Ruth First Educational Trust

Trustees: Helen Charnley (Secretary), Cheryl McEwan, Francis Pritchard (Treasurer), Lotte Shankland, Patrick Dorey, Michael Thompson (Chair)
Patrons: Sir Thomas Allen (opera singer, former Chancellor of Durham University), Bill Bryson (writer, former Chancellor of Durham University), Gillian Slovo (writer, former President of English PEN, daughter of Ruth First)

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ANNUAL REPORT 2024-25

The aims of the Trust are:

- To enable southern African students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds to undertake postgraduate study at the University of Durham.
- To educate and inform students and staff at the University, as well as residents of the area, about educational and development issues in southern Africa.
- To raise funds to support these activities.

Southern Africa is defined for this purpose as comprising the following countries: Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Republic of South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. This report gives details of activities undertaken by the Trust in the year ending 31 July 2025 in pursuit of these aims.

The Ruth First Scholarship in 2024-25

The scholarship was awarded to Nafisa Ayman Roza, a psychologist and LGBTQIA+ rights activist from Lesotho. She passed the MSc in Developmental Psychopathology with Distinction in November 2025 and is seeking opportunities related to gender equality.

The Ruth First Scholarship in 2025-26

There were 42 eligible applications, with the largest number from Zimbabwe (14) and South Africa (11). A ranked shortlist was presented to the University's scholarships panel, which approved our selection. The Scholarship was awarded to Bazela Rivombo from South Africa, a graduate in Development Studies from North-West University and Honours Population Studies from the University of the Western Cape. Bazela is taking the Masters in Data Science. She arrived in Durham on 29 September 2025 and moved into St Chad's College. Further details about Bazela can be found on the Trust's website:
ruthfirsttrust.webspace.durham.ac.uk/this-years-ruth-first-scholar

Updates on past Ruth First Scholars

Sicelo Ngwenya (2022-23) is working for Global Legal Action Network (GLAN), an NGO that takes legal action against powerful actors involved in human rights violations and environmental harms, working across borders with international and grassroots organisations.

Nomazile Chicho (2008-09) is Lecturer in Environmental Science at the University of Botswana, specializing in climate change, sustainable environmental management, public health and traditional medical practice.

Peter Okeno Ong'are (2007-08) is teaching at the University of Malawi and still making community music. See his latest song on TouTube appealing for reconciliation in Kenya: www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFaYtfx4JzM.

Malusi Marcus Balintulo (1965-68) was the first holder of the South African Scholarship, taking a BA in Sociology & Politics. He did a PhD in Sociology at Warwick and worked at various universities in Africa and the West Indies. His research focused on transformation in higher education. He was Vice-Chancellor of Walter Sisulu University from 2007 to 2011. He died in 2020.

Information about all former Ruth First Scholars can be found on the RFET website: ruthfirsttrust.webspace.durham.ac.uk/former-scholars. Details of some of the holders of the undergraduate scholarship (before 1995) have recently been added.

Events

The small exhibition on the life and work of Ruth First developed by Nancy Cartwright, Diana Collecott and Byron Hyde has found a permanent home in the Sociology Department.

The Ruth First Prize for the Best Postgraduate Dissertation in Sociology (2024) was awarded to Emma Gratte for: 'A Mixed-Method Qualitative Investigation of ADHD Experiences, Self-Concept, and Coping Strategies of Female University Students in the UK.'

The Ruth First Scholar Seminar was given by Nafisa Ayman Roza at St Aidan's College in June 2025 with the title 'Bondage, binaries and belonging' (on neuro-queer desire, intersectional identities and the radical ways in which South African BIPOC exist in – and resist with – community. The Hatfield Lioness Scholar, Zahbea Zahra, also gave a presentation on 'Honour killings and Islamic law: A legal enigma'.

The annual sponsored walk took place on 22 June 2025, involving 9 walkers including Roza. It raised just over £4000.

Finance

The accounts for 2024-25 will be presented at the AGM by the Treasurer. While expenditure has in recent years been exceeding income and more fundraising is always required, the scholarship can be supported in 2026-27.

Durham University informed the Trust in early 2025 that it intended to change the basis of its support for the Scholarship after the 2026-27 academic year. It would no longer waive the full international tuition fee; instead, the Trust would need to pay the home fee (between £13k and £15k for most courses in 2026-27) while the University would waive the difference between that and the international fee (between £29.5k and £33.5k). Discussion about how the Trust can respond is ongoing.

The annual grant of £2000 from Durham County Council was not received in 2024-25. The grant may be restored in the future, so an application will be made in 2026.

We are grateful to Durham University for awarding tuition fee scholarships to Ruth First Scholars; to the Departments that provide teaching and supervision; to St Aidan's College and its Principal, Dr Susan Frenk, for hosting Ruth First Scholar Seminars; and to St Chad's College and its Principal, Dr Margaret Masson, for their valuable commitment to supporting Ruth First Scholars and integrating them into the College community.

08 December 2025

Mike Thompson

Chair of the Board of Trustees