

**Harper Adams University - Respect Policy External Review**

Review Period: June 2022- November 2022

Report Date: 17<sup>th</sup> February 2023

**1. Background and Purpose:**

Harper Adams University and Harper Adams Students' Union approved the institution's Respect Policy in March 2021. The approval of the policy was a significant milestone in relation to the University's aim to "*ensure our community is free of harassment, violence, exploitation and intimidation and that through our actions collectively and individually we nurture an environment of respectfulness, positive relationships and experiences.*" However it is worth noting that work to change the culture had been underway in many areas of the institution before this, with the Policy drawing together these intentions and actions in a more holistic and integrated way.

One of the consequences of this whole institution policy was the development of an action plan to deliver the Respect Agenda which was focused on: "*laying the foundations and creating infrastructure*" (Report for Harper Adams Academic Board March 2022). Twelve months on from this, the senior leadership team wish to evaluate the effectiveness of the actions taken to date in order to support continuing progress in this area.

The purpose of the review, therefore, is to:

- Evaluate how widespread, organised and endemic are inappropriate behaviours that would be considered a breach of the Respect Policy and where these behaviours are embedded;
- Understand what are the most significant factors impacting on change;
- Evaluate to what extent proposed strategies are likely to lead to culture change and what else could be learned from the sector;
- Evaluate to what extent current respective governance procedures of the SU and Uni help or hinder culture and support adequate response to incidents.

**2. Deliverables**

At the end of this review, Harper Adams University and Harper Adams Students' Union will have:

- A report that details the findings of the review in the context of the above questions;
- Recommendations for future action based on a review of current and proposed strategies in light of sector experience;
- Recommendations relating to the respective governance procedures of the SU and University that are likely to support culture change.

**3. Methodology:**

**3.1 Primary research**

In order to better understand the context, the lived experiences of the community and the opportunities to further embed change, interviews were held with 17 members of staff/ officers across both the University and Students' Union, and with three focus groups of students from a range of academic disciplines and years of study.

**3.2 Secondary research**

- Students' Union Student Voice Surveys
- Existing data on discipline and complaints
- Case work information – summary of cases and nature of these

- Anonymous reporting mechanisms – summary of types of issue and where these occur
- Press coverage of events and issues at Harper Adams
- Staff survey data linked to experiences of culture, discrimination
- Data correlations based on demographics and activity

Sector research covering good practice guidance, regulatory requirements, other Universities' practice, plans and strategies

#### **4. Findings and recommendations:**

**4.1** In undertaking this review, we read relevant documentation and data reported to us by the University, interviewed staff and students, drew on our own experience of working in the sector, and reviewed relevant published sector information (see Appendix 2). Our recommendations are made on the basis of our work at Harper Adams and our knowledge of the sector in general. We would like to thank all of the staff and students who gave their time to talk to us, and for the frank and balanced way in which they approached the review. We would particularly like to acknowledge the work undertaken by Kate Baker, Simone Clarke and Liam Davies in supporting this review, as well as their leadership in the implementation of the Respect policy.

**4.2** The University and the Union have, to their credit, recognised the issues that need to be addressed, and have put time, effort and leadership into dealing with them. We were impressed by the extent to which, even during the period over which the review took place, progress was being made against the annual action plan, and recommendations that we had in mind after the first round of meetings had been overtaken by myriad actions taken by the University. Nonetheless, our impression is that Harper Adams has a larger gap between where it currently is and where it would like to be in respect of this agenda, than the university sector in general. Much has been done, but much remains to be done. While poor behaviour will arise in any community, we were shocked by some of the examples cited to us, and by aspects of the culture of the University that they illustrated. Nonetheless, given pressure on staff time and resources, and other priorities, we believe that the pace of change is appropriate. We are also mindful that “forcing the pace” on cultural change can lead to unintended and unhelpful consequences. We **Recommend** that the University maintains the current pace of its work and develops a two to three-year implementation plan with regular milestone reporting to the Board and senior management. **(R2)**

**4.3** Awareness of the Respect Policy was limited among the groups and individuals we spoke to. A typical response was awareness of the existence of the policy, but limited knowledge of its content, and not many individuals were prepared to say that they had read it. At the point at which we started the review the policy was not included in student induction. We understand, however, that induction this year has been significantly re-worked. The Respect policy is referred to and discussed throughout the process, including in sessions on the curriculum. Sessions have been recorded and discussions are taking place on a process to engage returning students. With those changes Harper Adams is much closer to what would be regarded as good practice. We **Recommend** that further action is taken to raise awareness and understanding of the Policy as follows:

- Regular reporting in the University's newsletter
- Reviewing the document to make it shorter and more digestible, or producing an executive summary for distribution to staff and students and visitors.
- Inclusion in staff induction

Making it a requirement that staff/student departmental meetings have it as an annual agenda item **(R3)**

**4.4** Student disciplinary procedure. We were told that in the past, matters, including serious allegations, had not been followed up and discipline, for example around acceptable

behaviour in bars has been lax, and standards and expectations have not been clear. From our discussion with the staff responsible, and our review of the procedures and a summary of cases we are satisfied that allegations of breach of disciplinary regulations are now being handled properly, so this is another area of significant progress. Both the University and the Union are setting clear standards of behaviour. Examples of unacceptable behaviour that are not dealt with properly can of course be powerful stories that pass from one generation of staff and students to the next and influence some of the less positive institutional cultures, and we were told about incidents that may have taken place some time ago. In that context we **Recommend** that the University publishes anonymised outcomes of disciplinary investigations, so that staff and students can see that unacceptable behaviour both on and off campus is dealt with appropriately **(R4)**.

- 4.5 The induction process for new students now includes the University's anonymous reporting tool, and this is a positive development. From our discussions, awareness of the tool is limited although recent evidence shows that this is growing and there is some way to go in convincing staff and students that it can be used without fear of reprisals. We **Recommend** that the University acts to publicise the process to both staff and students and the Board should receive annual reports on its use **(R5)**.
- 4.6 Many universities now have mandatory periodic training for staff on issues such as Respect. Harper Adams does not have any such provision. Given relatively low levels of staff turnover, the initial induction process for staff cannot be enough to discharge this responsibility. We **Recommend** that a target is set for all staff to be trained and for training to be repeated, say, every three years. We were told more than once that some staff do not have the skills to deal with unacceptable behaviour in the classroom and on campus and this should be addressed in training. **(R6)**
- 4.7 Harper Adams University has the potential to lead the development of the sectors of the economy in which it offers education and research. During our discussions we heard that the University is embracing this opportunity, but has some way to go. Some of the tensions that have been apparent in the University community are reinforced by different cultures in different academic disciplines, and the very different recruitment profiles of disciplines in terms of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic grouping. There appears to be little opportunity for students from different disciplines to interact in the classroom, and to engage in constructive debate. We **Recommend** that the Annual Report on Respect should explicitly cover educational developments including the embedding on Respect within curricula. **(R7)**
- 4.8 Harper Adams' student population is majority female, but this varies considerably between subjects with Engineering overwhelmingly male and veterinary nursing being predominantly female, for example. The proportion of BAME students is low across the board but again with variations between departments, with some significant areas of activity having literally no BAME entrants in the 2021 intake. To some extent these variations may follow national trends in the subjects offered, but it must be incumbent on the University to try to address these variations. The University has an Access and Participation Plan in place that reflects these issues, and actions are being taken to implement it. We commend this and simply point out that achieving a more diverse population at subject as well as institutional level is part and parcel of implementation of the Respect agenda. We **Recommend** that the University considers the implementation of the APP and the achievement of a more diverse student body at subject level as part of the Respect agenda **(R8)**
- 4.9 The Respect Policy is presented as a joint policy owned by the University and the Students' Union. While there is no question that the Union is committed to the policy and is taking actions in line with its objectives, the union officers we spoke to were unsure how joint ownership was effected in practice. We were told that there was no joint steering group for the policy, and that the only discussion on it over the last year to which the Union was a party was in the EDI committee. The commitment to joint ownership seems to us to be an important

one, and we **Recommend** that a joint steering group with joint Chairs, is established to oversee reviews and revisions to the policy and progress in implementation. **(R9)**

- 4.10** In our meetings we heard a perception that the Student Union was overly focused on events involving alcohol, and on revenue generation from bar sales. We also heard that the University had historically underfunded the Union, leaving it with limited funds to promote clubs and societies, and therefore limited ability to provide activities and opportunities to the full range of students, and a dependence on bar and event profits to fund other activities. We were also told that there is limited social space for students on campus that is not linked to the sale of alcohol. The Union was clearly aware of this perception and was taking appropriate steps to address it. In addition, we welcome the University's recent response to an application for an increase in block grant funding for the Union. We **Recommend** that the University and the Union engage in joint working to develop a multi-year plan for the Union that resources the Union to deliver against objectives agreed with the University, that will support the Respect agenda. **(R10)**

## **5. Summary of Recommendations:**

- **R1** - that the University acknowledges that implementation of the policy will require continued focus and effort over the next 2-3 years, with support and monitoring from the highest level, as it has had to this point.
- **R2** - that the University maintains the current pace of its work and develops a two to three-year implementation plan with regular milestone reporting to the Board and senior management.
- **R3** - that further action is taken to raise awareness and understanding of the Policy as follows:
  - Regular reporting in the University's newsletter
  - Reviewing the document to make it shorter and more digestible, or producing an executive summary for distribution to staff and students and visitors.
  - Inclusion in staff induction
  - Making it a requirement that staff/student departmental meetings have it as an annual agenda item
- **R4** - that the University publishes anonymised outcomes of disciplinary investigations, so that staff and students can see that unacceptable behaviour both on and off is dealt with appropriately.
- **R5** - that the University acts to publicise the process to both staff and students and the Board should receive annual reports on its use.
- **R6** - that a target is set for all staff to be trained and for training to be repeated, say, every three years. We were told more than once that some staff do not have the skills to deal with unacceptable behaviour in the classroom and on campus and this should be addressed in training.
- **R7** - that the Annual Report on Respect should explicitly cover educational developments including the embedding on Respect within curricula.
- **R8** - that the University review its student and staff profile at a subject level and benchmark it against similar subjects in other universities, and formulate an action plan to address its conclusions.
- **R9** - that a joint steering group is established to oversee reviews and revisions to the policy and progress in implementation.  
**R10** - that the University and the Union engage in joint working to develop a multi-year plan for the Union that resources the Union to deliver against objectives agreed with the University, that will support the Respect agenda.