

Teacher and Adviser Conference 2026

Schools Outreach and Widening Participation Team

Session:	Keynote: The admissions Landscape, trends, data and Durhams Response
Speaker(s):	Jon Batty- Director of Student Recruitment and Admissions and Deputy Academic Registrar
Session Bio:	The session will cover sector-level developments and patterns in recruitment, and Durham's response to the challenges. It will also highlight some of Durham's targets over the next four years and how this might impact schools within our local regions.

Session Notes:

Sector Level Developments and Patterns

- UCAS projections indicate that there could be around 1 million UK undergraduate applications per year by 2030. However, this seems to have been overestimated.
- Demographic change is an important factor in increasing applications, but levels of participation and popularity also play a significant role. Durham has seen a 25% increase in applications in the 2025/26 admissions cycle.
- There remain regional disparities in higher education participation, with the North East having lower progression rates to HE, alongside lower average GCSE and A-level attainment compared with other UK regions. These disparities were described as being driven by structural inequalities rather than student ability.
- Offer and placed rates at high-tariff providers are up strongly.
- There are growing concerns about the use of AI in personal statements across the sector. AI tools can be helpful for checking spelling, punctuation, and grammar, but applicants should use with caution and ensure statements remain personal and reflective of their own experiences.

Durham-specific Developments and Patterns

- Durham aims to make current cycle decisions by 31st March 2026- enabling offer holders to attend a Post-Offer Visit Day in March or April.
- Admissions selectors read all personal statements at Durham which can affect the speed of decision-making given large application volumes.
- All applications submitted before the UCAS equal consideration deadline are considered fairly and equally. Approximately 42,000 applications were received in the 2025/26 cycle.

- Competition for places varies by subject. Courses with particularly high demand in recent cycles include Economics, PPE and Law, although this can change year to year.
- [References](#) are very useful to selectors, particularly for providing contextual information about an applicant (for example caring responsibilities, care experience, disability or mitigating circumstances etc).
- College allocation and admissions are separate processes at Durham.
- Durham is not immune to the financial pressures being experienced across the sector. Student number growth is limited due to capacity agreements with the city, with total student numbers capped at approximately 22,500, meaning expansion through increased intake is not currently an option.

Access and Participation Plan Objectives

Durham's [Access and Participation Plan](#) includes aims to:

- To increase the percentage of students studying at Durham University from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- To increase the percentage of students studying at Durham University from Black and Asian heritage backgrounds
- To reduce the continuation and attainment gap between students with a reported disability and students with no reported disability.
- To reduce the continuation gap between students from low socio-economic groups and their more advantaged peers.
- To reduce the continuation, completion, and attainment gap between mature students and non-mature students.
- To reduce the completion and attainment gap between students from Black heritage backgrounds and those from white heritage backgrounds.
- To limit the attainment gap between students reporting a mental health disability and those not reporting a disability.

Other Initiatives

Contextual offers-

- [Contextual offers](#) are made to applicants who meet specific eligibility criteria, typically resulting in a lower entry requirement than the standard offer.
- There were questions and discussion around the use of ACORN as a progression indicator and the need for students to be able to self-check the eligibility of their home postcode. It was indicated that ACORN is

unlikely to form part of the 2026/27 contextual offer criteria, although this is subject to review and not guaranteed. Applicants and advisers are advised to continue checking Durham's website for updates to the published criteria.

- A question was asked around whether there are set quotas for the number of contextual offers given. JB responded that there are no set targets for the number of contextual offers made.
- Caring responsibilities are not currently included in the contextual offer criteria. There were questions and discussion around the inclusion of this within eligibility criteria in the future. While this is something Durham has considered at length and continues to review, changes to eligibility criteria can often be a balancing act and involve trade-offs between different criteria. Applicants with caring responsibilities are advised to have this included in their reference.

Financial support-

- The [Durham Undergraduate Bursary Scheme](#) is a non-repayable bursary for home undergraduate and PGCE students who do not already have an undergraduate degree and whose household income is below a specific threshold as assessed by Student Finance England (or equivalent).

Foundation Years-

- A significant barrier for some applicants considering Durham is prior attainment. [Foundation year programmes](#) are designed to support students in developing subject knowledge and academic skills.
- They help to increase access for underrepresented groups, particularly within the North East.
- Students who study a Foundation year at Durham, on average, perform better than those who join with standard entry requirements.
- A recognised drawback is the additional year of tuition and associated costs.

These notes summarise a session delivered at the Durham University Teacher and Adviser Higher Education Conference on 26th March 2026. They reflect information shared at the time and are intended as a general overview only. For the most up-to-date information, please refer to Durham University's website.

