Guidance on what to do when a student dies

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SECTION 1 – Overview of the process

1. Introduction

When the University is faced with the death of one of its students it is important that it is managed in a manner that is appropriate to the circumstances, supports the role of those with a statutory responsibility, is sensitive to the distress of those most closely involved and does not raise unnecessary distress or anxiety within the student body. This document is intended to provide guidance in the event of a student death, although it may also be helpful in the event of the death of a member of staff or visitor. If you wish to discuss any aspect of a student death, or suggest improvements to this guidance, please contact the Director of Student Support Services.

2. Factors that will influence the level and type of response

The death of a student will most commonly be an unexpected event and this guidance is written on that basis. Where a death is anticipated the grief will be no less profound for those close to the deceased; however some planning may have taken place and the initial shock associated with an unexpected death is likely to be less intense.

2.1 Location

The location in which the death occurs will have a significant influence on the degree to which members of the University are involved in the early stages of dealing with the discovery of the body and notifying the authorities. The location will probably be one of the following:

- In one of the University college residences
- In a Department building or other non-residential part of the University estate
- Off campus whilst engaged in University activity
- Off campus, whilst living in local accommodation away from their permanent or family residence.
- Off campus in their permanent home or in a public place.
- Whilst abroad, either on University placement or for vacation.

2.2 Circumstances of death

The degree to which members of the University become involved, in ways other than being supportive of those distressed, may be affected by the manner of death, which may fall into one of the following categories:

- Accidental
- Possible suicide
- Natural causes (with or without infectious disease implications)
- Crime or suspected crime
- Substance related
It should be noted that it is the responsibility of the Coroner to determine the cause of death. Therefore, when giving out any information about the death, care has to be taken not to assign a cause prematurely.

2.3 Circumstances of student

There are very significant differences in how we respond to, for example, the death of a full-time student living in our accommodation and the death of a part-time student living with their family. Therefore it is important to gather basic facts about the student and their circumstances from the outset and to avoid making any assumptions about what the family will want or expect from the University. The chaplains and the international student support co-ordinator can provide more detailed guidance about cultural issues.

3. If a body is discovered

DO NOT touch or move anything (other than to confirm that the person is deceased).

If the location is on campus: inform the University Security Centre on extension 3333 or via the Safezone app and ask them to call the police.

If the location is off-campus: inform the police and, separately, inform the University Security Centre on (01904) 323333

Where appropriate those present should secure the scene pending the arrival of the police; security staff will usually take the lead in this.

There may be other people at the scene and they need to be dealt with in a sensitive manner. Generally they should be asked to remain in the vicinity until the police arrive, preferably together in a suitable nearby room. Wherever possible immediate care and comfort should be provided by those on the scene and the names and contact details of those present should be recorded.

4. When information about the death of a student first comes to the University

Information that a student has died can arrive at the University in a wide variety of ways. Quite often it is from other students or from statutory services seeking next of kin details; less frequently from the student’s family. However the information is reported it is important that the facts are recorded accurately and the contact details of the person providing the information taken, so that follow-up can take place.

The information should always be passed to the University Security Centre immediately, as this is a 24 hour operation and staff in the Security Centre hold contact details for key University staff.
The Security Service **MUST** immediately inform:

Director of Health, Safety and Security who will normally inform:

Director of Student Support Services

Normally the Director of Student Support Services or his deputy will act as **University co-ordinator** from this point onwards.

**5. Communicating the news to others**

When someone has died it is the responsibility of the police (or sometimes the hospital if the death has occurred there) to inform the immediate family. This is the priority: it is important that we do nothing to interfere with this process and that we do not release information prematurely. This is increasingly important as online social networking accelerates the rate of communication.

The only people who have a right to information following a death are the next of kin, so we must request information sensitively.

Following University Security informing those who must know immediately, information is typically passed on in three phases, although in some situations the phases run together.

**5.1 Immediate communication**

*As soon as we have confirmation/corroborate the facts the following will be informed by the Director of Student Support Services:*

Press Officer  
Head of Academic Department(s)  
Academic Registrar  
Registrar & Secretary  
Head and Assistant Head of College  
Chaplaincy team  
Open Door team

**5.2 Second stage communication**

*Once we know that the family have been informed then the following will be told, usually by the Director of Student Support Services:*

Registry Services - who notify relevant administrative sections  
YUSU and if applicable the GSA  
The International Student Co-ordinator (if applicable)  
Accommodation Services  
Any other relevant University department (e.g. If student has worked for the University, undertaken an internship or is a student ambassador)
5.3 Informing students

The process of informing other students is also very important. Typically this should start with identified close friends, flat or house mates and those studying the same programme(s). Wherever possible this is best done in person rather than by email, for example telling a year group at the end of a lecture may be the best option. However, sometimes an email is the only way to reach a cohort or College community in a timely manner.

6. Media enquiries

All media enquiries should be directed to the University Press Office, who will prepare a brief statement to release to enquirers.

7. Liaison with the Police or Coroner’s Officers

In the event of a sudden death, the police have two quite distinct roles. They may be part of the initial emergency response and they gather evidence which will be reported to the Coroner and may also be used if any criminal proceedings ensue.

An unexpected death is reported to the Coroner in whose area the body is found. The role of the Coroner is to determine who has died, as well as when, where and how they died. They have jurisdiction over the body until they are satisfied that they have gathered all the information available or that they require, which usually follows the receipt of the report of a post mortem examination by a pathologist.

Liaison on behalf of the University with the police will usually be by the Head of Security and liaison with the Coroner’s office will usually be by the Director of Student Support Services.

8. Liaison with the student’s family

In order to offer what support we can to the family and to be able to make arrangements for those who wish to attend the funeral, it is important that we establish a single family contact. Occasionally the family will not want any contact with the University and we then have to adapt our responses accordingly.

Ideally the family contact is a member of staff at the University who knew the student: experience has demonstrated that families appreciate this most. Usually it is best for this to be a senior member of staff in the department who has had some teaching or other contact with the student. Sometimes it can be the supervisor, but if they had a close relationship with the student that may be asking too much of them. Sometimes the Head of College will take on this role. If no-one who knew the student is able to do so the Director of Student Support Services or the Academic Registrar can do so.

The key responsibilities of the University family contact are:

- To establish if there is anything the family want from us, for example help gathering personal possessions or to visit the department or some part of the University.
- To clarify funeral arrangements and whether the family would welcome students and staff attending the funeral.
• To be a conduit for any practical information, for example about returning fees or providing a transcript and/or certificate for a posthumous award (see section 10).
• If possible to find out a little about the family, in particular parents, so that a letter of condolence from the Vice Chancellor can be appropriately addressed.
• To note the names of any students the family raise concerns about as the family may know about close friends of the deceased and we may not.
• Sometimes the family contact may be asked to talk to the family about holding a memorial event at the University: whether they are comfortable about it taking place, wish to attend and whether there are any particular religious beliefs to take into account.

9. Support for students and impact upon studies

When a student dies there will typically be a close circle of friends and possibly a partner who are deeply affected, then a wider circle who are shocked and upset. The circumstances of the death may intensify the emotional responses, for example if it is believed that the death may have been preventable.

These emotional reactions are normal and it is important to treat them as such. Typically this involves other students or staff, and sometimes their own family members, being with the students initially whilst they adjust to the news. This is often a role the College is best placed to take on.

It is sometimes helpful to explain what will happen to students. For example it may be necessary to explain the role of the coroner in determining cause of death if students are jumping to conclusions or asking lots of questions. Often sudden deaths raise questions for which there are no satisfactory answers.

One of the practical tasks we can offer to undertake on behalf of the students most affected is to inform their departments about what has happened and their relationship with the deceased. The students should also be advised to contact their department within a day or two to sort out any work for which they need to submit mitigation.

10. Posthumous academic awards

When a student dies part-way through their studies it should be established whether they are eligible for an academic award for work already completed, or whether the student has successfully completed sufficient work for a posthumous aegrotat degree to be awarded, in line with the relevant University Regulations and Procedures.

The Head of Department is responsible for ensuring that a decision is reached as to what, if any, level of award is appropriate; Registry Services can advise on the process for reaching this decision, which requires a recommendation to Special Cases Committee where an aegrotat degree is recommended by the department.
When a posthumous award is made, the student’s next of kin should be consulted about how (if at all) they wish to receive the certificate. A family representative may receive the certificate at a degree ceremony, they may collect it from the University (typically the student’s department), or it can be sent by post. The timing of the presentation of the certificate should be guided by the preferences of the next of kin.

When an award is made, the student can be listed in the programme of the relevant degree ceremony. If the certificate is being collected in the ceremony the student’s name will be announced. In line with University degree ceremony protocol the names of those being made awards in absentia are not announced.

11. Funeral arrangements

The next of kin is formally responsible for organising the funeral and it usually takes place near the family home. Often family members are very pleased to see students and staff, but that remains their choice.

The norm is for the University to be represented, often by the Head of Department, possibly with the supervisor or another colleague. Where possible it is helpful for the Department to offer to assist with travel arrangements for students. On some occasions YUSU or GSA has organised transport for a party of students.

12. Memorial service/event

When the funeral is some distance away and for practical reasons not many students or staff are able to attend, a memorial event may be appropriate.

Whilst the University, through Student Support Services and the Chaplaincy team, can help to arrange such an event it is important to be sure that there are sufficient people wishing to take part for one to be successful.

The norm is for a memorial service to be arranged and to take place after the funeral, typically in the following few weeks. It does not have to be religious, but it is usually helpful to have someone conduct the event. Family are usually invited; attendance varies.

13. International dimensions

13.1 When an international student dies

When an international student dies, there is a number of additional practical dimensions to be addressed:

- Communication with the family may require a translation service. This is usually best done through a professional service such as Language Line; more information about this is available from the University telephony service.
- The appropriate consulate or embassy may need to be involved; advice should be taken from the International Student Support Co-ordinator if this may be required.
- The repatriation of bodies is subject to strict regulation, so if this is to happen a funeral director will need to be involved at an early stage. The main funeral directors in York are able to do this; if there is doubt the Coroner’s office can assist in identifying a funeral director.
13.1 When a York student dies outside of the UK

When a student dies overseas, the responsibility for investigating and determining the cause of death generally rests with the country in which the death occurs.

The family is likely to have to be in touch with the British consulate or embassy in the country in which the student died for assistance with the administrative requirements.

If the student is on University business, the University insurance policy may cover some aspects of the costs of repatriation of their body. Where relevant, the insurance company will appoint a caseworker to facilitate this process. It is important that no assurances are given that the University can cover these costs, which can be considerable.

14. Impact of a student death on staff

Dealing with the death of a student is usually hard for all involved. If any staff find dealing with any aspect of a student death personally very difficult, it is important that colleagues help them to do what is required and that they are encouraged to seek help through staff support structures, in particular the CiC staff counselling service.

SECTION 2 - responsibilities of role-holders

The following section describes the responsibilities of the key individuals, role-holders and services:

First contact

Any member of staff, learning about the death of a student from a family member, friends, member of the public, the police or other agency should:

- take note of the information provided and note the name and contact details of the person providing the information
- contact University Security on ext 3333 and pass on the information they have.
- They should not initiate contact with friends or family of the student who has died.

Health, Safety & Security

If the death occurs on University property, Security Services will inform the police and secure the scene of an incident until advised that this is no longer necessary by the police or other external authority.

When informed of any student death, Security should contact the Director of Health, Safety & Welfare and the Director of Student Support Services. Emergency contact numbers are available for this eventuality. Initially no-one else within the University should be told unless directed by one of these Directors.

Health, Safety & Welfare and Security will take responsibility for working with the police (and the Health & Safety Executive if required) to ensure that clear and direct lines of
communication are maintained. Normally the Director of Student Support Services will liaise with the Coroner’s office.

**Director of Student Support Services**

The Director of Student Support Services, or the Deputy Director, will normally act as University Co-ordinator and in that capacity undertake the following:

Seek appropriate corroboration of the information about the death where this appears advisable (for example through Coroner’s office, police or hospital).

Inform the following:

- Press Officer
- Head of Academic Department(s)
- Academic Registrar
- Registrar & Secretary
- Head and Assistant Head of College
- Chaplaincy team
- Open Door team

Provide next of kin or emergency contact details to the relevant statutory services.

Seek confirmation of when the next of kin/family has been informed (this is not a University duty: it is normally done by the police or the health authorities).

Act as University contact with the Coroner’s office, registering the University’s interest in being informed about inquest arrangements and advising the Coroner’s office of the implications of examinations and vacations on the availability of students who may be called to the inquest as witnesses.

Once the next of kin/family have been told, inform the following: Registry Services, YUSU (Academic and Welfare Coordinator), Accommodation Services and the Open Door Team. If the deceased student was a postgraduate then the GSA is informed and if a Postgraduate research student the following are also informed: Student Financial Support Unit and also the Research Student Administration Team.

Liaise with and advise the department and college about informing other students.

Ensure that the family are given any necessary assistance to collect belongings.

Draft a letter of condolence, to be sent by the Vice Chancellor on behalf of the University.

Co-ordinate information about funeral arrangements being made available to the relevant students and staff and establish University representatives to attend the funeral.
Where the Director and Deputy Director of Student Support Services is on leave or otherwise unavailable, the Academic Registrar or the Registrar & Secretary will assume responsibility for these duties.

**Press Office**

The Press Office will
- prepare a press release
- respond to all media enquiries and
- keep the Director of Student Support Services and where necessary the Academic Registrar and Registrar & Secretary informed of media interest.

**Family Contact**

This is normally a member of staff who knew the student. It is typically the Head or Deputy Head of Department, Supervisor or Assistant Head of College. The responsibilities are:

- To establish if there is anything the family want from us, for example help gathering personal possessions or to visit the department or some part of the University.
- To clarify funeral arrangements and whether the family would welcome students and staff attending the funeral.
- To be a conduit for any practical information, for example about returning fees or providing a transcript and/or certificate for a posthumous award.
- If possible to find out a little about the family, in particular parents, so that an official letter of condolence from the Vice Chancellor can be appropriately addressed.
- To note the names of any students the family raises concerns about as they may know about close friends of the deceased and we may not.
- Sometimes the family contact may be asked to talk to the family about holding a memorial event at the University: whether they are comfortable about it taking place, wish to attend and whether there are any particular religious beliefs to take into account.

**Head of Department**

The Head of Department should:

- assist the Director of Student Support Services in identifying a suitable Family Contact
- ensure staff particularly affected by the death are offered appropriate support
- oversee informing appropriate staff and students within the department, once cleared to do so
• ensure a decision is made about what, if any, posthumous award it may be appropriate to make

• ensure the department offers what support it can to the family

• ensure there is appropriate departmental representation at the funeral.

**Academic Supervisor**

It is important to recognise that the supervisor may know the student well and may therefore be quite distressed by their death.

The supervisor will be asked to write a few sentences describing the student, for use in the press release and the Vice Chancellor’s letter to the family.

Sometimes the supervisor will be the person best suited to be the Family Contact.

**Head of College/Assistant Head of College**

When the death occurs in College premises, the Head of College should

• provide whatever assistance is necessary to the police, University security and other statutory agencies involved in dealing with the immediate situation.

• Liaise with the Director of Student Support Services to check that practical matters are being dealt with.

• where possible identify the student’s close friends and offer pastoral support to:
  • the student’s flatmates
  • close friendship groups
  • relevant members of staff in the College

This may include signposting students to the Open Door Team and contact with their Heads of Department or Supervisors.

In some instances, the Head of College may be best placed to take on role of Family Contact. If doing so, it is important that the Assistant Head of College takes a lead in supporting the close friends and flatmates in College.

Where the Head of College is on leave or otherwise unavailable the Assistant Head of College will assume responsibility for his or her duties.

**Chaplaincy Team**

The chaplaincy team can be invited to provide

• pastoral support
• spiritual and religious guidance
• advice on the practices surrounding death in a wide range of religions and
• assistance with planning and leading local funerals or memorial services.

Open Door Team

The Open Door team is able to offer time to individuals or groups of students to talk through their reactions to the death of a student. It is important to recognise that the distress of grief is a natural and appropriate response to the death of a friend so referral to the Open Door Team should be based on specific identified need in the circumstances, rather than be viewed as routine following any death.

Academic Registrar

The Academic Registrar will discuss with the Director of Student Support Services (and possibly the Registrar & Secretary) any particular needs in the specific situation and whether any central University response over and above that set out in this guidance document is required. If an additional central response is required, she will ensure that all concerned are clear about who is taking responsibility for that response.

She will brief the University Registrar and Secretary on further details if the circumstances require it.

Accommodation Services

The Accommodation Services Manager may be required to identify and relocate any students requiring re-housing.

Temporary accommodation, where available, is offered free of charge to family members.

Where the death has occurred in a student room, Accommodation Services will liaise with Campus Services about a deep clean and with the Assistant Head of College to agree an appropriate way to deal with the room being re-allocated. In some instances a study bedroom has been left vacant for the remainder of the academic year, in other instances the Assistant Head of College may decide to fill the room after a suitable interval.

Registrar & Secretary

When they hear of the death, the Registrar & Secretary will inform the Vice Chancellor.

The Registrar & Secretary will also liaise with the Academic Registrar and Director of Student Support Services to arrange any debriefing meetings that may be appropriate following an incident.

International Student Support Co-ordinator

Will advise on relevant cultural issues to be taken into consideration and contacts to assist when a student dies in another country. If required they can assist in identifying other students from the same country.
Registry Services

When provided with confirmation of the death of a student, Registry Services will circulate the student details to all the relevant administrative departments to ensure that no further correspondence is circulated. Registry Services will also amend the SITS record and inform UKBA if appropriate.

Research Student Administration Team

For postgraduate research students they will ensure that any information about the student on the University web-site is dealt with appropriately and sensitively.

Student Financial Support Unit

Will check for any funding issues, in particular student sponsorship arrangements to ensure that these are dealt with appropriately. In some instances financial help may be given towards the unanticipated costs associated with a sudden death.

YUSU & GSA

When notified of a student death YUSU and GSA will ensure that relevant services such as Nightline are informed.

They will also sensitively inform any student societies of which the student is a known member and brief the Director of Student Support Services regarding any of the student’s friendship groups that are identified.

YUSU and GSA may also act as a contact point for students seeking information about funeral arrangements and assist students to organise transport to the funeral where appropriate.

YUSU will monitor reports in the student media to ensure due sensitivity is shown.