

Responding to a Student Death Guidance

Reviewed by: Head of Student Support

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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 statutory responsibility, is sensitive to the distress of those most closely involved and does not raise unnecessary distress or anxiety within the University community.

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 Head of Student Support.

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 Manager 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 Campus Safety 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 Campus Safety on (01904) 323333

Where appropriate those present should secure the scene pending the arrival of the police; Campus Safety 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 Campus Safety immediately, as this is a 24 hour operation and staff in Campus Safety hold contact details for key University staff.

Campus Safety will immediately inform:

- Deputy Director of Student Life and Wellbeing
- Head of Student Support or, alternatively in their absence, the Deputy Head of Student Support, who will then inform the Head of Open Door.

The Head of Student Support will act as the **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. We are not in a position to release any information formally until we have received confirmation from the Police or Coroner's Office that the family have been informed. 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 Campus Safety 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/corroboration of the facts the following will be informed by the **University Co-ordinator**, Head of Student Support:

- Head of Media Relations/Press Office
- Head of Academic Department(s)
- Academic Registrar
- Chief Academic Support Officer
- Deputy Director Student Life and Wellbeing
- Director of Library Learning Archives and Wellbeing Services
- PVC Teaching Learning and Students
- Head of College Life
- Vice-Chancellor's Office
- Chaplaincy team
- Head of Open Door
- Head of Campus Safety
- Director of Student Experience and Education
- Director of Communications
- Head of Internal Communications and Engagement
- York Student Union President
- CEO of York Student Union
- Director of Health and Safety Services (in circumstances where the death occurs abroad)

5.2 Second stage communication

Once we have received confirmation from the Police or Coroner's Office that the family have been informed then the following will be told, usually by the Head of Student Support:

- Student Records Manager - who notifies relevant administrative sections
- The International Student Support Manager (if applicable)
- Accommodation Services (if applicable)
- Student Information Team Manager
- 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 and sensitive. 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.

All communications from departments to staff and students must be approved by the Student Communications Manager before being sent.

It is the role of York Student Union to manage communications with student societies and/or sports teams that the deceased student belonged to.

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 Campus Safety and liaison with the Coroner's office will usually be by the Head of Student Support.

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. The College Manager may be able to undertake this role. If

no-one who knew the student is able to do so, the Deputy Director of Student Life and Wellbeing or the Head of Student Support can take on this role.

The key responsibilities of the University family contact are:

- To establish if there is anything the family wants 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 raises 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.

The Head of Open Door will lead in coordinating reaching out to those close friends who have been identified to offer them support through the Open Door Team.

The Head of Open Door will also liaise with the academic departments and colleges involved to assist with ensuring support is available to those affected by the death.

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; Student Experience and Education can advise on the process for reaching this decision, which requires a recommendation to Special Cases 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, York Student Union 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 Life and Wellbeing and the Chaplaincy, 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.

On occasions where a student's family or department make enquiries about a memorial to the deceased student, each enquiry should be coordinated through the Head of Student Support, liaising with the Directorate of Estates and Campus Services and the Supporter Relations Manager in the Office of Philanthropic Partnerships and Alumni and ensuring that a record of memorials is maintained.

13. International dimensions

13.1 When an international student dies

When an international student dies, there are 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 Manager 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.

13.2 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.

The Head of Student Support will liaise with the Director of Health and Safety and the Head of Department in these cases.

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 Health Assured staff assistance service about which HR Services can advise.

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 the University Campus Safety Team 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.

Campus Safety Team

If the death occurs on University property, Campus Safety 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, Campus Safety should contact the Deputy Director of Student Life and Wellbeing and the Head of Student Support. Emergency contact numbers are available for this eventuality. Initially no-one else within the University should be told unless directed by one of these members of staff.

Campus Safety 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 Head of Student Support will liaise with the Coroner's office.

Head of Student Support

The Head of Student Support or, alternatively, the Deputy Head of Student Support, 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:

- Head of Media Relations/Press Officer
- Head of Academic Department(s)

- Academic Registrar
- Chief Academic and Support Officer
- Deputy Director Student Life and Wellbeing
- Director of Library Learning and Wellbeing Services
- Chaplaincy team
- Head of Open Door
- Head of College Life
- Vice-Chancellor's Office
- Head of Campus Safety
- Director of Student Experience and Education
- PVC Teaching Learning and Students
- Director of Communications
- Head of Internal Communications and Engagement
- York Student Union President
- CEO of York Student Union
- Director of Health and Safety Services (in circumstances where the death occurs abroad)

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 Police or Coroner's Office have confirmed that the next of kin/family have been told, inform the following: Student Records. In addition International Student Support, the Student Information team and Accommodation Services should be informed if applicable, as well as any other relevant University department (e.g. if the student has worked for the University, undertaken an internship or is a student ambassador).

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. At the same time exercise judgement on a case by case basis as to whether flowers should be sent to the student's family.

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 Head of Student Support, Deputy Head of Student Support and the Head of Open Door are on leave or otherwise unavailable, the Deputy Director of Student Life and Wellbeing or the Academic Registrar will assume responsibility for these duties.

Press Office

The Press Office will

- prepare a press release
- respond to all media enquiries and
- keep the Head of Student Support and where necessary other senior staff 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 College Manager. 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 Head of Student Support 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, by the Head of Student Support, 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 Life/College Manager](#)

When the death occurs in College premises, the Head of College Life/College Manager should

- provide whatever assistance is necessary to the police, Campus Safety and other statutory agencies involved in dealing with the immediate situation.
- Liaise with the Head of Student Support 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 Life may be best placed to take on the role of Family Contact. If doing so, it is important that the College Manager takes a lead in supporting the close friends and flatmates in College.

[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 needs in the circumstances, rather than be viewed as routine following any death. The Open Door Team will reach out to those students identified as being close friends of the deceased student to offer support.

[Academic Registrar](#)

The Academic Registrar, liaising with the Deputy Director of Student Life and Wellbeing, will discuss with the Head of Student Support 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, they will ensure that all concerned are clear about who is taking responsibility for that response.

They will brief the Chief Academic Support Officer on further details if the circumstances require it.

Accommodation Services

Accommodation Services 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 on matters regarding the room and with the College Manager to agree an appropriate way to deal with the room being re-allocated.

Chief Academic Support Officer

When they hear of the death, the Chief Academic Support Officer will inform the Vice Chancellor.

The Chief Academic Support Officer will also liaise with the Deputy Director of Student Life and Wellbeing and Head of Student Support to arrange any debriefing meetings that may be appropriate following an incident.

International Student Support Manager

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.

Student Experience and Education

When provided with confirmation of the death of a student, the Director of Student Experience and Education will circulate the student details to all the relevant administrative departments to ensure that no further correspondence is circulated. They will also amend the SITS record and inform UKVI if appropriate.

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

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.

York Student Union

When notified of a student death York Student Union will ensure that relevant services are informed.

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

York Student Union 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.

