

Mark Burch statement on behalf of the Board of Trustees, 22 October 2021

Introduction

In June 2021 the ArtsEd Board of Trustees [**The Board**] appointed Rebecca Tuck QC to independently investigate allegations of serious historic misconduct against both current and former staff members. This wrongdoing affected students 18 or over and mostly occurred during the period 2012-2017 in the School of Musical Theatre.

Rebecca has now completed that investigation and reported back her conclusions to The Board. I would like to pay tribute to Rebecca and her team for undertaking this investigation. Throughout this process she has acted fairly, objectively and with the highest levels of care and sensitivity to all those involved. Her conclusions and recommendations to The Board are entirely her own, and a number of them have already prompted swift and decisive action.

I would also like to thank those who came forward as part of this investigation to tell their story. I hope they agree that Rebecca treated their concerns and complaints with the upmost seriousness.

The conclusions reached by Rebecca are absolutely clear and we do not intend to soften or equivocate what is in the report. Naturally, it will take all of us some time to digest the full findings and to determine and fully implement every course of action that we need to take.

It is clear from reading the authoritative conclusions that some of the events that took place within the School of Musical Theatre were wrong and the result of a misguided culture, which was made worse by a failure in leadership.

What happened should never have happened. Some staff members acted wrongly. The Board of Trustees is ultimately responsible for the conduct of the staff, freelancers and visiting creatives, and on behalf of ArtsEd, I am deeply sorry.

It is now clear to The Board that a change in leadership is required if we are to demonstrate how serious we are about transforming our culture.

It is for that reason that our Principal, Chris Hocking, has concluded that it is in the best interests of the School for a new Principal to lead that effort. Chris was placed on a temporary leave of absence throughout the investigation and has today resigned from his position. Dr Julie Spencer, Director of the School of Acting, will continue as Interim Principal.

I recognise that this investigation takes place against the backdrop of a wider crisis in the industry, and that much of the wrongdoing in the report is similar to that identified in a number of other British drama and performing arts schools over the last two years. However, that does not excuse or justify it.

Over the last 12 months we have made good progress in changing our culture, processes and procedures, and I am confident that the School of Musical Theatre today is a much more secure and supportive learning environment. However, The Board recognises that more needs to be done if we are to restore trust and accountability back into the organisation.

Outlined below are further details relating to the investigation, including the key findings and the recommendations that have now been implemented as a result.

Key findings

Although the report recognises the dedication and professionalism of many staff members at ArtsEd, it also points out a number of areas where the behaviour of individual staff members, freelancers and visiting creatives fell far below the high standards that we demand.

Rebecca concluded that in the School of Musical Theatre, there was an overly sexualised environment within a number of music and dance classes. Terms such as 'sexy dance', 'wear what you dare' and 'naked bond' were notorious and clearly distressed some students. They were wholly inappropriate.

She found that some staff members exercised poor judgment in their relationships with HE students. There are examples in the report of inappropriate relationships between staff members and HE students, in clear breach of the School's strict policies and code of conduct. They should never have happened.

She found that some staff members had a lack of regard for the physical and mental wellbeing of HE students and failed in their duty of care towards them.

She found inconsistencies in how past allegations of misconduct were handled by the School's leadership, meaning that some staff misconduct was not addressed correctly.

She found that in some instances, policies and procedures had historically not been universally applied by senior leadership, in spite of being updated regularly, including most recently in February 2021.

And, in some cases, she found that there was a lack of communication with and support for those students that were affected.

Learning the right lessons

The Board has accepted in full the conclusions within the report and is resolved to put matters right.

I outline below some of the measures that we have immediately taken following the delivery of Rebecca's report.

1. The Board has agreed to set up a new special panel to conduct a review of the School's existing policies and procedures to ensure they are in line with industry best practice. Once finalised, new and updated policies and procedures will be incorporated into ongoing training programmes across the entire HE institution. This new panel will also review all employment contracts in the HE institution to ensure that they are clearly linked to the updated policies and procedures. This review would extend to the contracts for visiting staff and creatives.
2. A second panel will instruct an external governance consultant to complete a review of governance practices and processes. Whilst The Board was not the subject of specific recommendations, it was acknowledged that Trustees had lacked information about the culture that existed within the School of Musical Theatre and had not been consistently informed of disciplinary issues. The review would also cover whistle blowing and complaint procedures.
3. The School has commenced a review of well-being provision, which involves two senior staff members working with an external expert. This review will look at the existing provision being offered and where there are any gaps, make relevant recommendations for future provision.
4. The consent and intimacy training already being provided in the School of Acting will be extended to the School of Musical Theatre as soon as possible.
5. A new training programme in the use of language will be implemented for all HE staff, including freelancers and creatives.

The Board has set a clear timetable for the implementation of these actions and will appoint an independent external adviser next year to review and report back on our performance in meeting these goals.

I am confident that these robust measures are necessary and will deliver the change that is required. I also believe that the report and the investigation itself demonstrate how a School should hold itself to account.

The General Secretary of Equity, Paul Fleming, says that drama school leaders need to “step-up” to make sure the industry is safe for young performers just starting out in their careers. We recognise that there have been calls for greater industry-wide collaboration to address these issues, including a new independent body with responsibility for driving these changes. The Board would welcome such a move and will closely examine the ways in which we can contribute to the conversation in the months ahead.

Once again, I would like to thank all of those who came forward to tell their story, and for Rebecca in undertaking the investigation and delivering the report.

I am confident that this report will mark the moment where ArtsEd is able to step up and confront those challenges set out in the report and the industry at large.

Mark Burch, Chair of the Board of Trustees

Statement on behalf of Chris Hocking

“I have, after 23 years at ArtsEd, stood down from my position as Principal with effect from today. I wish ArtsEd all success in the future.” **-ENDS-**