

Response of Newcastle University and Newcastle University Students' Union to the Coroner's report on the death of Edward James Farmer, December 2016

1. Context

- a) This report is submitted in response to the Coroner's report of 12 December 2018, sent to Professor Chris Day (Vice-Chancellor & President, Newcastle University) and Mr Simon Gerry (Chief Executive, Newcastle University Students' Union)
- b) The report was made under Paragraph 7, Schedule 5, of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 and Regulations 28 and 29 of the Coroners (Investigations) Regulations 2013.
- c) The nature of the recommendations in the report, and the close collaboration between the University and the Students' Union, make it appropriate to submit a single, joint response on behalf of both parties. In light of the specific nature of the formal relationship between the University and the Students' Union, some of the actions described in this report are / will be collaborative, and others the specific responsibility of the relevant party. This is made clear in the information provided below and the Appendices to this report.
- d) In very brief summary, in the context of this report: the University is responsible for University-wide induction of new students, general awareness-raising, communication and disciplinary action against individuals or groups who commit misconduct. Staff training also falls within the remit of the University.

The Students' Union is responsible for oversight of the affiliated student clubs and societies, including training, health and safety, key elements of awareness-raising, financial support and the application of appropriate sanctions when societies / clubs do not comply with the requirements.

2. The Coroner's Report

The Coroner's investigation into the death of Edward James Farmer in December 2016 raised a number of Matters of Concern, together with some recommended actions which are addressed in the Action Report and Plan attached as Appendix 1 to this response.

3. Approach taken by the University and Students' Union

The University and Students' Union acknowledge the validity of the Matters of Concern raised by the Coroner, and welcome the recommendations regarding possible actions. In the approaches described below, and in the attached Action Report and Plan, we have taken care to address the Coroner's recommendations, alongside other relevant issues which have emerged during our discussions, to ensure that our response is as comprehensive and effective as possible.

- a) Following the Inquest, in October 2018, the University took some **immediate interim actions**, which are recorded in Appendix 1.
- b) **A Student Initiations Group** was established, jointly chaired by the Vice-Chancellor and the Academic Registrar, with membership including the Newcastle University Students' Union Chief Executive, relevant Faculty and Professional Service staff, Students' Union staff and Sabbatical Officers, Presidents (or representatives) of key student societies / clubs, and alumni representation.
- c) The work of this Group includes the establishment of some **Definitions, Principles and Values**, which are attached to this report as Appendix 2

- d) The Group identified **four Workstreams** and established working groups to address the key issues and make specific recommendations relating to the following themes:

Group 1: Defining ‘initiations’ and tackling traditions and cultures

This group clarified and articulated the nature of activities that are considered unacceptable and considered the issue of cultures and expectations which are perceived to drive some events (eg the tradition of ‘initiations’ associated for many years with the Agriculture Society).

Group 2: Raising awareness to reduce risks: education, campaigns, training (students and staff)

This group considered how best to communicate with and educate staff and students about the risks associated with excessive alcohol consumption including the specific risks of death and serious illness resulting from unacceptable and dangerous behaviours.

Group 3: Expectations, policies, discipline and sanctions

This group clarified the University’s expectations and prohibitions in terms of unacceptable behaviours at student socials (including dangerous initiations), and how these expectations are communicated. It reviewed the University’s disciplinary procedure and protocols for dealing with such activities and clarified, for communication to students and staff, the sanctions applicable.

Group 4: Working with the city, the local community, the police and other outside organisations

This group worked with Newcastle City Council, Northumbria Police, the Licensing organisations and other external bodies to raise awareness of the issues associated with excessive alcohol consumption by students (and others). A particular focus has been to increase awareness and enforcement of regulations governing licensed premises selling to visibly drunk patrons and also the practice of ‘proxy’ sales where patrons can buy on behalf of others.

4. Emerging issues/ constraints in responding to the Coroner’s report

In considering the matters of concern and recommended actions in the Coroner’s report of December 2018, the University and the Students’ Union have identified a number of important issues, some of which have an impact on the response to specific recommendations:

- a) The unacceptable behaviours which fall under the auspices of this report go beyond ‘initiations’ *per se*, and include any organised event, ceremony or ritual which could be reasonably perceived as involving coercion or manipulation that results in a risk or occurrence of physical or mental detriment to students or other parties. This could apply to any organised social activity, including ‘initiations’, taking place at any time (i.e. not just associated with the beginning of the year).
- b) The University and Students’ Union seek to achieve the right balance in offering a positive, welcoming and enjoyable student experience whilst effectively communicating the key messages about behaviours and risks.
- c) The recommendation that compulsory training be provided for all academic staff may need to be balanced against the practicalities and challenges of doing so. Many academic staff have no day-to-day interactions with students, and other (eg professional service) staff also have an important role in academic units and central Student Services. Our initial focus is therefore to focus on the training of key staff who are in a position to influence students and who have the opportunity to be vigilant. We

will also explore other (eg digital) channels through which we may be able to raise the awareness and vigilance of all University staff, whilst recognising that compulsory participation may be impossible to achieve.

- d) Following the conclusion of the work of the Student Initiations Group, the University's Alcohol and Substance Misuse Working Group will oversee and monitor this area of work for longer-term sustainability and impact. This will ensure that the actions agreed now become embedded in the normal practices of the University and Students' Union and that we can be pro-active in taking forward our plans for culture change with successive generations of students and Students' Union sabbatical officers.

We recognise that culture change takes time, and that the matters of concern raised in the Coroner's report are not unique to Newcastle University, but reflect wider societal challenges. We hope that our work will also help to inform the wider debate across the university sector through the Vice-Chancellor's work with Universities UK.

- e) Newcastle University and the Students' Union are fully committed to doing everything the law expects from us when aiming to take appropriate and proportionate steps to manage and control the risks to our students. However, we are mindful of the need to recognise and remind ourselves that our students are independent adults, upon whom we must rely to some extent by expecting them to take some personal responsibility for their own actions and behaviour.

5. Conclusions

This report concludes the response of Newcastle University and the Students' Union to the Coroner's report of 12 December 2018. Appendix 1 summarises actions taken to date, planned actions and timescales for completion.

Professor Chris Day, Vice-Chancellor and President, Newcastle University

Mr Simon Gerry, Chief Executive, Newcastle University Students' Union

██████████, Director of Student & Academic Services (Academic Registrar)

28 March, 2019