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The summer interns and the law

THE INTERNS & THE LAW FIRM

# firm

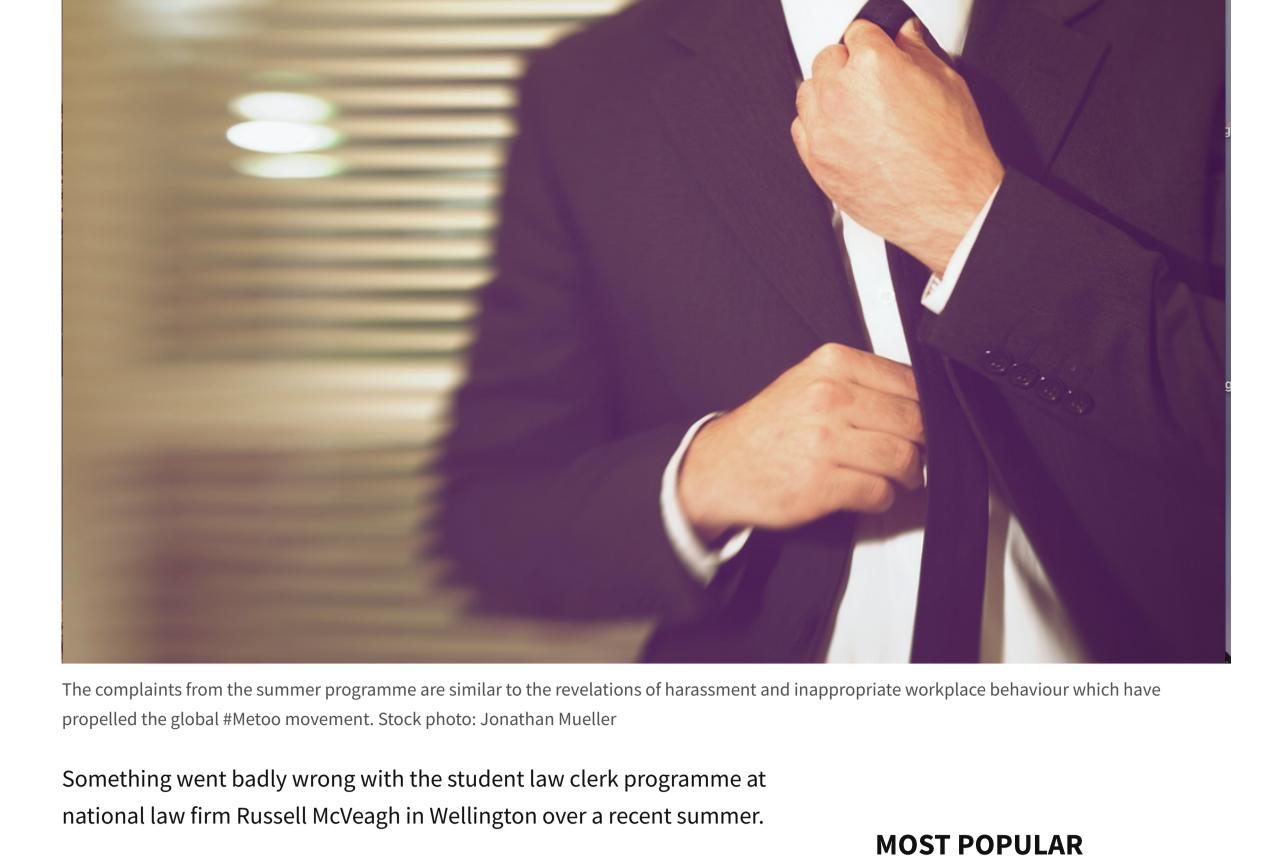




by **Sasha Borissenko** and **Melanie Reid** 

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'Roadside drug least one report made to the police and a later reform of the testing's puritanical political agenda' clerk programme including a ban on alcohol and the launch of a helpline for

them to seek support. The matter went before the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee and

Newsroom has learned of a pattern of sexually inappropriate behaviour

towards the female students that saw our leading universities intervene, at

the NZ Law Deans, who oversee the law schools sending graduates to Russell McVeagh and other workplaces. Victoria University said today its staff were "extremely disappointed that the incidents occurred" but found Russell McVeagh senior staff "genuinely concerned" for the welfare of those involved and determined to ensure the

safety of future clerks.

programme.

incident.

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clerking programme.

right to privacy.

incidents occurred".

their final year of studies, having accepted offers from the firm to take fulltime roles at the end of the study year. Some of the clerks in this programme raised concerns of a sexual nature with Russell McVeagh's human resources team. A university representative

met the chief executive of the Law Society to discuss complaining about

lawyers' actions in the affair but was told there was nothing that could be

Newsroom has not named the clerks or specified the dates of their

programme to protect their privacy, or - for now - the identities of the

lawyers involved. But in a multi-month investigation, Newsroom has

done without a formal complaint to the Society.

contested positions working in a firm. They return to university to complete

Summer clerking generally involves students competing for highly-

confirmed details from within the law and academia and has documents about the incidents and their ramifications. It is not unusual within companies and law firms for internal matters to be covered by non-disclosure agreements yet Newsroom is told such confidentiality measures were raised in connection with the summer intern

The complaints from the summer programme are similar to the revelations

Five women among the 10 clerks on the programme who were offered full-

time clerk positions at the end of the summer declined Russell McVeagh's

of harassment and inappropriate workplace behaviour which have

propelled the global #Metoo movement.

offer, a highly unusual outcome. The firm promotes itself as the country's premier law firm and "New Zealand's legal employer of choice".

Newsroom understands two older male lawyers who were the subject of

at times continued on Russell McVeagh work in his area of expertise.

clerk and university concern are now working in different roles, but one has

authority arose from Christmas functions that year. A third incident was at a Wellington venue, El Horno Bar. A complaint to

police about the actions of one man in attendance arose from the El Horno

department the issues were heard but no resolution was concluded at that

When the clerks approached the Russell McVeagh human resources

It is understood two incidents which provoked appeals for help to those in

Eventually the heads of the law schools at Victoria University and Canterbury University became aware of the allegations and further reports of sexual harassment after a student organisation raised concerns later over

a public event at Victoria. Armed with statements from the complainants,

and in the interests of student safety, the universities took the matter up

with Russell McVeagh directly and the firm committed to overhaul the clerk

programme and change alcohol-related policies. A helpline was introduced.

"Victoria was not involved in the resolution of the complaints as

we ascertained this was a matter being investigated by the Police.

We were extremely cautious about not doing anything to compromise this investigation." Victoria University Vice-Chancellor Professor Grant Guilford The sub-culture around working hard and partying hard during legal clerking programmes has been a feature of law firms beyond Russell

McVeagh and is well-known in the legal fraternity, often mixing powerful

men with young women seeking their first, potential, employment in the

Clerks at the Russell McVeagh programme talked about a particular, named,

cocktail being ordered for them in the early hours, recalled to Newsroom by

someone who once worked at the firm as "a lethal drink" that "I myself fell

A university official took up the concerns with the Law Society and then-

Chief Executive Christine Grice, now a High Court judge, who informed them

of the difficulties of taking the matter further without a formal complaint.

victim to when I was summer clerking".

Since the events, the Victoria University Law Students' Society cut sponsorship ties with Russell McVeagh for their Women in Law event and then Ngā Rangahautira (the Māori Law Students Association) rejected a sponsorship offer for Māori Language Week from Russell McVeagh, citing a clash in values with the firm.

The firm, formed in 1863, has 350 partners and staff across its Auckland and

country's largest company and largest listed company among many others

It advertises its summer clerk programme by saying: "As a summer clerk at

Russell McVeagh, you will work in at least two practice areas of your choice,

have ongoing technical and soft skill training, meet some great people and

have all the perks of working at a top tier firm.

issues which he was not able to discuss today.

Wellington offices and represents all of New Zealand's retail banks, the

on the NZX. Ten of the 36 partners shown on its corporate website are

"Our aim is for each of our summer clerks to have a great summer, get to know our firm, our people and our values and ultimately, to join us as a graduate once they finish university. This means that we only recruit as many summer clerks as we need for graduate positions." Approached for comment about what happened in Wellington that summer,

the firm's chief executive Gary McDiarmid said there were significant legal

Russell McVeagh was considering a list of written questions submitted by

In a response to Newsroom's questions, the Vice-Chancellor of Victoria

complaints, and had since helped Russell McVeagh examine its summer

"[Senior staff] were immediately involved in working closely with senior

ascertained this was a matter being investigated by the Police. We were

investigation. We were, however, involved in supporting our students and

advocating for them to protect their rights in the process, including their

extremely cautious about not doing anything to compromise this

"This matter was discussed by the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors'

University, Professor Grant Guilford said senior staff knew about the

staff at Russell McVeagh to examine the firm's procedures around the summer clerking programme in order to provide assurances around the safety of summer clerks working in the firm in the future," he said. "Victoria was not involved in the resolution of the complaints as we

safety of future summer clerks working at Russell McVeagh and other workplaces that run summer clerkship programmes. These discussions were focused on the safety of future clerks, rather than resolving specific complaints." Guilford said Victoria University staff were "extremely disappointed that the

Committee and the New Zealand Law Deans with a focus on ensuring the

information about consent on our website and when a disclosure is made, we provide strong support through our health and counselling services and other student support services.

"We did witness, amongst senior staff at Russell McVeagh, a determination

University. Victoria has a clear pathway for reporting sexual violence and

harassment, whether it happens on campus or off campus. We provide

"The safety of Victoria's students is of paramount importance to the

to ensure the safety of future summer clerks at their own workplace and in the wider legal profession. We also witnessed genuine concern for the students involved." The University of Otago has confirmed it was one of the universities made aware of the allegations, and that it was party to a meeting with the Law Society.

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