

Fitness to Study Policy

News Associates is committed to supporting trainees and recognises the importance of a trainee's health and wellbeing in relation to his/her/their academic progression and wider experience. News Associates has a responsibility to support trainees to feel and function well in order to maximise their potential while studying with us. There may be occasions where the health or wellbeing of a trainee deteriorates to the point where it raises questions about their suitability to continue their studies; their capacity to participate fully and interact with other trainees, including partner institutions and others involved in delivering programme activities, such as placements; or their ability to use premises appropriately.

The purpose of this policy and procedure is to outline the steps that News Associates will follow when concerns are raised about the fitness to study of one of its trainees or applicants, or when a trainee is returning to study following a break enforced by ill health. The procedure may also be used to assess whether News Associates can support a trainee's application to placements, field trips and any other course-related activity or trip outside of the normal class-based setting, where a health condition or other issues are raised that may impact on the trainee's ability to successfully take part in their placement.

The policy aims to ensure that:

- Appropriate consideration is given to the personal situation, their health, wellbeing and/or any disability they may experience. This is balanced with the experience of other members of the News Associates community;
- Study support is appropriate to meet the required learning outcomes of their course;
- Trainees who are experiencing difficulties are supported to address their difficulties at the earliest appropriate point;
- Trainees, where possible, take an active part in the process and are encouraged to make informed decisions regarding options available;
- Reasonable adjustments are considered and implemented and where appropriate reviewed;
- Trainees are offered a non-judgemental, consistent and sensitive approach to the management of issues. This may require different stages of response according to the perceived stage of concern;
- News Associates seeks to provide a suitable and co-ordinated network around a trainee involving staff working together to support a trainee where their ill health impacts on their ability to study;
- Where appropriate, certain behaviours which would usually be dealt with as a disciplinary matter, may be considered under this policy;
- News Associates should ensure that trainees properly consider the impact of ill-health on their ability to study when committing to the trainee contract.
- News Associates should also discuss with the trainee whether there are strategies and support that could help them manage their studies successfully, and the likely impact the pressures of study might have on a trainee who is unwell.

Scope and Purpose

It is important that trainees take an active part in the Fitness to Study process and take appropriate steps to manage their own health and wellbeing in order to fulfil their academic potential. This can include working with relevant agencies and support organisations. The Fitness to Study Procedure is complementary to other means of managing concern about conduct or academic progress where there is sufficient concern about a trainee's behaviour, attendance and/or academic progress. This can be driven by mental or physical ill health or disability or have an impact on the health and safety of other people.

The policy may be used for all stages and modes of study: undergraduate, part time and full time study. The policy applies to applicants as well as enrolled trainees.

Actions taken as a result of this Policy and Procedure are not of a disciplinary nature. If action is taken about a trainee who is not fit to study, it will be limited to that which is necessary to protect as far as possible the interests of the trainee in question and all members of News Associates. Depending on the nature and seriousness of the issue, we may also consider behavioural concerns at any time during the Fitness to Study process.

Grounds for concerns about a Trainee's Fitness to Study

This might include (but not be limited to):

- Progressive or sudden deterioration in a trainee's attendance, engagement, quality of work, demeanour, or behaviour; that serious concerns about the trainee's wellbeing or safety have been expressed to by a member of News Associates staff; another trainee; a placement provider; or a an external agency (e.g. care team), that indicate that there is a need to address the trainee's Fitness to Study;
- The trainee has told a member of News Associates that they have a problem and/or provided information that indicates that there is a need to address the trainee's Fitness to Study;
- The trainee has behaved in a way that would otherwise be dealt with as a disciplinary matter, but independent evidence has been provided to show that the trainee's behaviour may be the result of an underlying physical or mental health problem linked to their Fitness to Study;
- The trainee's participation in their programme (including placements or other course related activity) is not enabling them to make progress with their studies and there is reason to believe that this is linked to their Fitness to Study;
- The trainee's physical behaviour or demeanour is not acceptable or is causing others to fear for their safety including other trainees, staff and/or third parties, and is thought to be the result of an underlying physical or mental health problem;
- Where a trainee has disclosed to News Associates that they have a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term negative effect on their ability to undertake normal daily activities as a trainee.

Fitness to Study Procedure

Stage 1 and 2

Stage 1 of the Fitness to Study policy is for members of staff to raise issues of concern about a trainee with the trainee, to try and identify the cause of those concerns, and to agree an action plan to support the trainee in effectively engaging with their studies. This can be initiated by a member of staff. Stage 2 of the procedure is where there is continued and ongoing concern following Stage 1, or when there is significant concern about a trainee's health, wellbeing, behaviour, safety and/or ability to study, meriting direct referral to Stage 2. Stage 2 can also be used where a member of staff has been advised of a trainee's intention to engage in an external placement and has concerns about how they will be appropriately supported during their placement. The primary staff member should contact and/or approach the trainee to request a meeting, as a result of concerns being raised about them in relation to their health, wellbeing and studying. The trainee will be made aware of the precise nature of the behaviour that has caused the concern.

Other relevant members of staff may be invited to the meeting. The trainee should be informed who else will be present. The trainee will be advised that they may bring a companion for support if they wish. The companion is invited to support the trainee during the process, not to advocate on their behalf. A list of agreed actions/outcomes should be documented by the primary member of staff at the meeting, and a copy sent to the trainee and all other attendees no more than five working days after the meeting has taken place. A secure record of these actions should be kept in for an agreed period of time, in line with News Associates' privacy policy.

In cases where the trainee is invited but fails to attend stage 2 meetings:

- The situation should be discussed in the trainee's absence.
- If there are straightforward options about how to proceed, agreed expectations, support options and plans should be communicated to the trainee with a timescale for completion and date of review.
- If the situation is more complex or unclear, steps should be taken to progress to a Stage 3 meeting. The trainee should be made aware that if they do not meet to discuss concerns about their health and wellbeing then the meeting may still go ahead in their absence. It may be necessary at this point to consider either referring to stage 3 or using Disciplinary Procedures, depending upon what is deemed most appropriate based on the available information.

Stage 3

Stage 3 of the procedure is used where there is ongoing concern following Stage 1 and/or 2, or when there is significant concern about a trainee's health, wellbeing, behaviour, safety and/or ability to study and engage appropriately at News Associates. Where there are serious concerns regarding risk to the health and safety of the trainee and/or where there is a perceived threat and risk to others, cases will be referred directly to stage 3, without completing stage 1 or 2.

Break in Studies

Where a trainee is detained under the Mental Health Act, News Associates will try, where possible, to defer their studies. This will be lifted once a Fitness to Study process has assessed the trainee's fitness to return to their studies. A stage 2 Fitness to Study meeting will be held to consider whether an action plan can be agreed for the trainee's return to studies, or whether the decision needs to be referred to a stage 3 Fitness to Study panel.

Temporary Suspension

At stage 3, a News Associates panel will be convened. Before the Fitness to Study Panel, the trainee will usually be temporarily suspended from News Associates pending a panel decision. The course director or their nominee may impose a temporary suspension for a set period of time, usually one month, with immediate effect and subject to regular review. A trainee who is temporarily suspended is prohibited from entering News Associates premises and from participating in News Associates activities without prior agreement in writing. The suspension may, exceptionally, be subject to qualification, such as the permission to enter News Associates premises to attend a meeting with a support service. The terms of suspension will be individual to each case and will be notified to the trainee in writing. This suspension is not intended to be punitive but to ensure News Associates can discharge its duty of care to the trainee and the wider News Associates community. A Fitness to Study Panel will be convened to consider the case.

In preparation for above meetings, relevant News Associates' staff may be invited to write a summary report of the present and past relevant/key issues. The contribution of representatives will be subject to Data Protection legislation and/or professional codes of confidentiality. This information will be sent to the meeting co-ordinator and may be circulated to staff attending the meeting and to the trainee and their nominated companion where instructed to do so by the trainee. A copy of the report should be sent to the trainee and to all other attendees of the meeting no more than five working days after the meeting has taken place.

If the trainee does not attend any of the agreed meetings:

- The situation will be discussed in the trainee's absence.
- Agreed expectations, support options and plans will be communicated to the trainee with a timescale for completion and date of review. The trainee should be made aware that if they fail to take the opportunity to meet to discuss concerns about their health and well-being and/or fail to provide any supporting evidence of an underlying issues then it there may be no alternative but to move the case to be considered in relation to the trainee contract signed at the beginning of their course. In cases where a break in studies is agreed it must be made clear what needs to happen in order for a return to study to be considered. Responsibilities for arranging meetings and obtaining evidence and documentation must be confirmed and included in the meeting notes.

Returning to Study

A return to study procedure should be used either where a trainee has had a break in studies under Fitness to Study Policy, or where a trainee has been detained in hospital under the Mental Health Act and wishes to return to their studies. In cases where the outcome of the Fitness to Study procedures result in a break in studies, the procedure for considering a return to study should be made clear to the trainee at the time of their interruption.

Prior to News Associates agreeing to a return to studies, the trainee will be asked to provide satisfactory evidence that they have overcome the original difficulties and are well enough to return. They will usually be asked to meet with News Associates' course director/head of journalism and mental health first aider. The precise nature of the evidence required from the trainee will be dependent on the individual circumstances. Where a trainee returns to study after a break in studies under this policy the relevant staff will consider any support that the trainee may require to support a return to studies, such as regular review meetings or a return to study action plan. The general expectation is that the trainee will take personal responsibility for fully engaging with this support. The decision to approve a trainee to return to study will be taken by a Fitness to Study Panel and will be communicated in writing to the trainee prior to their return, and any requirements and special arrangements will be made clear. This will determine the ongoing arrangements to support and review of the progress of the trainee to minimize risk of a recurrence of the original difficulties.

Appeals

A trainee may request a review of a Fitness to Study Panel decision reached at Stage 3 or where an application for a placement has been declined. Trainees should note that a request for review of a decision will only be accepted if there is evidence of the following:

- (a) The correct procedure has not been followed
- (b) Evidence of further material circumstances which could not reasonably have been expected to have been submitted for consideration by the Panel. Trainees should request a review by submitting a written statement detailing the grounds for request within 10 working days of being notified of a decision at Stage 3. The nominated representative will establish, in consultation with other course leaders, whether there is a case for consideration, or whether to dismiss the request and inform the trainee in writing of the reasons for doing so.

If it is decided that there is a case for a review, News Associates may review the case, or they may refer back to a Fitness to Study panel.

Completion of Procedures

At the conclusion of our procedures a trainee will be offered a Completion of Procedures letter signifying the end of the College internal Appeals Procedure. News Associates will usually only issue a Completion of Procedures letter once our appeals procedure has

concluded and a final decision has been provided to the trainee.

Applicants

Where concerns are raised in relation to an applicant's fitness to study prior to their enrolment a member of staff involved with raising the concern (the primary member of staff) should arrange a meeting with the applicant to discuss their concerns with the applicant with the aim of ascertaining whether News Associates can support the applicant in the successful enrolment in and completion of their studies. This may involve referral to a Mental Health Advisor or another health professional for assessment, if deemed necessary. The applicant will be invited to discuss the concern and the primary staff member will seek to establish the applicant's perception of the concern. The primary staff member may speak with other relevant members of staff as is appropriate in order to deal with the matter. If the primary staff member feels that there is an issue of concern regarding the applicant's fitness to study, s/he may take such action as is appropriate in the circumstances, including but not limited to one or more of the following:

- Draw up an action plan, to be monitored by News Associates with the agreement of the applicant, setting out how the matter is to be dealt with and any conditions to be placed on the applicant prior to and during the enrolment phase and during their initial studies (for example, in relation to their behaviour or in relation to support they should seek). The primary member of staff will set a review date and will notify the applicant that if any conditions set out in the action plan are not complied with, and/or if there is a continuation of the same or any additional concern, these issues will be discussed at the review meeting and may result in the applicant being referred back through the fitness to study process for further assessment after enrolment.
- Recommend that the applicant defer their studies until such a point as they are well enough to study. The applicant will be advised that when they do wish to take up their studies, they may be asked to provide satisfactory evidence that they have overcome the original difficulties and are fit enough to study. This may involve referral to a Mental Health Advisor or another health professional for assessment, if deemed necessary. The primary staff member will notify the applicant in writing, with reasons, of decisions reached and provide the applicant with a copy of any action plan normally within five working days of the meeting. If the applicant refuses to or cannot attend the meeting, the primary member of staff will need to decide whether to try and reorganise the meeting, or to make a decision based upon the information available to them at the time.
- Applicants should note that a request for review of a decision will only be accepted if there is evidence of the following:
 - (a) The correct procedure has not been followed
 - (b) Evidence of further material circumstances which could not reasonably have been expected to have been submitted for consideration by the Panel.

Glossary of terms

Fitness to Study

News Associates defines 'Fitness to Study' for trainees as: being able to participate fully in the programmes of study and placement that the College provides for them and to be able to engage appropriately in the News Associates community.

Independent evidence

Evidence about a trainee's fitness to study from a third party, normally a registered medical practitioner or other relevant registered healthcare professional.

Medical Evidence

Medical evidence should be clearly defined as that which addresses specifically the trainee's fitness to meet demands of the course and interacting as part of the News Associates community.

Temporary suspension

A period defined by a Fitness to Study Panel during which the trainee is not permitted to attend News Associates.