

## MEDIA STATEMENT

### Release of the Cultural Renewal at the University of Sydney Residential Colleges

29 November 2017

I am pleased to stand today, with the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney, Michael Spence, AC and with each of the five College heads, representing, St Andrews College, St John's College, Sancta Sophia College, Wesley College and the Women's College, as together they launch my report *Cultural Renewal at the University of Sydney Residential Colleges*.

This is the first time, to my knowledge, that a group of residential Colleges together with an Australian University has made transparent the findings of an independent expert on culture following a detailed review. Today we release an overarching thematic report together with 5 individual College reports. These individual College reports will be available on each College website at 11.30am.

Before I begin I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners on whose land we meet today, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and to pay my respects to their elders past and present. I also acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Islander people here today.

Over the past year, at the invitation of the College Heads and the Vice Chancellor, my team and I have conducted a thorough independent review of the current culture of each of the 5 participating Colleges. I can confirm that St Pauls College has now joined the cultural review and will undertake the same process concluding in June 2018.

I want to thank the College heads for giving my team and I unfettered access to their Colleges, including organising discussions groups and one on one interviews with students, staff and alumni, and providing us with access to key data and policies. I also want to acknowledge the individuals in the Australian community, including students, who have encouraged the University and the Colleges to embark on the process of cultural renewal.

It is never an easy task to hold the mirror up, to have a close look at the culture of the organisation we lead, and at times, to face issues that can be confronting, distressing and uncomfortable. But in my experience of examining organisational culture, those

organisations that do precisely this are the ones that continue to evolve and, remain relevant and dynamic.

In commissioning this independent review the Colleges invited me to shine a light on all aspects of college culture, the good and the bad. I commend them on this.

My team and I have connected with many hundreds of College students. Far from being uninterested in this work, students have been enthusiastic about contributing to the project with one student stating:

*I want College to be a place where everyone can have a positive time, like myself. If we need to change parts of the culture to make sure this happens, then I am all for it... We need to be a place for everyone....*

I acknowledge that on occasion students recounted distressing experiences. I want to thank all of those students who participated – and, in particular, those courageous students who shared their stories with my team. The report is much richer and more powerful because of your contributions.

I am not surprised by what I found in the Colleges. Having studied many organisations over the past decade, those aspects of the culture that do require strengthening are the ones I would have expected. This should in no way minimise the findings. Rather the findings should be a lever for strong action, action that needs to be taken, as a matter of priority.

I will take you through some of the key findings, but first a word on the methodology.

My team and I spoke to over 630 students and recent alumni during the project. In total we spoke to 42% of current students in discussion groups and in individual interviews. We surveyed over a thousand students, representing a 69% response rate.

This research has provided us with strong representative data. We also undertook extensive reviews of local and international best practice and this best practice forms the basis for our recommendations.

Turning to the findings now. Our research found that for most College students most of the time, their experience is positive and rewarding. This was an overwhelming finding, drawn from both our survey data and the qualitative data. Students spoke of the strong academic support, pastoral care, access to extra-curricular activities and

the establishment of firm friendships – all features of College life that enriched their overall University experience.

Our data shows that of students surveyed, 86% felt a sense of belonging at their College. This strong sense of belonging also featured in many of the discussions with students across all of the Colleges.

In addition to this, 89% of students felt supported by peers and staff. Students told us:

*I feel safe, included and truly believe that College has not only helped me excel in academia but also learn social skills and gain friendships for life.*

Though there is strong positive data, some students also identified challenges with College life.

Students spoke to us, for instance, of a so-called “big drinking culture” at College.

49% of College students believed that alcohol helped them to socialise and make friends – an important element of fitting in. A further 15% believed that there was too much focus on drinking at College. 13% experienced pressure to drink alcohol when they didn’t want to. Female students were significantly more likely to report experiencing this (15%) than males (9%).

In relation to issues concerning safety, 19% of students reported experiencing bullying or intimidation, pressure to participate in activities that were humiliating or intimidating to them or another student, or hazing. 50% of students said they had witnessed these behaviours.

25% of women and 6% of men reported experiencing sexual harassment since commencing at College. 46% said the harassment occurred either at their College residence or grounds while 44% said the sexual harassment occurred at a different University of Sydney College residence or grounds. The overwhelming majority of perpetrators were male.

6% of women and 1% of men reported that they had experienced actual or attempted sexual assault. In 95% of the incidents and in all the incidents reported by women, the alleged offender was male.

The data is compelling. As I mentioned earlier, overwhelmingly students’ stated that

they felt they belonged in College and felt supported by both staff and peers. But for some, College life is challenging. It can be isolating, and on occasion it can be unsafe.

Our evidence found that for women in particular, the College experience can be quite different to that of their male peers. This was evident across many data points, including experiencing 'exclusion or isolation', pressure to drink alcohol, sexist remarks, the pressure to have sex or hook up to fit in, experiences of sexual harassment and of sexual assault.

Turning now to the recommendations - I make 23. Many build on the promising strategies underway at the Colleges.

Each recommendation is intended to ensure a safe and supportive environment, for all students.

A cohesive and collaborative intercollegiate community will have a united response to culture. For this reason the recommendations are common across all Colleges.

Courageous leadership from College Councils, staff and student leaders lie at the heart of the recommendations. All three tiers of leadership should therefore actively own and champion the recommendations. With this objective in mind we propose that the leaders develop and deliver a clear and strong written statement (signed by all) that articulates the importance of cultural renewal, its benefit to individual students and the College more broadly. This message should also unequivocally state the College's zero-tolerance to any unacceptable behaviours and attitudes.

On student leadership, there is a set of recommendations that give greater capacity for the election of, not just the most popular students, but those student leaders who visibly demonstrate the best leadership qualities or potential, including a visible commitment to an inclusive and respectful College culture.

Our analysis shows that women are largely under-represented in student leadership roles. Over the last five years only 6 women have held the position of senior student or House President in co-ed Colleges compared to 16 men. The research is now unequivocal – leadership teams that are gender diverse, result in better decision making and outcomes.

Therefore, in co-ed colleges, we propose a range of options to ensure gender diverse teams are selected.

The students from co-ed colleges made it clear to us that they wanted to see more women in their leadership teams, which historically has not been the case. As one student told us:

*If males just keep on getting elected, good women students will leave. They will feel they don't have a voice.*

On ensuring the wider University campus is inclusive for all students – College and non-College students alike - we make specific recommendations to the University of Sydney. Our data found that around 51% of College students felt stigmatised on the broader University campus because they attend College. There was a sense that they did not belong on the campus. We therefore propose that the University's code of conduct prohibit negative or unacceptable comments, attitudes or behaviours from other non college University students and University staff towards College students and staff. We also recommend the creation of shared learning spaces within the Colleges where College and non-College students can come together.

Alcohol featured prominently in our discussions and in the Survey. The evidence from numerous research studies is clear - excessive alcohol consumption creates risk – risk to oneself and risk to others. Strong action to minimise any risk is therefore imperative.

So in relation to alcohol we make strong recommendations grounded in best practice approaches of harm minimisation, that seek to reform its demand and supply. We recommend one common alcohol policy across all Colleges. This will limit an individual's ability to "alcohol shop" as all College bars will operate in the same manner.

In relation to the operation of bars and events we recommend that the liquor license is held by and the bar is managed by an qualified external provider and that the use of student club fees for the purchase of alcohol be prohibited.

In relation to safety we again draw on best practice and recommend that the College's policies on bullying and harassment should explicitly include provisions that strictly prohibit hazing or any other behaviours that compromise students' physical or psychological safety and wellbeing. Swift action should be taken in relation to those who breach this policy.

In relation to sexual misconduct, and again drawing on best practice approaches, we

recommend that each College, and the University of Sydney develop with an expert, a stand alone policy. The policy should articulate a zero tolerance approach to sexual misconduct, a commitment to trauma informed victim/survivor support and strong action against those who breach the policy.

A stand alone policy sends a clear message to all students of the College's position on sexual misconduct. It also signals to survivors that all incidents and reports are taken seriously and in so doing, contributes to the creation of a safer reporting environment.

Linked to these recommendations is a call for Colleges - particularly those which are co-ed – to eradicate all elements of a hyper-masculine culture – one where male sport for instance, is celebrated over female sport and a “boys will be boys attitude” can be perpetuated. Where such culture exists negative attitudes and behaviours, particularly in relation to women, can be heightened.

Finally, we recommend that the survey should be administered again in 3 years to enable the Colleges to measure progress and to obtain trend data.

As I stated earlier, all of the Colleges have begun the process of implementing these recommendations already and I commend them on their proactive stance. Cultural change does not happen overnight. In institutions that have deep-seated traditions and customs it can take time. The cultural renewal process has built significant momentum and I am optimistic that the residential colleges at the University of Sydney are on a strong path of evolution. This report serves as a record that the Colleges are genuinely committed to ensuring the creation of environments where all students can thrive. It demonstrates a readiness by each institution to take further bold action to strengthen culture.

I am also encouraged by the fact that the University and all College Heads and Chairs have accepted my recommendations and have begun the process of implementation. Implementing the changes described in my reports will position the Colleges and the University of Sydney as leaders among Australian and international colleges and universities.

There is also a strong appetite for cultural reform from the students. Student contributions have been vital to the formulation of our recommendations. Constructive discussions on the findings and recommendations have been held with the cohort of 2018 student leaders. These student leaders will be important ambassadors of cultural reform. As one student stated:

*I have thoroughly enjoyed [College] and my attendance here has been a highlight of my life so far, and because of this, I'm in strong support of making changes that could make the experience even better for upcoming generations.*

I look forward to following the progress of each College as they continue on the path of cultural reform towards the creation of inclusive environments where every student feels supported, respected and safe.

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