

Hannah Godfrey  
Area Coroner for Berkshire  
Berkshire Coroner Office,  
Town Hall,  
Blagrove Street,  
Reading  
RG1 1QH

4 September 2024

Dear Ms Godfrey,

### **INQUEST INTO THE DEATH OF BENJAMIN FAUX**

I write on behalf of the University of Reading ("the University") in response to the Prevention of Future Death Report ("PFD Report") dated 10 July 2024.

As a preliminary matter, the University would like to record its appreciation for the care and consideration with which the inquest into Ben's death was conducted, and for the issues that have been identified in the subsequent PFD Report. Whilst the University has already taken steps to address a number of these concerns, we also recognise that there are points highlighted here which remain live issues, and where more work is required on our part. We are engaging constructively with the matters of concern raised in the PFD Report with the aim of reducing potential risks faced by future generations of vulnerable students.

We note that the matters of concern raised in the PFD Report are specific to the group of students on "taught graduate research courses" at the University. We have interpreted this to mean our small portfolio of 'Master's by Research' ("MbR") programmes as Ben was on the chemistry MbR programme. As I briefly explained during my evidence at the inquest hearing, these are one-year Master's degrees which are formally categorised as 'research' rather than 'taught' programmes.

There are approximately 60 students at the University currently registered on MbR programmes. In terms of the practical delivery of these programmes, they have some features in common with postgraduate taught degrees, while in other respects they much more closely resemble research programmes. As such, we recognise that our student support processes (which are designed either for traditional 'taught' or 'research' programmes) have not been well-suited to this particular set of programmes. We have already undertaken a review of student support arrangements for MbR programmes, which we believe addresses some of the concerns raised in the PFD Report, alongside the actions set out in the table below.

| Concern | Response  | Actions (Deadline)   |
|---------|---|--|
| 1       | <p>The Academic Tutor role was revised a number of years ago, with a stronger provision of professional welfare support made available within the central student services teams.</p> <p>This change was an institutional decision made to reflect the view that it was more appropriate for academic staff to focus on providing academic and general pastoral support, with trained professionals providing more specialist welfare support where required.</p> | <p>1. Strengthen support system for MbR programmes to ensure that all MbR students have monthly meetings with two academic points of contact.</p> <p><u>Deadline:</u> Complete</p> |



|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
|   | <p>This division of responsibility between the Schools and the Welfare Team ensures that students facing more complex wellbeing concerns are able to access specific professional support alongside more general pastoral and academic support from their Academic Tutor.</p> <p>In relation to MbR programmes specifically, we have identified the over-reliance on the Project Supervisor as a source of support. To address this concern, we have updated the support system for MbR programmes such that all MbR students will now have two academic points of contact with whom they will meet monthly throughout their programme, and who can monitor academic engagement.</p>  |  |
| 2 | <p>We believe that the recommendations we have put in place relating to student support in MbR programmes (as set out above) will significantly reduce the risk of delay in identifying a student 's lack of engagement.</p> <p>We recognise there is a need for further pro-active follow-up with students whose non-engagement has been identified. To address this, the University will introduce a new process for MbR programmes whereby the relevant School Director of Academic Tutoring ("SDAT") emails relevant academic staff at regular intervals to request reports of any significant engagement concerns back to the SDAT (who would then follow up appropriately).</p> <p>This would be particularly pertinent for MbR programmes where there is limited scope for other forms of engagement monitoring.</p>   | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strengthen support system for MbR programmes to ensure that all MbR students have monthly meetings with two academic points of contact.</li> </ol> <p><u>Deadline:</u> Complete</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. New notification system to be implemented whereby the SDAT emails reminders to relevant academic staff at regular intervals to monitor and report engagement of MbR students. Student Support Centres ("SSCs") to provide templates to the SDATS for this purpose.</li> </ol> <p><u>Deadline:</u> September 2024 (ahead of start of academic year)</p> |
| 3 | <p>There will be a range of circumstances in which students, outside of our formal fitness to study process, may need to consider the possibility of suspending their studies. Our system for supporting students through to the conclusion of such discussions, is a weakness that the Coroner has correctly identified.</p> <p>The University will take the necessary steps to ensure that:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. students who have had a discussion with their school about withdrawal or suspension and who are considered to be vulnerable are flagged to relevant teams in the SSCs and Student Wellbeing Services;</li> <li>ii. staff in the SSCs actively support these students to suspend their studies, should that decision be taken by the student, for example by completing</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Updated process to be implemented for the 24/25 academic year</li> </ol> <p><u>Deadline:</u> September 2024 (ahead of start of academic year)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. New routine process to be introduced whereby when a vulnerable student confirms to staff in the SSCs that they don't wish to suspend, confirmation of this is sent back to the relevant member of academic staff.</li> </ol> <p><u>Deadline:</u> September 2024 (ahead of start of academic year)</p>  |




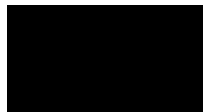
|           |   |  |
|-----------|---|--|
|           | <p>relevant paperwork on their behalf (with appropriate consent); and</p> <p>iii. in the event that no action to suspend is taken by the student, the Fitness to Study Process is triggered, empowering the University to carry out the suspension on the student's behalf in appropriate circumstances and in accordance with our procedures.</p>  |  |
| 4         | <p>The measures, referred to above, in relation to enhanced Academic Tutor support for students on MbR programmes are designed to reduce the risk of delays in identifying students who are not fit to study.</p> <p>Our response here is covered by our response to Concerns 2 and 3:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our response to Concern 2 addresses the issue of identifying non-engagement.</li> <li>• Our response to Concern 3 addresses how we will ensure that identified engagement issues are followed up until resolved.</li> </ul>   | See response to Concerns 2 and 3.  |
| 5a        | <p>In response to this Concern, the University has circulated new guidance to key staff. This has included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Instructing welfare officers to be more prescriptive on next steps when raising welfare concerns about a student with their school;</li> <li>ii. Reminding welfare officers not to assume that welfare references (such as the implications of the CRISIS team being involved with a student), and their implications will be understood by academics and other staff who are not trained welfare professionals;</li> <li>iii. Instructing the Student Wellbeing Team to promptly share concerns about high-risk students with the school's SDAT, in alignment with relevant professional codes of conduct (e.g. British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy code of conduct for Counsellors).</li> </ul> | Deadline: Complete   |
| 5b and 5c | <p>The University has clarified that the student support in place for MbR students should be aligned as far as possible with those on taught programmes. Therefore, it is the relevant SDAT who is responsible for ensuring that student support processes are seen through to completion for these students.</p>   | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. New notification system to be implemented whereby the SDAT emails reminders to relevant academic staff at regular intervals to monitor and report engagement of MbR students. SCCs to provide</li> </ol> |

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
|   |   | <p>template to SDATS for this purpose.</p> <p><u>Deadline:</u> September 2024 (ahead of start of academic year)</p> <p>2. New guidance to be circulated to SDATs and Heads of Schools in all schools with MbR students to reinforce the SDAT's responsibilities in relation to student support processes.</p> <p><u>Deadline:</u> September 2024 (ahead of start of academic year)</p> |
| 6 | This concern is addressed in the above responses. |  |

I would be grateful if you could confirm whether a copy of this letter will be served on Ben's family and the Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust as the other Interested Parties at the inquest and/or Universities UK as the other recipient of the PFD Report.

I also understand that you will be providing a copy of this response to the Chief Coroner. The University respectfully submits that in relation to the exercise of the Chief Coroner's discretion to issue a copy of this report to other persons, we do not consider there are any other persons who would find it useful to receive a copy of this response.

Yours sincerely,

  
Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education and Student Experience)