

Review of the Impact of Students on the Local Community at the Start of the Academic Year

Dr Anne Mumford

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Introduction

This is a report of a review undertaken by Dr Anne Mumford on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer. The review was initiated following concerns by local residents regarding the behaviour of students and the impact of this behaviour on the local area, which is particularly intense during the first few weeks of the academic year.

“Freshers’ Week” starts a week before the start of the first term of the new academic year. It commences with the return of the hall committees on the Sunday (this year 25th September) and then the arrival of students into halls on the Tuesday-Thursday (this year 27th-29th September) with a phased arrival necessitated by logistics. Organised events commence in halls and the Students’ Union from the Tuesday night. Social events continue throughout the next ten days culminating with the Freshers’ Ball on the Saturday (this year 8th October) and the Freshers’ Bazaar on the following day. This runs in parallel with the start of the academic year with semester one commencing this year on 3rd October. Much of the activity is organised in halls and by the Students’ Union through their events team, clubs and societies.

This is a period where the University, the Students’ Union and Hall Committees work hard to ensure that students are welcomed to the University and to the town. Returning students come back early, volunteering their time, to play a key role in helping students make the adjustment to living away from their families and friends, making them feel welcome, providing advice and supporting students who take time to find their feet.

Returning students arrive prior to the start of term to their accommodation on campus or in the town with most second years and many finalists living off campus.

The change from vacation to term-time is a short period of rapid change both on campus and in the town as the students return for the start of the year. This has both positive and negative impacts.

This review involved meeting most of the groups involved in and affected by the impact of the return of students at the start of the year:

- residents - including attendance at a SARG meeting and a walk-round of both the Storer Road and Kingfisher areas;
- the local police;
- University staff; including the Vice-Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer;
- Loughborough Students’ Union Executive;
- Loughborough Students’ Union permanent staff;
- Chair of Hall Students Federation.

Key Findings

The Strength of the Feelings in the Local Community

Although this is a review of the start of the academic year, the feelings of the community relate to the whole year with “Freshers’ Week” being a high profile and more intense period of time. The disturbance is caused both by freshers (first years) and returning students, many of whom live in the town.

- Although the statistical evidence suggests that there have been no more complaints this year than last, people felt that the disturbance levels at the start of this academic year were greater than had previously been experienced.
- The unseasonably good weather at the start of the academic year contributed to the disturbance as students spent more time out of doors and people (students and residents) had windows open.
- Some local residents have reported that they are tired of being woken up by the noise as students go out and as they return as well as by social gatherings in houses.
- The areas which get disturbed by students have extended geographically as the Kingfisher Estate has been taken over by landlords for student lets rather than being owned by families. At the same time, the hours of disturbance have extended as students go out later (often after drinking in halls and at the Students’ Union first) and clubs stay open later.
- While there is a recognition that students do good work in the community and they bring economic benefit there are some people in the community who consider that this does not outweigh the negative impact.
- There is a view from some residents that the University, as well as the students, sees the “student experience” as being one long party and condones (or at least accepts) this.
- Comments from local residents reflected their desire to see the University encouraging students to work harder and creating an ethos of collective responsibility amongst all staff and students with regard to their responsibility to the town and its residents.
- Some residents expressed a belief that the University does little if anything to discipline students and that they considered the University protects sports people from facing disciplinary action.
- Many residents are very tolerant of a certain amount of disturbance, understanding that it goes with the territory of living in close proximity to a large number of young people. They are, however, not prepared to accept wilful damage, abuse or a lack of response to complaints.
- The behaviour of the majority of students is acceptable for much of the time. It is difficult for local residents to recognise this because of the poor behaviour of some students, the cumulative impact of incidents and the over-riding view of some local residents that the University does not do enough to sort things out. The well behaved students suffer as a result.

Key Findings

The University's Commitment to Good Community Relations

There is a great deal of evidence of actions taken and resources expended on behalf of the University and Loughborough Students' Union which reflect a commitment to good community relations.

– A vast amount of work has already been undertaken to provide advice and guidance to students on:

- managing their alcohol intake and staying healthy;
- appropriate behaviour;
- recognising that they are part of the wider Loughborough Community.

This includes:

- the "Better Decisions" campaign which has focused on countering peer pressure to drink and drinking prior to going out;
- printed materials;
- web resources (Welcome to Loughborough site for new and returning students; health and wellbeing information);
- the Student Charter;
- support from Community Wardens, Student Voice, the Town Students Federation etc.

Significant resources have been expended by the University.

- Briefing and training sessions are held for new hall and society chairs when they are elected and again at the start of the year. The importance of good student behaviour and respecting the local community are stressed.
- The Community Liaison Officer, the Community Wardens and Security staff work hard to respond to complaints and to attend incidents.

– Students input many hours of volunteering and fundraising effort for local organisations. Last academic year just under 2,000 students volunteered in the community with initiatives including:

- conservation projects;
- running events such as the Community Fun Day, a tea dance and kids art day;
- litter picking;
- assisting in a local soup kitchen;
- mentoring in schools;
- supporting older people in learning how to use computers and the internet.

– In Freshers' Week this year 449 students volunteered their time for projects at the start of the year.

This included 58 students working on a re-vamp of John Storer House as well as projects in local schools and conservation projects such as those at the Outwoods and the Mountsorrel extension of the Great Central Railway.

Key Findings

The Intensity of Freshers' Week

- Students have tremendous challenges to face during their first few weeks at University. For many it will be their first time away from home - for some the first time in the UK. Many have to come to terms with a new style of teaching and learning, new housing arrangements, making new friends and finding the extra-curricular activities that they will carry through their University career.
- Many also have to come to terms with a new level of independence that come with adulthood including managing their time and money independently, drinking and other social pressures.
- The University, Students Union and Hall Committees work hard to help students meet these new life challenges and settle in to a new community successfully.
- There has, in recent years, been some limited co-ordination of activities between the Students Union and Hall committees but there is no over-sight of the entire programme organised for freshers by one individual or group.
- The number of activities that do not feature alcohol, e.g. films, ice skating, barbeque and sports days, has been increased and Halls have been encouraged to leave some days without any organised activity.
- A substantial part of the programmes comprise disco and music based social events that feature alcohol and students expect this sort of event.
- There is a strong social trend for students to drink in Halls and houses before moving to their final destination around 11pm to midnight and leaving there around 3-4am. Organised Freshers' events tend to start earlier in an effort to limit drinking and structure student movement through town, often using buses or organised convoy walking to minimise disruption.
- Many students love the "Sing Off" competition and the feeling of participation and belonging it invokes. Hall Committees see winning the Sing Off as a key part of winning Hall of the Year. This year many of the practices were held outdoors due to the good weather and this caused additional disturbance and, in some cases due to the lyrics of the songs, offence.
- There are students, and this includes many international students and sports scholars, who do not wish to participate in the traditional events where the vast majority of students drink. Students are also neighbours and also do not like being disturbed should they wish to work or sleep.
- For the local residents the difference between the summer vacation is made more extreme by the concentration of student rented properties as the areas go from being very quiet to noisy.
- Freshers' Week is a high profile part of the student year when the need to establish new relationships combines with inexperience, a new level of independence and alcohol. It is inevitable that some students will make mistakes and act thoughtlessly thereby causing disturbance to residents. The considerable work of University staff and the Students' Union aims to minimise disruptive behaviour, mitigate the effects and to establish good patterns of behaviour for the future through advice and warnings as well as penalties for those who over-step the boundaries of reasonable behaviour.

Student Discipline Processes

The University has appropriate disciplinary processes in place and these are over-seen by the Student Disciplinary Committee and are well managed in their implementation.

Anecdotally there is a suggestion that there are a small number of very disruptive students. There is, however, no evidence through the records of disciplinary action that this is the case. This may be because many incidents are not reported through the formal channels and/or because there may be insufficient evidence to charge a student with poor behaviour. There are no links to the local anti-social behaviour database jointly managed by the police and Charnwood Borough Council (CBC) and there is no formal agreement for information exchange with the police.

Freshers' Week is critical in that standards are set in this period for the year. It seems likely that if a relaxed attitude is taken to behaviour at this time that this sets the expectations for the year.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

There should be changes to the management of Freshers' Week to include earlier planning and to ensure coordination of activity. These changes should include:

- a) There should be a single named person responsible for oversight of the Freshers' Week programme across all those involved in the organisation of activities. This person should discuss the programme and any identified risks and mitigation in place with the Chief Operating Officer and seek their advice prior to it being finalised.
- b) Hall Committees and their chairs should be accountable to the University through the Hall Wardens.
- c) Training for Hall Committees and planning for Freshers' Week should commence in March/April following elections to committees and a programme for halls should be put in place by July. This will enable any clashes of activity to be identified and to ensure that there are not too many organised events in town on any one night. Opportunities should be identified during this period for putting over messages to students regarding behaviour through a range of media – building on existing good practice.
- d) All programmes produced by Hall Committees should include one night off from organised events (particularly important for those halls where the students return early). This is happening in some halls and is considered to be good practice.
- e) Hall Wardens should work with their Hall Committees to identify the key risks associated with their Hall which will vary depending on location and seek to work with students to mitigate the impact on local residents and to create positive engagement.
- f) There should be a review of the regulation which relates to the constitution of Hall Committees and behaviour in Halls (Regulation XIX).

Recommendation 2:

There is a need for improvements in behaviour prior to, during and after the "Sing Off" event. The Students' Union, Hall Wardens and Committees should work together to ensure this happens to help make the Sing Off a positive celebration of Hall and Loughborough spirit and tradition. There should be changes to the management of the Sing Off as follows:

- a) The guidelines previously agreed should be made clear to Hall Committees and Hall Wardens. Committees and the Students' Union should work to get "buy in" to these. Briefing on the guidelines needs to be a part of the induction for Hall Chairs and Committees.
- b) Consideration should be given to practices not being allowed to start until all halls have returned (Thursday).
- c) The management of teams who fail to get to the next round should be improved to prevent them causing disturbance.
- d) LSU and Facilities Management should find somewhere for halls without a suitable location to practice indoors.
- e) The Sing Off should not be included in the scoring for Hall of the Year, allowing the main focus to be getting people to gain a sense of belonging and having fun. Other awards could be considered to encourage positive behaviour and make the event less intense.

Recommendation 3:

The University should undertake improvements which are visible to the local community which enhance their sense of safety and security and which improve the University's ability to discipline students. These should include:

- a) Funding additional CCTV cameras to be located in key locations. These cameras to complement and be linked with the existing coverage by CBC and to be managed following installation by them.
- b) Extending the current patrol hours from 3am to 4am on busy nights.
- c) Funding additional patrols in the Kingfisher area, some of which would need to be on foot.
- d) Funding an additional sub-warden in the Kingfisher area.

Recommendation 4:

The University should improve its communications with the community regarding student behaviour and discipline which is important both for the Freshers' Week period and the whole year and this should include:

- a) Communicating to the local community the steps taken to mitigate any anticipated problems in Freshers' Week.
- b) Establishing a communications protocol which provides consistency irrespective of the initiation of the contact (normally Security, Community Liaison Officer or Community Warden) with people who report incidents. This to include a personal visit or a closure letter from a designated person to those affected.
- c) Including an article in each Community Newsletter which relates to incidents - not necessarily quantifying the number of students disciplined or the penalties issued. This action to complement better communications with victims.
- d) Providing some more details to the residents group meetings about incidents in their own area, during Freshers' Week and throughout the year.

Recommendation 5:

There should be discussions regarding the implementation of the disciplinary procedures during Freshers' Week to ensure standards of expected behaviour are made clear and penalties are consistent. These to include:

- a) Reviewing the approach taken by Hall and Community Wardens to informal warnings and penalties aiming to move to greater consistency as to when informal and formal approaches are appropriate and to improved record-keeping using a shared database for formally recorded actions.
- b) Looking to ensure that all incidents of a serious nature as defined in the disciplinary regulations go through the disciplinary channels of the University.
- c) Penalties for poor behaviour in the community to be extended to include litter picking in the community the "morning after the night before".
- d) Providing more information on the web site (LSU and LU) regarding the disciplinary processes and penalties – aiming to be a deterrent as well as showing residents that we are advising students what might happen – particularly important at the start of the year.

Recommendation 6:

The University should continue to engage with a number of external agencies in progressing its desire to improve student behaviour and to reduce and mitigate impact on the local community which is particularly important at the start of the year. This engagement to include:

- a) Working with the local police and CBC to enable the University to use the anti-social behaviour Sentinel System. This is not a criminal record database. This could be used for identifying persistent offenders across agencies.
- b) Working with the police on data sharing of incidents which the police are investigating as criminal matters. This happens in other areas.
- c) Being proactive in inviting club promoters to discuss the planning for Freshers' Week with Hall Committees to ensure there are no clashes in the programme and that everyone works together to mitigate the impact of students visiting clubs on the local community.
- d) Investigating with CBC the extension of the no-drinking zone to the Kingfisher Estate.
- e) Discussing the range of approaches to property management with letting agencies to ensure best practice across rented properties for the benefit of students and other residents.

