and societies (one component achieved an Eigenvalue of >1, accounting for 80.7% of the variance observed; Cronbach's Alpha = 0.729). As with the academic inclusion PCA, the financial variable was excluded because of poor model fit (see section 5.7 for analysis of financial exclusion specifically). Multivariate linear regression analysis (*Figure 12*) showed that the three strongest predictors of low levels of inclusion in clubs and societies using this aggregate variable were (in order of effect size): having a disability, coming from the Northeast of England, and coming from a less-privileged background. Being from other areas of northern England or other UK nations, being female, and identifying as LGBTQ+ were also associated with lower scores in this domain, but with smaller effect sizes and lower levels of statistical significance. There was no statistically significant association between inclusion in clubs and societies and either mature student status, religious faith, or racial/ethnic identity.

Figure 11: Mean Likert scale scores for questions on inclusion in student clubs and societies



Note: items marked # are reverse coded, such that a higher number always indicates a more positive response

Figure 12: Linear regression analysis of the aggregate variable on inclusion in student clubs/societies

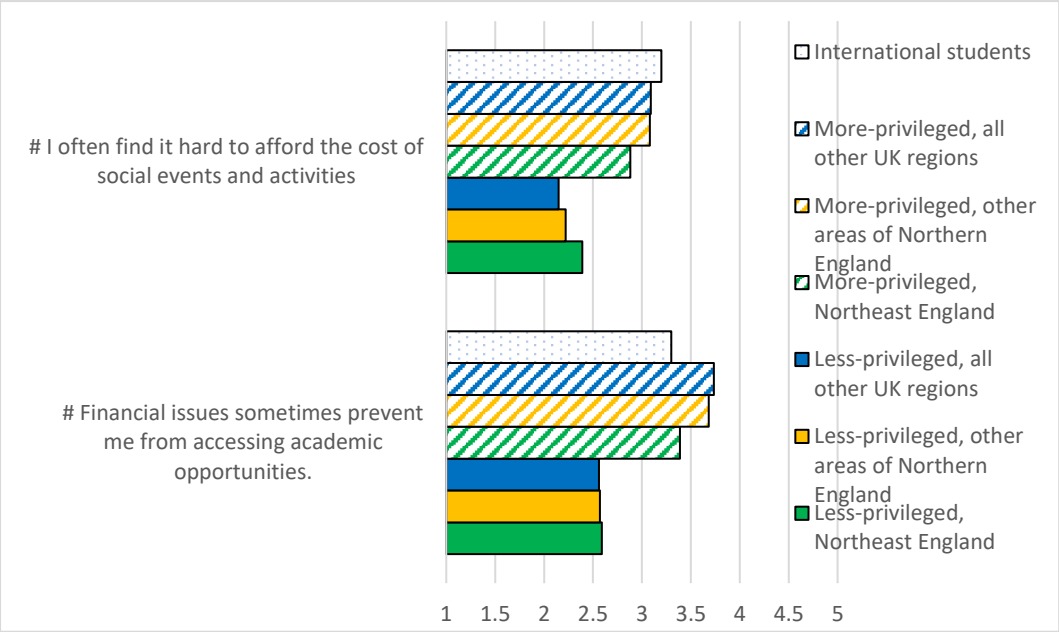


5.7 Financial exclusion

Two survey items related directly to financial exclusion at Durham University: (a) Financial issues sometimes prevent me from accessing academic opportunities, and (b) I often find it hard to afford the cost of organised social events. As noted above, these items were excluded from the PCA-derived variables on inclusion in academic settings and in student clubs/societies respectively; instead, they are analysed separately here. *Figure 13* recaps the Likert scores shown as part of previous figures. Unsurprisingly, students from less-privileged backgrounds are much more likely than more-privileged students to experience financial exclusion in relation both to academic opportunities and social participation. The experience of international students appears broadly in line with that of more-privileged UK students.

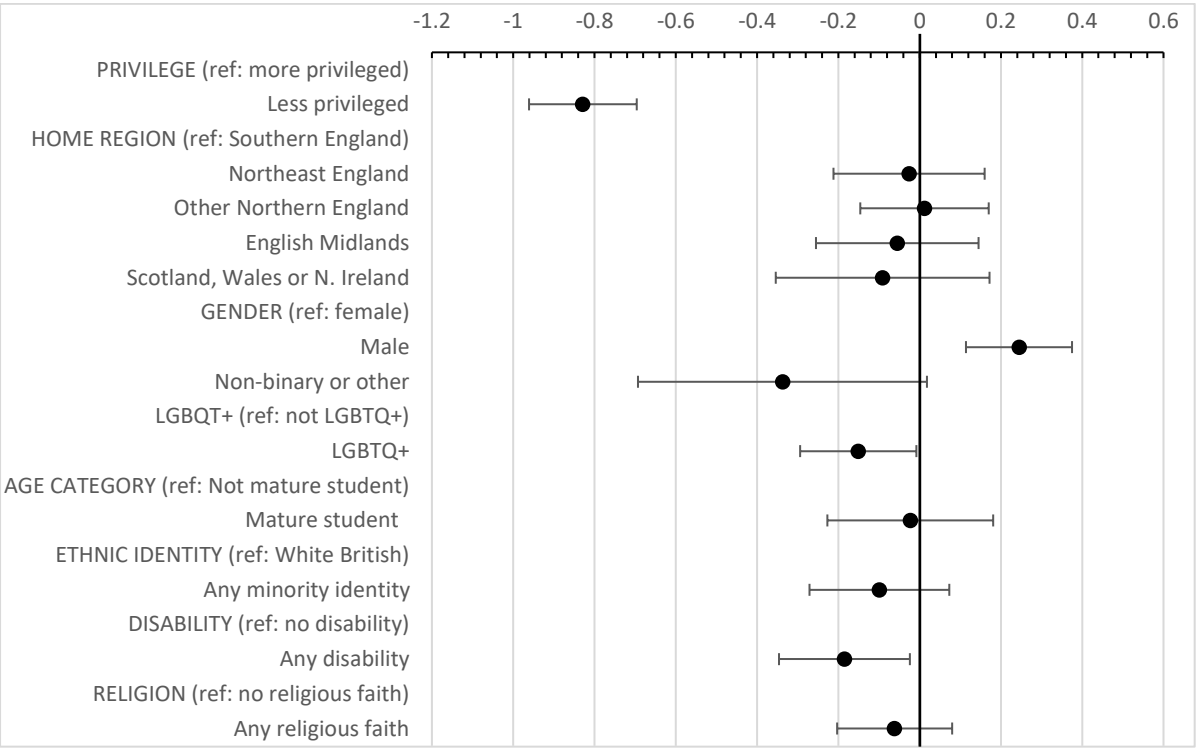
PCA was used to produce a single variable for experiences of financial exclusion (one component achieved an Eigenvalue of >1, accounting for 81% of the variance observed; Cronbach's Alpha = 0.762). Not surprisingly, in multivariate regression analysis, socioeconomic privilege was by far the strongest predictor of financial exclusion overall (*Figure 14*). Much smaller effect sizes were observed for gender, disability and LGBTQ+ identification.

Figure 13: Mean Likert scale scores for questions on financial inclusion



Note: items marked # are reverse coded, such that a higher number always indicates a more positive response

Figure 14: Linear regression analysis for the aggregate financial inclusion variable



5.8 Mental wellbeing

The questionnaire included a 7-item measure of mental wellbeing, using the Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) scale[2]. The seven statements are all positively worded ("I've been feeling optimistic about the future", "I've been feeling useful", "I've been feeling relaxed", "I've been dealing with problems well", "I've been thinking clearly", "I've been feeling close to other people", and "I've been able to make up my own mind about things"), with five response categories (none of the time, rarely, some of the time, often all of the time, each scored 1-5 respectively). Scores are first summed, giving totals scores ranging from 7 to 35, with higher scores indicating better mental wellbeing.

Mean SWEMWBS scores by student group are shown in *Figure 15*. Overall, international students had the highest scores, indicating better mental wellbeing. However, this finding should be interpreted with caution, as there may be cross-cultural variation in the interpretation of questions. Among the home student sample, more-privileged students from all regions of the UK except Northeast England (blue and yellow striped bars) had higher scores than any of the other UK groups. The strong effect of socioeconomic privilege was confirmed by multivariate linear regression modelling (*Figure 16*), where having a disability and identifying as LGBTQ+ were also strongly associated with having a lower SWEMWBS score.

These findings should be interpreted with caution. While it is concerning that some groups of students that disproportionately experience exclusion at Durham University (less-privileged, those with a disability and LGBTQ+ students) also appear to have lower average mental wellbeing scores than their peers, we cannot assume a causal relationship. Nationally, there is a strong positive association between socioeconomic status and mental wellbeing. Nonetheless, it would be useful to delve deeper into how experiences of exclusion might play into mental wellbeing among Durham University students.

[2] Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) © NHS Health Scotland, University of Warwick and University of Edinburgh, 2008, all rights reserved.

Figure 15: Mean SWEMWBS scores by student group

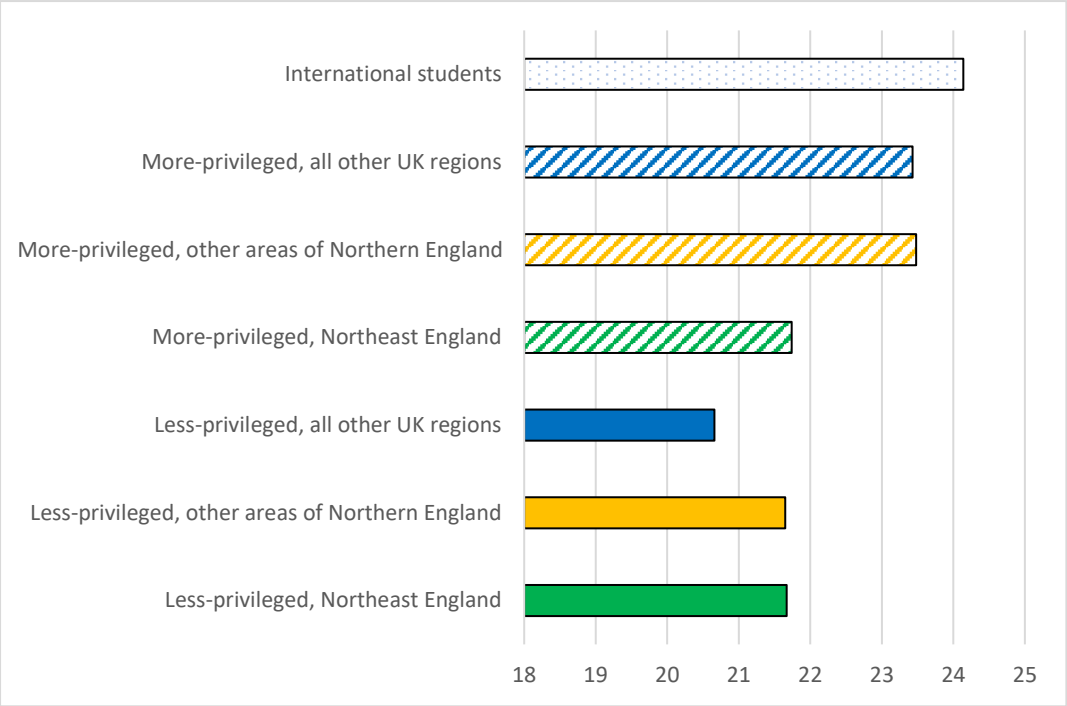
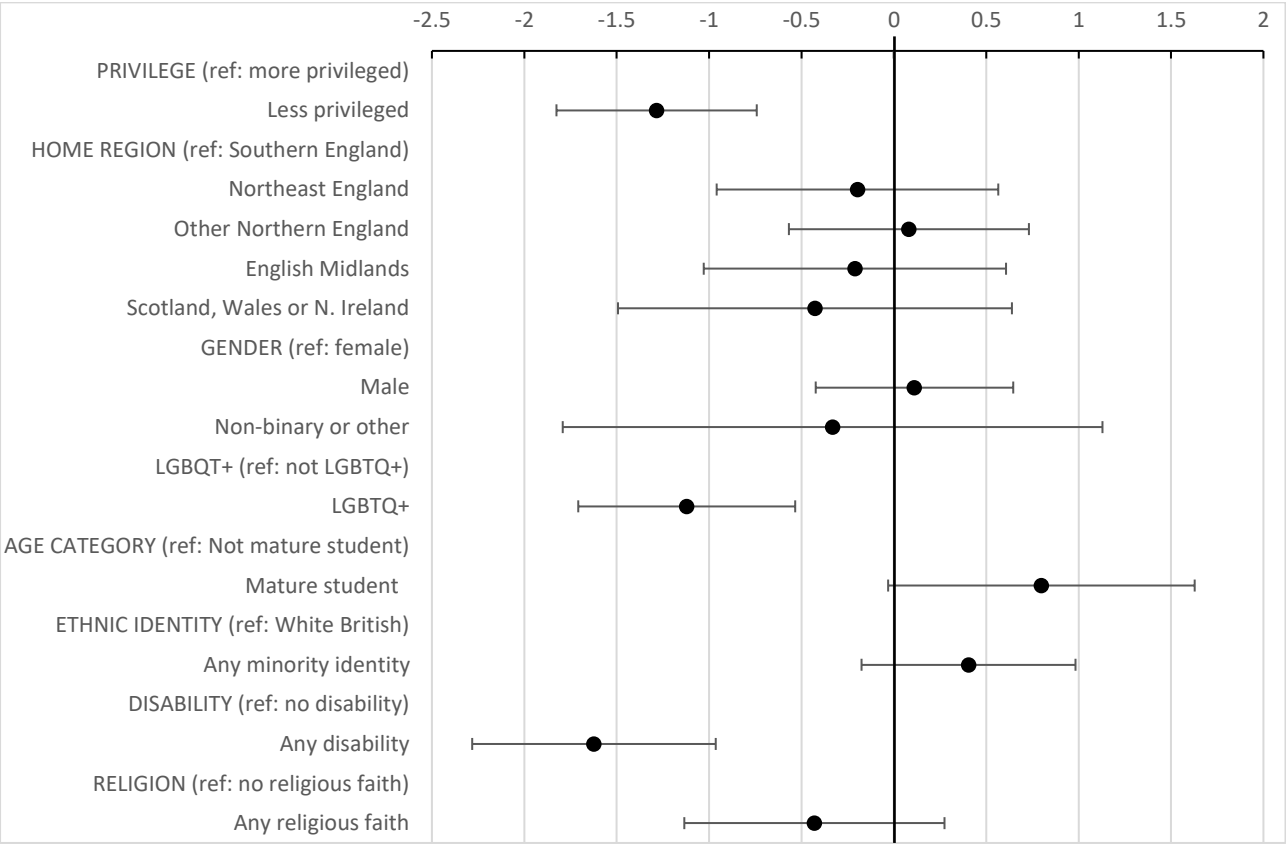


Figure 16: Linear regression effect sizes of independent variables on mental wellbeing



5.9 Summary of quantitative findings

The quantitative survey data show clear differences in students' experiences of belonging at Durham University, that extend across almost all areas of university life. Overall, international students had higher scores (more positive responses) than UK students, but there were very substantial differences in the experiences of UK students based on socioeconomic privilege and region of origin, as well as several protected characteristics.

On the Likert scale questions, home students from less-privileged backgrounds reported significantly worse experiences than more-privileged students across every domain except for interactions with college staff. Among other measures, for example, less-privileged UK students were significantly more likely than more-privileged UK students or international students to feel ashamed about the way they speak, dress and express themselves, and to have felt targeted because of their backgrounds or personal characteristics. They were less likely than the other groups to feel comfortable contributing to seminar discussions and participating in other academic activities. Within colleges, they were more likely to feel excluded from social events such as formal dinners and college balls, and less likely to feel that they could "be themselves". They were also less likely to be able to access relevant clubs and societies, and to feel welcome in those spaces. These patterns also held true after controlling for other sociodemographic variables using multivariate linear regression models. On the PCA-derived aggregate measures, home students from less-privileged class backgrounds reported significantly worse experiences than more-privileged students across every domain except for interactions with college staff.

Students from the North of England, and especially the Northeast, also tended to fare worse than those from other UK regions. The Likert scale data show that students from the Northeast (and, to a lesser extent, those from other areas of northern England) reported poorer experiences than those from elsewhere in the UK across three domains: overall belonging at Durham University, experiences in colleges, and experiences in student clubs and societies. The close interaction in survey sample between social class and region of origin, makes it difficult to fully separate these two effects. However, even after controlling for other variables in multivariate analyses, there is a strong residual effect of region in these three domains, and a weaker effect for experiences in academic settings. Being from a more privileged social class background is therefore not enough to counteract all the negative experiences faced by local students at Durham University. Beyond the effects of social class, students from the North-East (and, to a lesser extent, those from other regions of northern England) were significantly less likely than those from the South to feel that they belonged at Durham University as a whole, and to feel included in colleges and student clubs and societies, key elements of Durham University's "Wider Student Experience."

Taken together, these findings suggest that socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and students from North-East England (and, to a lesser extent, those from other areas of northern England) face multiple forms of exclusion at Durham University. There is a particular irony, perhaps, to that fact that students from the local area were the most likely to report feeling that "Durham University isn't really for people like me".

These findings come in addition to what emerges as a salutary reminder of the ongoing challenges faced by students with various protected characteristics at Durham University. Across five of the seven domains (belonging at DU as a whole, social inclusion, Department inclusion, inclusion in clubs/societies, and financial inclusion), female students reported consistently and significantly lower levels of inclusion than their male counterparts[3]. Those with a disability reported lower

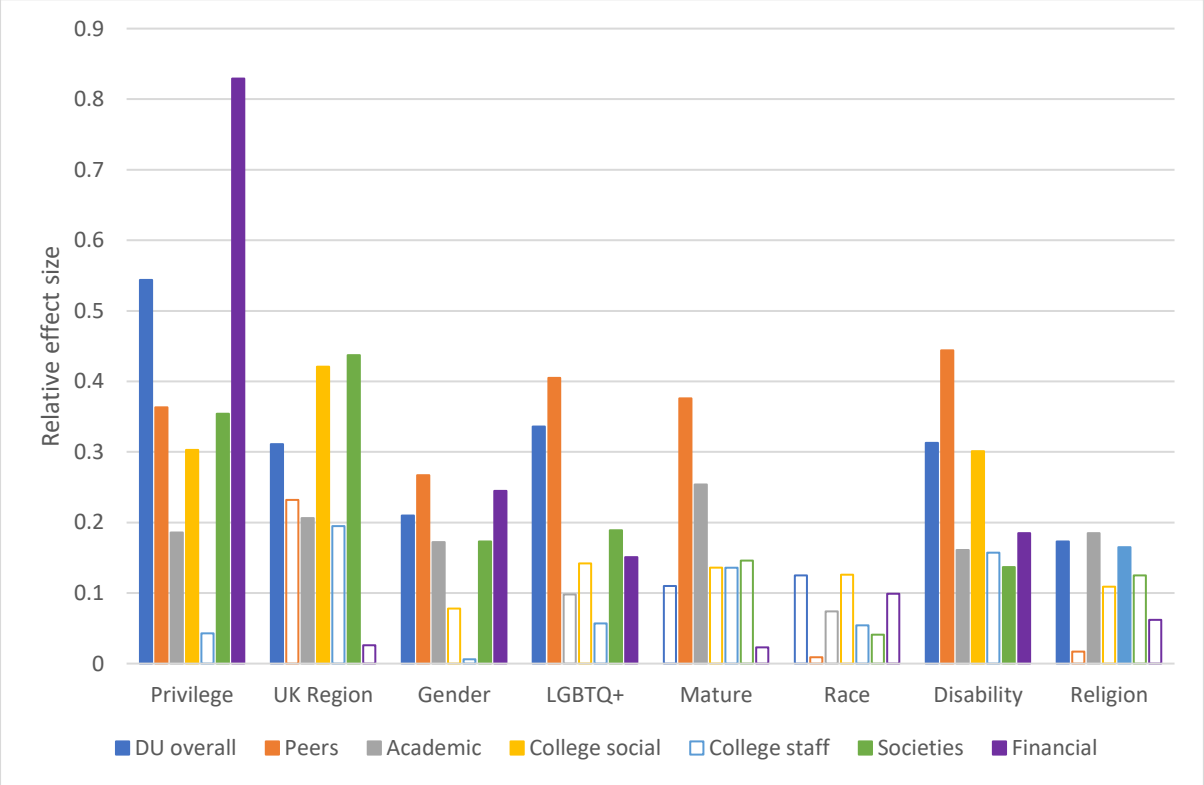
[3] There was no significant effect for non-binary students, possibly because of the small numbers in the sample.

inclusion than other students for all domains bar academic inclusion, while students identifying as LGBTQ+ reported lower scores in overall belonging and social inclusion. Interestingly, mature students reported generally more positive experiences than their younger counterparts across several domains (social inclusion, Department inclusion, and College support).

Analysis of the mental health (SWEMWBS) data follows a broadly similar pattern, with students from less-privileged backgrounds, those with a disability and those identifying as LGBTQ+ having lower scores than the student body as a whole. We cannot draw causal inferences from these cross-sectional data: it is not clear whether experiences of exclusion contribute to poor mental wellbeing, whether poor mental wellbeing contributes to or increases exclusion, or indeed whether another factor altogether is responsible for the association. However, the poor mental wellbeing of some groups of Durham University students is something that needs to be understood and addressed.

Figure 17 provides a visual summary of the quantitative findings, showing the effect sizes for each domain by each of the sociodemographic variables measured. The height of the bars corresponds to effect size, and solid bars represent statistically significant effects, while white bars indicate non-significant associations. Level of socioeconomic privilege clearly emerges as the most important predictor of belonging at Durham University, followed UK region and disability, and then by gender and LGBTQ+ identity.

Figure 17: Summary of effect size magnitudes for sociodemographic variables in each domain



Notes: Effect size magnitudes are derived from multivariate linear regression. Solid bars represent statistically significant differences, while white bars indicate non-significant associations. For non-binary variables in the analyses (UK region and gender), the effect sizes refer respectively to NE England compared with S England, and to male students compared with female.

6. Qualitative findings

Analysis of qualitative data from the survey free-text comments and focus groups sheds further light on how these experiences of exclusion play out across the various domains of university life.

6.1 Interactions with University staff

Most comments relating to experiences of interacting with University staff were very favourable. Within colleges, students really appreciated the fact that staff took time to get to know them personally; as one student put it, "*College staff knowing my name and taking time to talk to me*". These experiences cut across the various college roles and positions. Several commented enthusiastically on interactions with college principals and other senior staff, pointing to the difference this had made, especially when they first arrived. For example, one international student told us that she began to feel at home at the University when *"My principal invited me for a cup of tea just to get to know me and have a chat about my experience*," while another (UK student) said:

> *"On one of my first weeks in Durham, I was unsure about if I would fit in. But when walking from my room to the dining hall, [College Principal] stopped me in the corridor and addressed me by name and asked about how it was going. That he knew who I was and seemed to take a genuine interest in my term went a long way in making me feel like I fit in."*

Students also talked very positively about their interactions with other college staff, including catering staff and porters. For example, one recalled that, "*On the first day of arriving, the porter remembered my name and still asks how I am now*." Another reported "*becom[ing] close with one of the catering staff at my college, and we would chat when I was eating in the dining hall alone*." When it goes well, these relationships can be transformative, as this undergraduate student from a less-privileged background write, "*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.*"

Students were similarly enthusiastic in free-text comments about the efforts made by academic staff to help them feel valued and that they deserved to be at Durham University. For example, one student from a less-privileged background appreciated *"Talking to some of the lecturers who have made me feel like I deserve to be here",* while another talked about *"One of my lecturers [who] helped me to see that I earned my place here and that I deserve it regardless of the fact that I am working class and the first in my family to go to uni".* Some students also pointed to occasions when academic staff had actively encouraged their participation in teaching sessions, valuing the diverse views and experiences they brought:

> *"In a seminar, the lecturer made a point to include myself and another mature student to get our experience as it was significantly different to the other students in the room - we both really appreciated it and felt as though the rest of the class were actually really interested in us instead of us just being rejected".*

Encountering academic staff who shared aspects of students' own background could also make a big difference, as this excerpt illustrates: *"I spoke to a member of staff and he described the fact he was working class too, it was good for me to hear that as I then felt more accepted. It helped me situate my class within an academic structure that I'm not used to seeing/hearing about*."

While college and academic staff are the most frequently mentioned in free-text accounts, kindness and understanding from people they might interact with on a less regular basis could also make a big difference. One student, for example, recalled a time when a member of library staff helped her to find a particular book as a really turning point in her sense of being valued at the University.

However, in a small number of cases, students reported more problematic interactions with University staff. For example, one student recounted that, in a seminar context, *"Teachers have laughed at the way I speak when I've spoken up in class as I don't always sound very smart",* while another felt uncomfortable as a result of *"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."* A handful of others complained that they had been challenged by staff when trying to enter teaching or colleges spaces because the ways they spoke or dressed were "*not like typical Durham student,*" as one put it. One local mature student, for example, reported "*Repeatedly being asked to prove I was a student when going into Elvet Riverside when no-one else was stopped*", while another talked about *"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.*" Another told us, *"Three times upon entering college - once by a porter - I have been stopped to show ID because allegedly I do not look like a [name of college] student."*

Far more common, though, were complaints that some University staff were not challenging problematic behaviours from fellow students. By failing to call out such behaviours, they (and by extension, the University) were seen to be complicit in perpetuating some of discriminatory practices outlined in the section below.

6.2 Behaviour of fellow students

In contrast to the mostly positive comments about interactions with staff, the opposite was true about interactions with other students. A small number of these related to reported incidents of exclusionary or discriminatory behaviour based on protected characteristics, including race/ethnicity, gender, LGBTQ+ identities and disability. However, many dozens more concerned behaviour relating to social class (including attending state school) and regional accents (especially "Northern" or "local" accents).

These behaviours typically began in Freshers' week and continued throughout the student journey, progressively wearing people down and making feel out of place at Durham University. One student, for example, reported that, *"The first words spoken to me by my neighbour in College were to make fun of my accent"*. Being singled out disparaged for having a northern accent reportedly happened on such a regular basis as to become almost mundane, but gradually undermined students' sense of self-worth and belonging. As one (female) student put it, "*My Northern accent [is] ridiculed repeatedly. At first I could take it as a joke then it quickly became annoying and embarrassing*". Another described how "*People would constantly make fun of my accent and tell me to 'speak properly' and would make me feel stupid because of where I come from, […] like I wasn't really a person anymore".*

Several students remarked on the stereotyping assumptions made by other students on the basis of regional accents. For example, one said that *"At a formal dinner, students laughed at my North-east accent, they asked if I live in a pit village*," while another local student, with a family heritage of coal-mining, reported that "*Durham is full of students making fun of Durham locals calling them stupid and dirty for this profession."* A few even reported being told explicitly by their peers that they didn't belong in Durham University. For example, one said, *"I was told I shouldn't be at Durham because I am from Yorkshire*," while another talked of "*Being asked, 'how did you even get into Durham, they shouldn't let locals in!'"* Over time, this could lead to what another student described as "*feeling like an outcast in my own region*".

There were an equally large number of complaints about classist behaviour and comments from fellow students. One respondent, for example, talked about consistently "*being made fun of*" by

people who characterised "*working class people [as] being unintelligent, unworthy and irritating*". One of the principal ways in which social class difference was reportedly ascertained and enacted was through discussion of schools attended. For a great many respondents, the first few weeks of their lives in Durham were characterised by constantly being asked which school they went to, with disparaging remarks and exclusionary behaviour if it was not the "right" one. As one student put it, *"Freshers week was the worst. Everyone I met […] 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".* At times, students reported concealing aspects of their backgrounds to avoid drawing unwanted negative attention; for example, one student told us, "*I have been told to lie about my parents' jobs to avoid embarrassment*".

Students from less-privileged backgrounds often reported feeling isolated when (for example), *"People who know each other from big boarding schools from the South have formed a big exclusive group that is intimidating and unwelcoming. They make me feel judged and make me think there's something wrong with me."* Others talked about a sense of alienation when everyone around them seemed to be talking about gaps years, ski trips and other things they couldn't relate to, as this excerpt illustrates: *"A large proportion of the people around me talking about private school experiences and what they were doing with their summers – I had to wor*k*."*

In other cases, the exclusions were more direct and overt. For example, one student working-class reported being told by fellow students that *"People of 'my kind' do not deserve to go to Durham Uni*". Another talked about *"being in a seminar where a student stated that non-privately educated working class people should study at non-Russell-Group universities",* while a third said that her flat-mates had asked her "*to be the flat cleaner because […] I am used to doing 'those sorts of tasks'".* Students who had (or were assumed to have had) come to University through supported progression or "contextual offers" were often singled out for abuse. One said that *"I was told I should be embarrassed I got a place at Durham through a contextual offer as 'someone else deserved it more'",* while another reported *"I overheard my friend say that schemes like Sutton Trust, which I participated in, don't need to exist because everyone who does them are 'thick'".*

The free-text comments also revealed clear intersections between (assumptions around) social class and region, and particularly pernicious forms of exclusion were experienced by female students who were also either from the local area, or perceived as working class, or both. One local female student, for example, reported *"Being told countless times by a flatmate that I seem the 'most chavy' and continuously refers to Northerners as degenerates"*, while another wrote, *"I was a bet for someone to sleep with at a college party because 'Northern girls are easy'".*

Against this background, several students described the relief of finding "people like them". For example, one state-school-educated student described their sense of relief *"The first time I got to talk with someone who had also grown up in a place without privilege and who understood my discomfort at certain events at the start of term"*, while another described finally beginning to feel more at home at Durham University when *"Interacting with students like me, who are from Merseyside because there are very few."*

6.3 Experiences in learning and teaching environments

Relatively few free-text comments related to experiences in learning and teaching contexts. Among those that did, the biggest concern was participation in seminars and other class discussions, where some students reported being made to feel excluded – and sometimes humiliated – by their peers. In two cases, female students described being "*ignored*", "*talked over*" or "*shut down*" by male students in seminar discussions.

However, far more often, these behaviours apparently centred on social class and/or regional accents. One local student, for example, reported feeling upset after a lab where "a *group of posh people [were] mocking the way I pronounced a word*", while another described the painful experience of "*Someone sniggering when I made a comment in a tutorial*". Several respondents reported classmates making highly problematic assumptions about their academic abilities based on their accent and/or (perceived) social background. One, for example, said that *"Being from the Northeast, people judge your accent, it's laughabl*e." Other examples include: *"People have assumed that I am poor because I am from the North-East. Generally, people have just assumed that I am not as good as them, academically*," and even, *"I had a class where I was told that my accent was the same as the people who served their food*."

Unsurprisingly, some students stop participating in class discussions as result of these experiences. One undergraduate, for example, talked about "*Feeling unable to speak in seminars because of my accent*", while another avoided contributing to class discussions for fear that "*people may think that you don't know what you're talking about".* A third student reported being asked to repeat "Geordie" phrases, which "*made me feel like a circus monkey and since then I decided not to speak during seminars."*

Academic groupwork also attracted some comments, both positive and negative. When it goes well, groupwork can help individuals connect supportively with people from different social backgrounds, as this local student reports: "*Group work forced me to work with people who had similar interests to me this was a pivotal moment in which I made friends on my course which then lead to me branching out to other people too.*" On other occasions, however, groupwork may accentuate feelings of exclusion. For example, one student described feeling isolated on "*finding myself to be the only person from my social background in seminar groups*," while another shared that *"Members of a group project were all very well off and privately educated and I felt quite disregarded by them."*

Many academic departments also run field courses and put on extra-curricular activities where students and staff can interact in less formal contexts. For some students, opportunities this these can make all the difference. For example, one student from a less-privileged background wrote, *"I took part in artefact cleaning, and it was lovely to talk about my interests in archaeology with people from many different backgrounds that share similar interests."* Another (also from a less-privileged background) talked about her involvement in a peer mentoring scheme within her department, noting that *"At the end of the year, the staff organised a picnic for those involved in the scheme. […] I really felt part of the department, wanted, included, invited."*

As noted above (Section 6.1), comments about interactions with academic staff were generally positive, particularly when efforts were made to include diverse perspectives in class discussions, and when students encountered staff from their own class or regional background. However, there were a small number of reports of teaching staff apparently buying into and replicating the discriminatory behaviours noted above in teaching contexts (see Section 6.1). More commonly, academic staff were criticised for not challenging (and therefore implicitly condoning) other students' behaviour and remarks; for example: "*In lectures during first year, a few private educated people made classist insults about the working class. Nobody challenged this, even the lecturer*."

6.4 Experiences of college events and activities

A much larger number of comments related to experiences in colleges and associated social activities. This is perhaps not surprising, given that students generally spend much more time in colleges than in academic settings, and that their interactions with other students in college settings are less mediated by staff presence. Experiences of college events and activities were also the most

polarising of all the domains reported in free-text comments. For many students, they were the bedrock of the Durham University experience, giving them a real sense of belonging and identity, enduring friendships, valuable social opportunities. However, a roughly equal number of other students reported that being in college could feel alienating, reproducing and accentuating their other experiences of not fitting in.

College "formals" (formal dinners, held at regular intervals throughout the academic year) drew a particularly large number of free-text comments, both positive and negative. It was clear that, for many students, formal dinners are a highlight of their Durham University experience: a much-valued social occasion and a way to feel connected to their college and peers. The majority of such experiences were reported by respondents in the "more-privileged" category; for example, one such student wrote that *"Going to formal dinners makes you feel like home and share something in common. It's rooted in tradition and [we] share this tradition with other people."* But some "less-privileged" students expressed similar opinions, such as this local undergraduate: *"College Annual Formal Dinner was just a lovely evening with good company, great food and wonderful entertainment and atmosphere, felt very inclusive and united."*

However, other students (and the majority of those from "less-privileged" backgrounds) reported rather different experiences. Some said that were simply not able to afford the cost of formal dinners, which compounded existing feelings of exclusion; for example: "*When I couldn't afford to go to formals, I felt excluded. I couldn't even be a part of the college*". Others had tried attending formal dinners, but had found the experience alienating. Several mentioned "*the pressure to have new outfits [for formal dinners], to be able to afford them*," and one had reportedly "*been told I look bad because of my suit for the formal, when I can't afford a new one*". Some students also expressed uncertainty about what certain dress codes meant, not having come across the term "lounge suits" (for example) before. Another said she felt ashamed by not knowing what all the different knives and forks were for. One respondent put it more bluntly: responding to the question about an incident that had made them feel excluded, they simply wrote, "*The only formal I ever went to*."

College balls attracted similarly polarised reactions. For some, they were a major highlight of the academic year: a chance to unwind, celebrate with friends and feel part of their college. Again, to some extent, this cut across social class, as this account illustrates: *"Me and all my other working-class friends went to a ball together and i felt a real sense of belonging at university, even though my dress wasn't as nice, etc. My college has a banging welfare team and such a good community that everyone feels they fit in*." However, the majority of less-privileged students who commented on college balls were far less upbeat. Again, cost was apparently a major issue for many; one student, for example, reported feeling excluded by the *"Assum[ption] I could pay the £75 for a ball ticket*," while another described feeling very uncomfortable when, "*The ball's being advertised like an event that Everyone Needs To Attend when it's really expensive to go and I don't have anything that would fit the dress code. The assumption that I will, that I can*." This excerpt also highlights the (perceived) need to spend money on appropriate attire. As one student put it, *"When the dress code includes 'black tie' as if that's something everyone just has*." Another reported the following humiliating experience: *"I wore the same dress twice to different balls because it was quite expensive, and I didn't want to wear it just once. However, somebody made a rude comment which put me off attending these kinds of events."*

College balls are one of a range of events and activities organised by Junior Common Rooms (JCRs, run by elected student officers who form the "exec"). As such, JCR Execs – and MCRs (Middle Common Rooms), the equivalent for postgraduate students – can have a significant bearing on students' college experiences. As with other facets of college life, opinions on JCRs and MCRs were

strongly divided. Some students reporting very positive experiences; for example, one international student wrote that *"My JCR president in first year was always welcoming and would ask how you were doing, especially if you hadn't been to many college events."* In a similar vein, a local mature postgraduate reported, *"In my first year, there was a really lovely MCR group - and even though I lived out & was older, everyone got on well and included each other in activities and invites, etc."* However, there were a greater number of negative comments relating to JCRs in particular. Some remarked on the membership fees; for example: *"I did not have £140 to spare to join the JCR, therefore I've not been included in many things. It's a shame, I enjoy getting involved and taking on responsibility, but I don't have those opportunities as I couldn't fork out £140 for a membership."* Several others commented on what they saw as "cliquey-ness" in JCRs which were reportedly (in some colleges) "*dominated by a particular kind of [private-school-educated] person*".

6.5 Inclusion in student clubs and societies

A great many students highlighted clubs and societies as a key source of inclusion at Durham University, offering opportunities to meet people with shared interests, and make new friends beyond their immediate college or academic department. Being part of a club or society could provide a useful way of unwinding from the pressures of academic work, and several students commented on the emotional support they received from fellow members. For example, one student reflected on an occasion when "*I rocked up to a training session a bit sad because it had been a stressful day of working on lectures. The club noticed and spent most of the session trying to get me more involved than normally*". Clubs and societies could be a particularly valuable way for some individuals from minority backgrounds, to meet and connect with others "like them". For example, one UK student from a less-privileged background talked about "*Finding other people just like me when I joined a DU sports team*". Another commented that *"Joining a Durham University sports team had more diversity than my college. There were more people like me from a similar [working class] background who faced the same problems accessing college balls/events".* Similar sentiments were expressed by several LGBTQ+ students, for example: *"The trans and non-binary picnic run by the LGBT society made me feel like there was a space in which I could belong".*

However, many other students – particularly those from less-privileged backgrounds – reported worse experiences. One common criticism related to the financial costs; for example, one student complained about *"Not being able to afford to join societies, particularly sports, which is a big part of college and DU".* Others had reportedly turned up to events and been made to feel unwelcome. One wrote: *"First social with my society, I say one word and the first thing someone says is 'wow you're Northern'",* while another talked about *"Being overshadowed or completely ignored in societies by other students because of my 'poorer' background".* The apparently widespread "drinking culture" in many student societies was also off-putting and exclusionary for some. One international student, for example, quit membership of a society after "*being forced to drink at a social*", while another (also an international student) complained about "*Not being able to partake in many society activities because I do not drink*".

6.6 Accommodation

Another set of concerns expressed in free-text comments centred on accommodation. Most first-year students live in college accommodation, arranged around "corridors" or "flats" with shared facilities. Flatmates (or those on the same corridor) can thus be a very important part of the University experience, especially in the first few months. When it works well, this can be very helpful, providing a ready-made group of companions and an opportunity to mix with people from different backgrounds. However, as several students noted, finding oneself the "odd one out" – the only person from a state school, for example – can result in feelings of isolation. One respondent, for

example, recalled her dismay on *"First moving in to realise I was one of the only state students at my college and only one of my whole block"*, while another recounted: *"I was the only member of my first year flat not southern, didn't go to private school and hadn't been rejected from Oxbridge. I was consistently belittled for my background*." Another reported feeling isolated and excluded by social activities by *"[Flatmates who] all know each other and have these private school connections*." Such experiences could have profound consequences on a student's sense of belonging at the University. One student told us that *"My first term of first year I felt like I secretly wasn't wanted at Durham because of the actions and opinions of some of my flatmates*," while another wrote, "*I did not get on with my flat and spent most of the first year at home*".

The situation can be even more challenging for first years who don't live in college accommodation, usually for financial reasons. Among first-year "livers-out" (disproportionately local students and mature students, who often live "at home"), there can be a sense of being quite distant from college and of feeling "forgotten". Several survey respondents in this position commented on having been overlooked in college communications and events, which made them feel unvalued and unwelcome. For example, one commuter student, who had reportedly not been included in communications about JCR membership and associated events, wrote *"I have no sense of belonging at my college at all. I can't go to balls or anything – I'm just left out. Just because I lived out and am older, that doesn't mean I don't want to have a formal and bring in a friend to celebrate what achievement it was to get to Durham. It was my first choice after all and I'm damn proud I made it, but now I can't even say I feel anything towards it".*

7. Summary and interpretation of findings

Together, the qualitative and quantitative data provide important insights into the magnitude and nature of the multiple forms of exclusion experienced by Durham University students from less-privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, and from certain UK regions (northern England in general, and the Northeast in particular). Three points merit particular attention.

First, the quantitative data show clearly that social class background explains more of the variation in experiences of belonging at Durham University than any other factor. The two next biggest contributors are disability and UK region of origin, followed by gender and LGBTQ+ identity. This finding is strongly supported by the qualitative data. While some students reported experiencing discrimination based on gender/sexual identity and race, these were in a small minority. By far the most widely-reported exclusionary experiences concerned social class and/or regional origins and accents. This is important: while EDI work in the University to date has (understandably) focussed on protected characteristics, social class and home region remain the "elephants in the room." Without detracting from important ongoing work in other areas, we need urgently to get to acknowledge and address the exclusion of working-class and "northern"/local students at Durham University. We also need to understand the intersectional nature of social class, region and gender, and tackle the particularly pernicious forms of exclusion experienced by female students who were also either from the local area, or perceived as working class, or both.

Second, it appears from the data that the single biggest set of issues relate to student behaviour. This was evident both from the volume of free-text comments and the effect sizes in quantitative analyses. Arguably, while it has become much less acceptable to be openly homophobic, racist or misogynistic, it appears that repeatedly drawing attention to someone's accent or social class background receives no such social censure. These behaviours can be grouped broadly into two categories: those that are intentionally designed to exclude and belittle (for example, explicitly telling someone from a working-class background that they shouldn't be at Durham University), and

the more mundane and thoughtless comments, day in and day out, that gradually undermine a sense of belonging. For example, many of the more privileged students seemed completely unaware of how their constant questions and comparisons of schools, parents' occupations, ski trips and gap years might exclude those from different backgrounds.

By contrast, comments about University staff were generally much more positive. This applied equally to college staff (all the way from principal and senior tutors to catering staff and porters) and staff in academic departments, libraries, and other university services. Students really appreciated college staff taking time to get to know them personally and checking in to see how they were doing. And they appreciated efforts made by teaching staff to make them feel included as valued members of the academic community who deserved to be at Durham University. There were, however, a small number of cases where staff were seen to have contributed to the problem; for example, by making offhand remarks about accents, or assumptions about what a Durham student "should" look (and sound) like. More commonly, staff in both college and department contexts were criticised for failing to challenge problematic comments and behaviours from other students, which made them (and, by the extension, the University) appear complicit.

Third, while student behaviours appear to be the biggest problem, this study also points to certain features of Durham University life that may facilitate and perpetuate socio-economic and regional divides among our community. It is notable that a high proportion of free-text comments related to college formal dinners and balls, and that these were among the most polarising between students of different social class and regional backgrounds (a finding supported by the quantitative data on college events and activities). Beyond the direct costs of these events, many students from less-privileged backgrounds found themselves out of place when confronted by unfamiliar dress codes and dining etiquettes. Of course, it is not necessarily the case that students from more-privileged backgrounds will all know exactly what to do at a formal dinner. However, when someone is *already* feeling that they perhaps don't really belong at Durham University, and is doubting whether they should be here at all, anxieties about picking up the wrong fork may be the final straw.

Accommodation is another such area. Again, when it works well, sharing a corridor or flat in the first year can provide a ready-made group of companions and an opportunity to mix with people from different backgrounds. However, finding oneself the "odd one out" (e.g. the only state-school or local student) can result in feelings of isolation that may ripple through other facets of university life.

8. Next steps and recommendations

Durham University is almost certainly not the only higher education establishment in the UK to suffer from the issues highlighted in this report, which are also pervasive in wider society. However, Durham University is taking an important first step by *acknowledging and owning the problem*. The next step will be to work collaboratively with students and staff from across the University to develop and implement a series of targeted actions to begun to tackle these issues. The following recommendations are intended as a starting point.

8.1 Admissions

Currently, more than half of the home student body at Durham University comes POLAR4 quintile 5: areas over-represented in higher education participation. Changing this is a prerequisite for achieving more socially-balanced departments and colleges.

Goal: To increase the proportion of students from PQ1-4 relative to PQ5.

Recommendations:

8.1.1 Invest in targeted outreach to schools (especially in the local area) that currently rarely send students to Durham University.

University response: The new APP outlines a renewed approach to outreach, with commitment to engagement within the North East region. It commits to design and deliver a pre-16 multi-intervention programme, focusing on raising attainment, boosting university preparedness, and building positive perceptions of HE and of Durham University, predominantly in the North East. In practice, this involves devising a revised list of target schools.

8.1.2 Consider recruiting "student ambassadors" (from those similar backgrounds) as paid roles, to visit schools and conduct outreach activities.

University response: Co-design, co-development and co-delivery of activity with target groups is a fundamental part of the new APP. A specific example of this is in Intervention Strategy 2: Access to Asian Heritage Students. The specific activity included within this intervention will be co-designed together with a panel of Asian heritage Durham University staff and students. The same is true for all intervention strategies proposed in the new APP.

8.1.3 Increase the numbers of contextual offers made, and consider further reducing entry requirements further for students from less-privileged backgrounds.

University response: Student Access, Success and Outcomes Committee (SASOC), which is a sub-committee of Education Committee, evaluates data on access, continuation, attainment and progression to graduate level jobs or further study. These analyses are used to inform entry requirements and contextual offers and direct resource to support students' success following entry.

8.1.4 All academic departments to engage actively in encouraging applications from students from low-participation backgrounds.

University response: All departments should be actively engaged in encouraging applications from students from all backgrounds, including making their courses as accessible as possible.

8.1.5 "Selecting departments" to consider setting quotas for admissions by POLAR4 or TUNDRA Quintile, moving towards equity across quintiles.

University response: We need to increase the number of applications to all courses from all student backgrounds so we can be more selective to balance our student communities in Departments and Colleges.

8.2 Welcome Week and Induction

The data suggest that many of the problematic student behaviours begin in Welcome Week, so this is likely to be a particularly important point to intervene.

Goal: To foreground behavioural expectations around social/regional diversity as a core part of Welcome Week activities, equipping students to engage constructively with people from different backgrounds in their first few days at Durham.

Recommendations:

8.2.1 Before arrival, provide all students with a welcome pack, containing information on behavioural expectations and a "toolkit" to help incoming students engage more inclusively and respectfully with peers from different kinds of backgrounds.

University response: A task group is currently reviewing the activities the University already carries out in relation to respect, values and behaviours, in order to present these matters to students in a more coherent way as they begin their studies. We are moving away from the view that single, brief interventions can have a lasting impact, and are seeking to focus on promoting positive behaviours rather than preventing negative behaviours.

8.2.2 Embed events/activities on horizon-broadening and diversity as a core part of college and department induction activities. This might include providing information on the North-East region and its rich cultural heritage.

University response: DCAD resources are available for academic departments on Inclusive Learning Communities: Developing Inclusive Learning Communities - Overview (durham.ac.uk)

8.2.3 Expand the current Bridging Programme across all departments, to help prepare students from under-represented backgrounds for Durham University.

University response: In the new APP, we have committed to developing a training programme for academic departments to design and build pre- and in-sessional subject-specific transition support, focusing on general fundamental academic skills as well as department-specific skills, for all students entering via contextual pathways. This provision will scale over time, to eventually reach 800 undergraduate students per year.

8.3 Training and academic progression

Goal: To provide effective training on class and regional awareness, and ensure that teaching and learning spaces are inclusive for under-represented student groups.

Recommendations:

8.3.1 Develop a mandatory training module on class and regional awareness for all Durham University staff and students.

8.3.2 Consider making successful completion of the training module a requirement for academic progression and/or graduation.

8.3.3 Provide training for teaching staff on managing problematic exclusionary behaviour in learning and teaching contexts.

University response to 8.3.1, 8.3.2 and 8.3.3: Mandatory training and its inclusion for both staff and students as a pre-requisite to promotion and graduation has significant implementation challenges with arguable positive outcomes for culture change. There is already good practice in some departments and colleges that could be deployed more widely to effect positive culture change. Enhancing teacher training, embedding it in all programmes and helping to deliver more inclusive learning environments is a real opportunity to make progress and the university will explore this further by reviewing DCAD training courses, through the APP belonging initiative, and actively sharing good practice between academic departments and colleges.

8.4 College institutions, events and activities

Colleges are an important and distinctive feature of the student experience at Durham University. There are places that many students spend a lot of their time, especially in the first year, so ensuring that college spaces and activities are inclusive and welcoming to diverse student groups is especially important. Each college has its unique characters and traditions, cherished by students and staff alike. The intention is not to lose those, but to take further steps (where necessary) to ensure that they are as inclusive as possible, enabling all college members to feel valued and involved. Recommendations in this section seek to draw on and extend current good practice.

Goal: To build on and extend current good practice to ensure that Durham Colleges provide inclusive and supportive environments for all students.

Recommendations:

8.4.1 Continue with efforts to achieve more equitable distribution of social backgrounds across colleges, including implementation of the new UG college allocation algorithm.

University response: We have designed a new algorithm for allocation of incoming undergraduate students to colleges, which we are confident will result in a more even distribution of social backgrounds. A high-priority requirement to focus CIS resource on Banner in 2024/25 has prevented its immediate implementation, but we intend to use it from the 2026 entry cycle onwards.

8.4.2 Work closely with JCRs and MCRs to make college events as inclusive and affordable as possible. Where necessary, this might sometimes involve some "scaling back" of events such as balls, to make them more affordable.

University response: Work is under way, led by the Student Enrichment Directorate, to address barriers to participation in enrichment activity. Two of the themes of this work are (a) fundraising to support broader participation and (b) encouragement and support to student groups to make a wider selection of low-cost activities available.

8.4.3 Work closely with the student body to increase the inclusivity of college "traditions", including those around formal dinners. For example, provide explicit information on dress and etiquette to everyone. Where a "tradition" is inappropriate or excluding, work with the student body to reframe and adjust as appropriate.

University response: Heads of College and their leadership teams work consistently and diligently to challenge and support their student leaders to provide an inclusive experience and to represent their diverse peers/communities well. This is at the heart of the student enrichment work done individually and collectively with student leaders. College teams are steadfast in their commitment to further cultivating welcoming and inclusive learning communities with and through common room leaders.

8.4.4 Work closely with student leaders to ensure they represent the full student body in their colleges, providing appropriate training on inclusive leadership and decentring of dominant voices.

University response: JCR and MCR Presidents are given training each year at the start of their term of office on a wide range of topics, including leadership and EDI. As described above, Heads of College and their leadership teams also work

consistently and diligently to challenge and support their student leaders to provide an inclusive experience and to represent their diverse peers/communities well.

8.5 Student Clubs and Societies

Student clubs and societies are another key plank of Durham University's Wider Student Experience, and offer important opportunities to foster a sense of belonging.

Goal: To ensure that all students can benefit from these valuable extra-curricular opportunities.

Recommendations:

8.5.1 Undertake a review of membership/participation costs of all clubs and societies within the University and colleges. Where appropriate, consider revising membership fee structures and/or providing financial support to ensure that the vast majority of these opportunities are affordable for all students.

University response: Work is under way, led by the Student Enrichment Directorate, to address barriers to participation in enrichment activity. Two of the themes of this work are (a) fundraising to support broader participation and (b) encouragement and support to student groups to make a wider selection of low-cost activities available.

8.5.2 Continue to call out and impose sanctions on clubs/individuals promoting activities or "traditions" that are at odds with the University's EDI and Respect policies.

University response: Addressing inappropriate behaviour that contradicts policies and expectations is indeed part of the journey toward more inclusive communities and stronger sense of belonging. Wherever groups promote activities incongruent with our shared vision, we will and do impose disciplinary sanctions, while also maintaining a focus on student learning in the process. Ensuring an educational (not simply punitive) conduct process assists in mitigating future occurrences as students begin to teach each other what is and is not appropriate.

8.5.3 Actively promote alternatives to social events centred around alcohol consumption.

University response: College teams consistently encourage a wide array of common room sponsored events, particularly those not centred around alcohol. Despite the challenging nature of this sociocultural reality, we are making progress. From orientation week onwards, common rooms sponsor music, theatre, volunteering, and other events not focused on alcohol. There is more work to do, but we are encouraged by the progress made so far.

8.6 Financial support

This study has highlighted the problem of financial barriers as potential sources of exclusion from both academic and WSE opportunities. Students commended the Durham Grant Scheme, which is automatically paid to students below a certain household income threshold. However, some other sources of financial and material support (e.g. college bursaries and clothing banks) are currently underused by intended beneficiaries, either because they are not sufficiently well advertised or because of associated stigma. There is much good practice around the University that these recommendations draw on.

Goal: To reduce financial barriers to accessing academic and WSE opportunities.

Recommendations:

8.6.1 Where possible, academic opportunities (e.g. field courses) should be free of charge, through pricing them into tuition fees, rather than requiring additional payments.

University response: All compulsory modules with fieldwork already have provision for free fieldwork activities. It should be noted that fieldwork costs are outside of the fee and could be charged for in their entirety. DU already makes a significant financial contribution in this area. Fees are charged for fieldwork in optional modules (not required to meet the programme learning outcomes).

8.6.2 Ensure that any costs associated with WSE activities (e.g. dress for formal dinners) are made explicit, with appropriate support for those in financial need.

University response: We provide an additional bursary of £250 (part-funded by an alumni donation) to UK undergraduate students from low-income backgrounds. This is intended to help with the costs of the WSE. We also publish the known costs of WSE participation at each college, for example the costs of joining the common room, of purchasing a gown, and of joining the gym.

8.6.3 Review processes for advertising and applying for bursaries and other forms of financial/material support, to ensure they are widely accessible and non-stigmatising. Some colleges have found that operating on a trust basis (without requiring means-testing) has increased uptake of bursaries by students in financial need. One college has significantly increased uptake of meal bursaries for commuter students by re-branding them around time poverty, which is less stigmatising than cash poverty.

University response: The Durham Grant Scheme and the WSE Bursary are paid automatically to students meeting the relevant criteria.

8.6.4 Provide appropriate financial and practical support for commuter students, who incur daily travel costs (e.g., bus passes, access to parking spaces).

University response: The Durham Grant Scheme and the WSE Bursary are paid automatically to students meeting the relevant criteria without any need for an application – students can use the funds for whatever purpose they need, though in the case of the WSE Bursary they are requested to provide a brief description of the opportunities of which the bursary has enabled them to take advantage (as a stewardship requirement around the donor element of the funding).

8.7 Student support services

If the ambition to increase the intake of home students from underrepresented groups is realised, the University must be ready to support those students throughout their time at Durham, recognising that they may continue to face additional challenges. (As one student who came to Durham on a contextual offer put it, "*Context doesn't just disappear once you become a student*.")

Goal: To ensure that students from under-represented backgrounds receive appropriate support throughout their student journey at Durham.

Recommendations:

8.7.1 Extend the Bridging Programme across the whole student journey, via termly check-ins with a dedicated student support colleague.

University response: In the new APP, we have committed to developing a training programme for academic departments to design and build pre- and in-sessional subject-specific transition support, focusing on general fundamental academic skills as well as

department-specific skills, for all students entering via contextual pathways. This provision will scale over time, to eventually reach 800 undergraduate students per year.

8.7.2 Continue to monitor capacity within Student Support Systems, to ensure that any increased demand resulting from a shifting student demographic can be met.

University response: Following the introduction of our Student Support Information Management System (SSIMS), we are now able for the first time to monitor the demand on – and the responsiveness of – our student support systems. We will now carry out such monitoring on a continuous basis.

8.7.3 Actively manage the commuter student experience; for example, by having regular check-ins and ensuring they can access relevant support services.

University response: We will consider the issue of the commuter student experience (and how it might be actively managed) at the Colleges and Student Experience Division Senior Management Team.

8.7.4 Consider extending the current Report & Support tool to include instances of discrimination based on social class or regional accent/identity.

University response: Whilst Social Class is different from socio-economic background, staff or students making a report in Report & Support are asked: "Are any of these factors relevant to your report" and socio-economic background is offered as a response option. The University will give this matter further consideration and explore the approach of other universities with the Report & Support system.

8.8 Data

High-quality data, collected and analysed longitudinally, are core to developing and evaluating the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of initiatives to increase access and participation among working-class and local/"northern" students.

Goal: To build an evidence base to measure change and establish impact of interventions:

8.8.1 Re-run the Belonging@Durham survey at/before the end of the APP period to measure change and provide evidence to feed into the ongoing AP strategy.

University response: We have rigorous and sector-standard methods for measuring the success of the APP and will be reporting these as required by the OfS and expected by our community.

8.8.2 Consider running a panel study to monitor a cohort of contextual-offer students across their DU journey, to help understand where/when the main challenges are and how they can best be supported.

University response: See response on SASOC (8.1.3). A student-led group called the Student Advisory Board will monitor the effectiveness of the APP, always providing the student voice and making suggestions for improvements.

8.9 Conclusion

As noted above, the first step in addressing the multiple forms of exclusion experienced by working-class and local/Northern students at Durham University is acknowledging and owning the problem. The suggestions provided in this section are intended as a starting point, recognising that meaningful

change will be achieved only through a collaborative effort by students and staff from across the University. This will not necessarily be an easy process: it will require sustained commitment and resources over an extended period, recognising that we might not always get it right first time. It will also require a humility and willingness to be challenged, as this is not about helping students from under-represented groups to adapt and "fit in" to existing Durham University culture; it's about changing the culture where necessary and embracing diversity.

> **University response:** The Belonging Report is among the many sources of research and insights that have informed our Access and Participation Plan, 2025/6-2028/29, which represents a step change in our approach to creating and supporting an inclusive student community. z