

Witness Name: Atanas Popov

Statement No: WITN0051001

Dated: 22 September 2025

## THE NOTTINGHAM INQUIRY

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### FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF PROFESSOR ATANAS POPOV

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I, Atanas Popov, of the University of Nottingham, Faculty of Engineering, Advanced Manufacturing Building, Jubilee Campus, Nottingham, NG7 2GX (the “**University**”) will say as follows: -

#### INTRODUCTION

1. This witness statement is made to assist the Nottingham Inquiry (the “**Inquiry**”) with the matters set out in the Rule 9 Request dated 26 June 2025.
2. I am a Professor of Mechanical Engineering and have worked at the University for 26 years.
3. My academic career started in 1989 in Bulgaria as Assistant Professor in Engineering Mechanics in Sofia. After six months as a Visiting Professor in Hamburg in Germany, I moved in 1995 to University College London on a Royal Society Fellowship. Between 1997 and 1999, I was a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Engineering Department at the University of Cambridge. From 1999, I was consecutively a Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Reader and Professor in the Faculty of Engineering (the “**Faculty**”) at the University of Nottingham. From 2005 to 2010, I was the Undergraduate Vice-Dean for the Faculty, with responsibilities for the management of academic quality and standards. I also participated as Chair in different Faculty committees. In summary, I have interacted with undergraduate and postgraduate students for about 40 years.

4. The role of Professor of Mechanical Engineering includes teaching engineering students. Each academic year, I lecture on 2-3 teaching modules and supervise 3-6 final year project students. In addition, I am responsible for conducting research, both academic and industrial, and for supervising 2-5 doctoral students at a time.
5. I am the Personal Tutor to 20-25 undergraduate and postgraduate students. The Personal Tutor role includes pastoral, but no formal wellbeing, responsibilities. Essentially, I am the first point of contact for my tutees when they have questions about the course or need any form of support outside of the direct teaching activities. When students require wellbeing support, my role is to refer them to the established and specialised University departments in this area.

### **CHRONOLOGY**

6. I have been asked to set out a chronological account of my contact with Valdo Calocane, who I will refer to as Valdo throughout this statement. I did not meet or have contact with any member of Valdo's family. In general, I would not expect to meet or have contact with a student's family.
7. I got to know Valdo in the 2019/20 academic year, when Valdo selected the optional module, Advanced Dynamics and Vibration, on which I taught. He would then have been in the third year of his studies, and his cohort on this module comprised of 37 students. I recall him attending some of my lectures and always sitting quite close, alone, to the front of the small room in which the lectures took place and willing to answer questions in a way that showed a good understanding. My impression of him at the time was that he was more serious than the other students (this may have been because he was more mature than them in age) and that he did not interact much with them. The only direct interaction I had with Valdo in relation to this module was when Valdo e-mailed me on 29 November 2019 that he would be late submitting the assigned coursework. This was just for my information for the coursework

marking because he was not claiming any mitigating circumstances and did not request any formal extension [UNIN0001630]. In his submission, the work carried a penalty of 5% for lateness.

8. In the 2020/21 academic year, when he was in the fourth year of his studies, Valdo selected his final MEng individual project with me – there were six other students (4 BEng and 2 MEng students) under my supervision. The work did not require any interaction between them. I organised individual online Teams meetings (due to Covid-19) with all students.
9. In general, I meet my project students on a weekly basis for about 30 minutes each throughout the academic year, from the start of the Autumn term in October. In Valdo's case it was difficult to establish this channel of communication because he did not attend meetings, even when rescheduled on his request.
10. I found it quite difficult to pin Valdo down. Valdo had a tendency to confirm meetings, but then to cancel close to the meeting date or not turn up.
11. For example, I arranged a meeting with Valdo for the morning of 30 September 2020 and he accepted the meeting request [UNIN0000788], but did not attend, apologising in an e-mail he sent to me just after the meeting had been due to conclude and explaining that his internet connection had suddenly been cut off and asking to reschedule [UNIN0001779]. I suggested we meet after 3pm but Valdo responded to say he would be at a seminar and asked if I could meet 'now' (11.20am) or if not then at 1pm [UNIN0001250]. I sent a Teams meeting invite for 12.30 – 12.45pm [UNIN0000380] but Valdo did not accept the meeting.
12. We were also meant to meet on 5 October 2020, but Valdo did not attend this meeting either and e-mailed me on 6 October 2020 offering his apologies and saying that he had been busy elsewhere, had not seen the meeting request and asking to reschedule [UNIN0001075]. I responded to Valdo the same day

and said we had had trouble setting a meeting in the last two weeks. I explained I had limited flexibility to change meetings during the Autumn term and asked to meet at 10am on Wednesday (this was a reference to Wednesday 7 October 2020, the day after we had the e-mail exchange). Valdo responded and we did meet on 7 October 2020.

13. We also managed to meet on 19 October 2020 on Teams [UNIN0000371].
14. In these meetings, we only discussed Valdo's academic work and Valdo was polite and courteous.
15. After these two meetings, Valdo seemed to disappear and did not communicate with me at all. He also stopped accepting or rejecting the meeting requests, except an e-mail on 26 October 2020 in which Valdo told me he could not make the meeting scheduled for that day [UNIN0001153]. I responded to confirm I had cancelled the meeting but told Valdo it would be difficult to re-schedule as I had checked both his timetable and my schedule [UNIN0001588].
16. On 2 November 2020, I wrote to Valdo, copying his Personal Tutor, Dr Stewart McWilliam, to highlight the serious difficulties I had been having trying to organise regular project meetings with him [UNIN0000521]. This is my normal practice in similar cases of lack of engagement by the students. My e-mail to Valdo was as follows:

*"I hope that you are well. I am writing to you and copying your personal tutor in this e-mail. I have had some serious difficulties up to now to organise project meetings with you. I must admit that this comes as a surprise to me because I rarely have any difficulties in this particular aspect of our teaching delivery. You have been cancelling meetings at a short notice, or not turning up to the meetings at all. Please discuss your learning plans with your tutor as a matter of urgency."*

17. I did not get a response from Valdo to this e-mail and contacted Stewart again a week later on 9 November 2020 when Valdo again failed to show up for a meeting with me [UNIN0000257].

18. At this point, Stewart let me know that Valdo was discussing an interruption of studies with the Senior/Deputy Senior Tutor. Stewart confirmed to me on 10 November 2020 that Valdo was taking an interruption from his studies [UNIN0000342]. I did not know why and did not ask as it was not information that I needed to be privy to.

19. I had no further interactions with Valdo in 2020 after this, but at the start of the 2021/22 academic year, on 8 October 2021, the Year 4 Lead, Dr Donald Giddings, contacted me about Valdo. Donald asked whether Valdo was still undertaking my project as it appeared he hadn't registered [UNIN0001457]. I wrote to Donald the same day to inform him that Valdo was no longer studying on my project and had not done any work on it before he interrupted his studies the last academic year. I advised Donald that Valdo would need another project and supervisor [UNIN0001076]. As far as I recall, I said this because I did not have any project slots free at that point. I understand that Valdo was allocated to another project, supervised by Dr James Rouse.

20. At the start of the 2021/22 academic year, Valdo had provisionally selected my optional module Automotive Vehicle Dynamics for the Spring semester. On 13 February 2022, I wrote to Stewart McWilliam, his Personal Tutor, to ask what Valdo's status was, as he was still registered on that particular module, but had not attended teaching sessions from the end of January 2022 and did not seem to be doing any work on the module [UNIN0001473]. Stewart responded the same day [UNIN0001094]. Stewart's e-mail said:

*"Sorry to say he is ill and unlikely to attend this next week. I will have a chat with Emma Barney to discuss what's best for him to do."*

21. I recollect that I found out from Stewart in person, I believe around the end of

February or beginning of March 2022 (although I can't be sure of the date), that Valdo had replaced my teaching module with another optional module after the start of the Spring term.

22. Apart from trying to get Valdo to attend meetings, I did not have any difficulties with Valdo and my correspondence with him was fairly routine. I did not observe or hear of any behaviour which gave me cause for concern.

23. At the time Valdo was a student, I was not aware he was suffering with mental illness whilst he was a student or that he had been admitted to hospital because of this. I was not aware that Valdo had any interactions with the police or the University security team. I am not aware of any complaints made to the University about Valdo's behaviour, or any Fitness to Study assessment of Valdo whilst at the University. Given my limited involvement in Valdo's academic studies, I would not expect to be made aware of these types of issues.

#### **THE UNIVERSITY'S STUDENT WELLBEING SERVICES AND MENTAL HEALTH ADVISORY SERVICE**

24. I have been asked what training I received. In relation to my role as a Personal Tutor, I have had training in how to conduct tutorials and undertake pastoral care, which included training on how students can submit Extenuating Circumstances claims, difficulties students might experience during their studies, and what services are available for signposting students to. This training was delivered in person by the Senior Tutor at the beginning of each academic year and information on how to support students is also available to tutors on Moodle [UNIN0001840].

25. The University website contained relevant policies and procedures. There is also information available on Moodle [UNIN0001840]. I did find them useful.

26. At the time (2017 – 2022), my understanding of the role of Student Wellbeing

services was that they offered support to students for a range of difficulties, such as financial difficulties or mental health. The Support and Wellbeing service would be my first port of call if I had a student who came to me with an issue. I spoke with the Support and Wellbeing service fairly regularly and always found them to be helpful.

27. I was familiar with the mental health advisory service (“MHAS”) and understood what services they offered, but I have not had any direct interaction with MHAS because I have not had any students who have required MHAS’ support. My understanding was that if I had a student with mental health issues, I could refer them to MHAS.

28. If I had concerns about the mental health of a student, then at that time I would or could have discussed the case with the personal tutor of the student in the first instance. The personal tutor would have been able to escalate the case to the Year Leads, Senior Tutors and the Head of Department, if necessary, for referring the student to the specialised University services who could provide direct support. Also, I could or would have directed the student to the relevant services depending on the nature of the issue.

29. If I had concerns about the risk a student posed to the safety of others, the actions which I would or could have taken in 2017-2022 would depend on how bad the situation was. In the case of an immediate physical risk, I would or could have contacted Security for help. If my concerns were less serious, I would listen to the student and then signpost them to the relevant services.

### **OBSERVATIONS**

30. I have been asked to comment on whether I think I should have been told more about Valdo Calocane’s behaviour while at the University, his mental illness and/or his interactions with the police, and if so what I should have

been told and by who. I do not think that I needed to know this information about Valdo at the time.

31. I have been asked to comment on whether I consider there are additional actions that I or the University could have taken in respect of Valdo Calocane. From my point of view, I am not able to see any additional actions that could have been undertaken.

32. I have been asked to comment on whether I consider there are any structural issues (such as guidelines/policies, training, organisational structure, communication with others in or outside the University) which contributed to any of the issues I have identified. I cannot identify any issues. Generally, the University has worked effectively in terms of supporting students.

33. I have been asked to comment on what recommendations I think the Chair of this Inquiry should make to ensure lessons are learned and to prevent similar attacks in the future. As I had very limited involvement in relation to Valdo and I am not an expert in mental health, it is difficult for me to comment here.

34. I have been asked what improvements I think could be made to the University or to the higher education sector generally in how they deal with acutely mentally ill students and / or students who pose a risk of safety to others. I do not think the University can and should deal with acutely mentally ill students. This should be done by the NHS.

### **Statement of Truth**

I believe the content of this statement to be true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed **GRO-B** \_\_\_\_\_

Dated: 22/09/2025 \_\_\_\_\_

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<b>No.</b>	<b>Inquiry URN</b>	<b>Document Description</b>
1.	UNIN0001630	Email from Valdo Mendes Calocane to Atanas Popov, re: Coursework
2.	UNIN0000788	Email Appointment from Valdo Mendes Calocane to Atanas Popov (UON), re: Accepted: short project meeting
3.	UNIN0001779	Email from Valdo Mendes Calocane to Atanas Popov, re: Re: Design Project Meeting
4.	UNIN0001250	Email from Valdo Mendes Calocane to Atanas Popov, re: Re: Design Project Meeting
5.	UNIN0000380	Email from Atanas Popov [University of Nottingham] to Valdo Mendes Calocane [University of Nottingham] Re: project meeting
6.	UNIN0001075	Email from Valdo Mendes Calocane to Atanas Popov [UNIN], re: Meeting
7.	UNIN0000371	Email from Atanas Popov [University of Nottingham] to Valdo Mendes Calocane Re: regular project meeting
8.	UNIN0001153	Email from Valdo Mendes Calocane to Atanas Popov, re: Meeting
9.	UNIN0001588	Email from Atanas Popov to Valdo Mendes Calocane, re: re:
10.	UNIN0000521	Email from Atanas Popov to Valdo Mendes Calocane and Stewart McWilliam Re: project meetings
11.	UNIN0000257	Email from Atanas Popov [UNIN] to Stewart McWilliam [UNIN] Re: Your tutee Valdo
12.	UNIN0000342	Email from Stewart McWilliam (UON) to Atanas Popov (UON), re: Valdo
13.	UNIN0001457	Email from Donald Giddings to Atanas Popov, re: Valdo?

14.	UNIN0001076	Email from Atanas Popov to Donald Giddings, re: Valdo?
15.	UNIN0001473	Email from Atanas Popov to Stewart McWilliam, re: Your tutee
16.	UNIN0001094	Email from Stewart McWilliam to Atanas Popov, re: Re; Your tutee
17.	UNIN0001840	Module M3 Personal Tutors (UK) moodle Nottingham