

Procedure for Responding to the Death of a Student

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Note: All policies must be read in conjunction with all other SOAS policy, procedure and guidance documents. Printed copies of policies may not be the most up to date, therefore please refer to the policy pages on the SOAS external website or intranet for the latest version.

1. Purpose

- To provide a clear, compassionate, co-ordinated institutional response when a student dies (on campus, off campus, or abroad)
- To ensure responsibilities are clear, that key stakeholders are notified, that emotional, practical, and legal matters are handled with dignity and consistency
- To incorporate best practice in suicide postvention (i.e. how to respond after a death by suicide) to protect wellbeing in the student community, and reduce contagion risk.

2. Scope

- Applies to all enrolled students (undergraduate, postgraduate, online learning). If the university is informed of a former student's death then advancement/communications should be notified while admissions/registry/the relevant department should be notified if the university is informed of the death of an incoming applicant.
- Applies to deaths occurring on campus, in student accommodation, off campus, or overseas
- Covers the immediate response, liaison, communications, follow-up, review, memorials, inquests, and support to the university community
- Includes special additional steps when the death is suspected to be suicide or self-harm.

3. Guiding principles / ethical considerations

- The dignity, wishes, privacy, and grieving process of the deceased and their family/friends must be paramount
- Responses should be timely, compassionate, consistent, and proportionate
- Information disclosure must balance confidentiality / data protection with duty of care and support obligations

- Decisions (especially around whether to disclose cause of death or suspected suicide) should be made with senior oversight, legal advice, and in consultation with the family where possible
- Recognise the “ripple effect” – student deaths (especially by suicide) affect peers, staff, and the wider community – so emotional support, communication, and interventions matter
- The university’s response will closely follow the best practice guidance relating to postvention which is published by Universities UK (UUK) and is hosted on the Office for Students (OfS) website: [Responding to a suicide: advice for universities](#)
- The university should treat each death as a learning opportunity and ensure a review / postvention / critical incident review mechanism is triggered
- Co-ordinate with external agencies (police, coroner, NHS / local mental health services) as required.

4. Key roles / leads

A Response Group should be activated as soon as a death is suspected or confirmed. Members / leads will include:

Role / Team	Suggested lead / department <i>(nb. not all these post holders will be required to attend, invitation will depend on circumstances/availability)</i>	Key responsibilities / mandate
Senior Incident Owner / Executive Lead	Deputy Vice Chancellor	Oversee co-ordination, make high-level decisions (e.g. whether to issue public statement), ensure resources, escalate to leadership, approve reviews.
Family Liaison Lead	Usually the Multi-Faith Advisor and Coordinator	Acts as primary contact for the deceased’s next of kin/family, ensures communication, conveys condolences, co-ordinates logistical and practical matters with family.
Wellbeing / Counselling / Mental Health Lead	Director of Student Support, Wellbeing and Careers; Head of Advice and Wellbeing (for students) / Director of People (for staff)	Co-ordinates emotional support for students, staff, peers; arranges outreach, group sessions; links with external mental health services.

Communications / Media Lead	Director of Marketing, Student Recruitment, and Communications / Head of Communications	Manages internal and external messaging, press enquiries, media sensitivity, social media, memorial announcements, guidance to staff on language.
Security / Campus Incident / Estates Lead	Director of Estates / Assistant Director of Campus Safety	Manages the physical site of death, ensures safety of scene, liaises with police/coroner/undertakers, secures area, controls access, logistical removal of remains.
Academic / College / Department Lead	Dean and/or Head of Department where student was enrolled	Co-ordinates within department, handles academic logistics (communications to colleagues and students, managing class disruptions).
Registry / Student Records	Academic Registrar	Handles formal student status, next-of-kin contact details, record updates, data disclosure, certificate issues.
Student Accommodation / Halls Lead	Residential Operations Manager – Accommodation Office	If the student lived in halls, handles matters like room closure, belongings, liaising with residence staff or wardens, cleaning, reassigning rooms.
Chaplaincy / Faith / Pastoral Lead	Multi-Faith Advisor and Coordinator or designated Chaplain	Offers religious/spiritual support, liaises with family for funeral, supports memorial service planning, pastoral presence.
Students' Union / Student Affairs Lead	Students' Union Sabbatical Officer	Helps co-ordinate student-facing communications, memorial or tribute events, support to peer groups, liaises with societies/clubs.
Health & Safety	Director of Estates / Assistant Director of Campus Safety	Ensures health & safety incident protocols.
Insurance Lead	Chief Finance Officer / Deputy Director of Procurement and Insurance	Ensures insurance reporting, documentation, risk assessment, any liability considerations.

Review / Learning Lead	Director of Student Support, Wellbeing and Careers	Leads post-incident review, prepares lessons learned, updates policy, ensures dissemination of findings.
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5. Procedure: step-by-step

Below is a staged breakdown however in practice several streams run in parallel such as emergency response, communications, family liaison and student support.

Stage A: Immediate / first response (minutes to hours)

First alert / raise the alarm

- If a staff member, student, or campus safety receives a report (e.g. someone discovered unresponsive) then they must immediately call 999 (ambulance / police) if life is at risk.
- The first staff on scene should – if it is safe to do so – treat the scene with care: do not move the body; preserve the area; avoid disturbing possible evidence; but check if first aid is appropriate.
- They should notify the Campus Safety Team (located on the lower ground floor of Main Building).

Secure the scene

- Campus safety / estates will: ensure the location is safe, control access, ensure no contamination of the scene, and allow police / paramedics access to the location.
- If the death is in a student room, the door may be closed and a staff member stationed outside in order to minimise staff/other students entering the room prematurely.
- If the scene relates to student accommodation, the university will be required to work with the accommodation provider according to their procedures.

Emergency services / police / coroner liaison

- Emergency services will confirm whether the person is deceased.
- The police / coroner may need statements, scene preservation, removal of body. The university must co-operate by providing: any staff present, relevant room key access, CCTV footage if appropriate, student ID records, access logs, and anything relevant (while observing GDPR / data protection principles).

- The coroner's office becomes involved and will instruct on the removal of remains and further forensic processes.
- Support and advice should be provided to any staff and students who are required to provide statements to the police on behalf of the coroner. For example, how the process with the police will work; how the police will make contact; what sort of questions the police will ask; and how the statement will be drafted and agreed with them.

Mobilise the Response Group

- A clear escalation procedure for responding to the death of a student should begin with the first point of confirmation. Once reliable information is received – typically by campus safety, the accommodation team, or a senior member of staff – the incident should immediately be escalated to the university's Director of Student Support, Wellbeing and Careers who will immediately alert members of the Vice-Chancellors Group and confirm that a response group is being established. Information will then be cascaded across the institution in line with Stage A (Immediate internal communications & safeguarding - page 5 below) and Stage B (Public / external media communications - page 7). In the absence of the Director of Student Support, Wellbeing and Careers, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Finance and Operations) should be the point of contact.
- The Director of Student Support, Wellbeing and Careers will ensure the key leads identified in section 4 are notified and a meeting is convened (this may be in person or online).
- The Response Group will identify who is responsible for immediate tasks: securing the scene, liaising with emergency services, notifying senior leadership, initiating communications triage.
- A draft agenda for use by the Response Group at their first meeting is available at Appendix A.

Immediate internal communications & safeguarding

- The Communications Lead (with legal / senior oversight) should prepare a brief internal message to relevant staff (senior leadership, student support, campus safety, relevant academic staff) informing that an incident is being managed, with instructions to avoid speculation, to defer media comments, and to contact the Director of Student Support, Wellbeing and Careers with any queries.
- The university may consider pausing routine public announcements in affected areas / social media.

- The Head of Advice and Wellbeing should notify the mental health / counselling teams to prepare for increased demand.

Support for first responders / staff on scene

- Targeted support should be offered to the security staff, cleaners, residences staff and any other first responders who were directly involved as they may experience trauma or distress. Immediate debriefing, psychological support, and access to counselling should be arranged for those involved.

Stage B: Next hours to days (24 hours – 1 week)**Detailed verification and record keeping**

- Registry should confirm the full identification, enrolment status, emergency contact / next-of-kin details.
- Gather all facts known: the time the student was last seen, timeline of events, staff involvement, CCTV, access logs, and communications.
- Checks should be undertaken to understand if the student had recent contact with support services such as student advice and wellbeing and student casework and what recent contact key academic leads had with the student.
- Financial and legal obligations should be checked (e.g. reporting to insurers, any relevant health & safety issues).

Initial family / next-of-kin contact (as soon as possible)

- The Family Liaison Lead should, if possible, obtain next-of-kin / trusted contact information from student records.
- The Family Liaison Lead should make contact with the next-of-kin as soon as possible after the university has received notification that the next-of-kin has been informed of the death.
- Contact with utmost sensitivity: express condolences, indicate that a designated liaison will be the point of contact, ask for the family's wishes regarding communications, funeral, public statement and involvement.
- If cause / suspicion of suicide is at this stage uncertain, be cautious about discussing cause as the family may prefer discretion.

Public / external media communications

- The Communications Lead will develop a communications plan which ensures that student and staff communications are regularly published across the university's communications channels.
- One of the first communications tasks will be for the Communications Lead to prepare a letter of condolence to the student's family for the Vice-Chancellor which will include an open invitation for the family to visit the campus at a time of their choosing. Consideration should be given to this letter being personally delivered.
- The communications plan will include a prepared response to any media enquiries if the case becomes known or is media-worthy. The Communications Lead should issue a respectful, factual public statement (if the family consent). The statement should avoid sensational language, should not speculate on the cause of death, and should signpost support services for students and staff.
- If the death is suspected to be suicide, the media approach must follow best practice in suicide reporting (avoid graphic details/describing method, use signposting).
- Internally, a more detailed communication to the department / students may go out (again, with respect, minimal detail, signposting to support).
- The Response Group should ensure that all stakeholders including the Students' Union, union colleagues and Trustees are briefed and kept updated.

Outreach to affected students / cohorts

- The Head of Advice and Wellbeing should map students likely to be significantly affected (flatmates, course mates, friends, peers, student society members) and proactively reach out to offer counselling, drop-in sessions, group support forums.
- The Students' Union can help in co-ordinating peer support, memorial spaces, adopting protocols for student societies.
- Consider holding "safe space" drop-ins in campus venues, staffed by mental health professionals.
- Train academic staff – and potentially provide them with FAQs – about how to respond if students approach them so that they can provide guidance on compassionate responses, boundaries and referral pathways.

- Senior academic staff should attend each of the student's tutorial groups to speak to the student's fellow students and ensure they are aware of the support services that are available if needed.

Manage student practical issues

- Finance / fees / scholarships: freeze or adjust liabilities, consider refunds if there is credit on the account. Alert not to chase for debts.
- Registry: suspend enrolment status, manage enrolment closure, send communications to the student's department, and adjust internal systems so that the student is removed from any mailing systems/surveys.
- Academic: Department staff should remove the student's name from emails, group lists and registers (especially any which may be manual).
- IT / library: close accounts, retrieve any university property (such as ID cards) and secure data access.
- Students' Union: notify so that they can close their account.
- If the student held university responsibilities (e.g. as part-time staff, student representative roles) then make arrangements for handovers.

Liaison with external agencies / inquest

- The Family Liaison Lead / Director of Student Support, Wellbeing and Careers should liaise with the coroner's office, funeral directors, local authority, police, as needed.
- The university may offer to assist the family (e.g. help with logistics, travel, accommodation, chaplaincy) where appropriate and within policy.
- Prepare and provide administrative documents required by the coroner or family (enrolment verification, academic transcripts, records).
- Where the deceased student is a UK citizen that has been posted abroad (for study abroad; placements; internships), there may be a requirement to liaise with external agencies abroad including the UK consulate. The Deputy Director for Procurement and Insurance will make arrangements for the repatriation of the body if this is needed.
- The Director of Student Support, Wellbeing and Careers will notify the OfS of the circumstances of the student's death at regulation@officeforstudents.org.uk

- If there is the risk of suicide contagion, or a suspected suicide cluster, then the Director of Student Support, Wellbeing and Careers or the Head of Advice and Wellbeing will notify the relevant local Director of Public Health who leads the local suicide prevention response and co-ordinates with NHS services, local authorities, and Public Health England, which is now under the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID).

Memorials, tributes and commemorations

- Any memorial event must be sensitively considered; when the death is suspected suicide, extra care is needed.
- Engage with the family to understand whether they want public memorials, dedications, or low-key tributes, and what form.
- A book of condolence should be considered and set up in an accessible area, such as the Student Advice and Wellbeing space in the Paul Webley Wing.
- If the university establishes a memorial or remembrance (e.g. plaque, online tribute), ensure it is non-sensational, avoids explicit mention of any suicide method, and include signposting to mental health support.
- Consider timing (allow some period of privacy) and co-ordinate with student groups, chaplaincy and communications.
- The Academic Registrar and the Head of Department will liaise on the possibility of a posthumous award.

Record dates / anniversaries

- The Head of Advice and Wellbeing should record key trigger dates (birthday, anniversary of death) and may send a supportive message to close contacts or relevant student groups (as agreed with family).
- Consider a small commemorative activity (quiet moment, lectures, awareness events) – but consult the family before doing so.

Stage C: Longer-term follow-up, review & learning (weeks to months)

Accommodation clearing and return of belongings

- The accommodation team will work with the accommodation provider (and follow their procedures) and the next-of-kin to secure or clear the deceased's room, manage storage or the return of belongings (in line with family wishes).

Critical Incident / Postvention Review

- Within a suitable timeframe (e.g. 4 - 12 weeks), the Director of Student Support, Wellbeing and Careers will undertake a structured review of the incident: what went well, what gaps existed, any recommendations, any required changes to policy or practice.
- The review should include input from all the key leads who were involved in the Response Group as well as student representatives and, if possible, the family (or their representative).
- If the death was by suicide – or is suspected to be suicide – the review should include a postvention review (with learning for preventing future suicides). Universities UK's (UUK's) *Responding to a suicide: advice for universities* contains a checklist and suggestions for institutional learning.
- Identify any systemic contributors (e.g. pressures in academic workload, access to mental health services, access to means, staffing support).
- The Director of Student Support, Wellbeing and Careers will provide a report to the Executive Board with actionable recommendations, responsible leads, timelines, and accountability.
- The university will consider using anonymised case summaries to inform training, awareness and policy change.

Policy / protocol revision & training

- Any lessons learned will be used to revise this procedure – as well as staff training – in order to embed improvements.

Sustained community support & monitoring

- On-going counselling, therapy and support may be provided to affected students and staff who continue to suffer effects.
- Monitor for contagion risk or clustering (e.g. other students showing distress or suicidal ideation).
- Plan for awareness-raising, suicide prevention campaigns, support networks.
- Consider partnering with the Samaritans and other local mental health charities for periodic check-ins or postvention advice.

Reporting and external obligations

- The university will comply with any statutory reporting. For example, to the Health & Safety Executive, insurers and regulators.
- If the coroner issues a “Prevention of Future Deaths” or similar recommendation, the university will formally respond and follow through.

Evaluation and audit

- After 6 – 12 months, the university will review whether the recommendations have been implemented, evaluate outcomes, and audit the effectiveness of the procedure.

RESPONSE GROUP AGENDA

[Date, Time]

[Office location] and Microsoft Teams

Item	Timing	Subject	Lead	Format
1	XX:00	Welcome and apologies for absence	Chair	Verbal
2	XX:05	Student Information Gathering <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student/incident details – what do we know? • Review of student record/details of study • Feedback from academic advisor/tutors/last tutorial • Access to student wellbeing/casework services 	ALL	Verbal
3	XX:20	Reports from Single Points of Contact (<i>these need to be appointed at first meeting on [insert date]</i>) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Police • Coroner (movement of body, inquest update) • Family (support required, funeral arrangements, visit to campus, memorial) 	ALL	Verbal
4	XX:25	Communications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board of Trustees / Executive Board / SMT • Students/wider community • Briefing key stakeholders (SU, Unions) • Media Interest • Vice-Chancellor letter to family 	Head of Communications	Verbal
5	XX:30	Wellbeing Services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affected staff inc academic tutors • Identified close friends • Halls of residence students • Additional wellbeing services / communications • Chaplaincy engagement • Book of condolence • SU support to students affected. 	Head of Advice & Wellbeing / Director of People	Verbal

6	XX:40	Operational impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any events/standard operations that need to be postponed as a mark of respect? 	ALL	Verbal
7	XX:45	Office for Students (OfS) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reporting and response 	Director of Student Support, Wellbeing and Careers	Verbal
8	XX:50	Medium/longer term considerations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update student record Closing email and library accounts Close SU account Department staff to remove name from emails, group lists and registers Removal from any mailing lists / surveys Close student financial account and alert not to chase for debts / advise if balance on the account Inquest arrangements / preparation. 	Academic Registrar / HOD / Director of Student Support, Wellbeing and Careers	Verbal
9	17:55	Any Other Business <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Timings/frequency of next meetings 	ALL	Verbal