



COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE & GUIDANCE POLICY

VERSION CONTROL

Issue Date: November 2019

Version: 1.0

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Agreed by The Board of Trustees

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1. OVERVIEW & SCOPE

- 1.1. The Board of Trustees of all colleges are required to have in place a procedure to deal with complaints relating to the college and to any community facilities or services that the college provides.
- 1.2. This procedure is to deal with all concerns or complaints relating to the actions of staff and application of college procedures where they affect individual students, **except** matters directly related to curriculum, or to a particular exclusion, adult protection, special needs statementing or admission issue, all of which are dealt with under separate procedures; details of these procedures should also be available from the college.
- 1.3. Similarly, any complaints by members of staff should usually be dealt with through the appropriate separate procedures such as grievance, capability or anti-harassment.

PART ONE – GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF COMPLAINTS

2. DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS – INITIAL CONCERNS/INFORMAL PROCEDURE

- 2.1. These procedures make a distinction between dealing with a concern or complaint informally or formally.
- 2.2. The underlying principle of the procedure is that, if at all possible, concerns and complaints ought to be handled and resolved informally (usually by the staff directly concerned) without the need to invoke a formal referral and process. It is expected that the class will be able to resolve most concerns without the need to go any further.
- 2.3. An unreasonable refusal by the complainant to attempt an informal resolution may result in the concern or complaint being taken no further.

3. FORMAL PROCEDURE

- 3.1. The formal Complaint Procedure will need to be invoked when initial or informal attempts to resolve the issue are unsuccessful and the person raising the concern or complaint remains dissatisfied and wishes to take the matter further.
- 3.2. There are four stages to the Complaints Procedure:
 - 3.2.1 Stage One: Receiving the complaint
 - 3.2.2 Stage Two: Complaint dealt with by staff member (though not the subject of the complaint)
 - 3.2.3 Stage Three: Complaint dealt with by College Principal
 - 3.2.4 Stage Four: Complaint dealt with by the Board of Trustees complaints panel

4. FRAMEWORK OF PRINCIPLES

- 4.1. Any concern or complaint should be brought to the attention of the college at the earliest opportunity. Any matter raised more than 3 months after the event will only be considered in exceptional circumstances.
- 4.2. A concern or complaint from a member of the public who is not a parent or a guardian of a student attending the college should be referred directly to the College Principal, unless the complaint is about the College Principal in which case it should be referred to the Chair of the Board of Trustees.
- 4.3. An anonymous complaint cannot be dealt with unless there are exceptional circumstances.
- 4.4. Any concern or complaint will be dealt with in a way that:
 - 4.4.1 respects confidentiality;
 - 4.4.2 addresses all the points at issue;

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- 4.4.3 provides an effective response and, *where necessary*;
- 4.4.4 appropriate redress.
- 4.5. Concerns and complaints should be handled in both an impartial and non-adversarial manner, and an open, transparent and constructive way.

5. INVESTIGATING COMPLAINTS

- 5.1. At whatever stage, the person investigating the concern or complaint should:
 - 5.1.1 establish **what** has happened so far, and **who** has been involved;
 - 5.1.2 clarify the nature of the complaint and what remains unresolved;
 - 5.1.3 clarify what the complainant feels would put things right;
 - 5.1.4 interview those involved in the matter and / or those complained of, allowing them to be accompanied if they wish.
- 5.2. Any person interviewed as part of an investigation is entitled to be accompanied by a friend or representative and / or a translator, and to agree any notes taken, particularly if the investigation is part of the formal process.

6. RESOLVING COMPLAINTS

- 6.1. At whatever stage, the person dealing with the concern or complaint should endeavour to find a resolution, but obviously this will depend on the nature of the concern or complaint and what the complainant wants.
- 6.2. It is also of equal importance to clarify any misunderstandings that might have occurred as this can create a positive atmosphere in which to discuss any outstanding issues.
- 6.3. Complainants should be encouraged to state what actions they feel might resolve the problem at any stage – though this should be on the understanding that it may not be possible or reasonable to deliver them.
- 6.4. It may be appropriate and sufficient to acknowledge that the complaint is valid in whole or in part - an admission that the college could have handled the situation better is not the same as an admission of negligence.
- 6.5. In addition, it may be appropriate to offer one or more of the following:
 - 6.5.1 an expression of regret for any distress, etc;
 - 6.5.2 an explanation;
 - 6.5.3 an admission that the situation could have been handled differently or better;
 - 6.5.4 an assurance that every effort will be made to ensure that the event complained of will not recur;
 - 6.5.5 an explanation of the steps that have been taken to try to ensure that it will not happen again;
 - 6.5.6 an undertaking to review college policies in light of the complaint.
- 6.6. Use of the formal procedures means that all attempts at an informal resolution of the concern have failed; resolution will then depend upon any recommendations based on the judgements made from the evidence uncovered in the investigation.
- 6.7. Of course, an investigation may find no evidence for the complaint or that the complaint is otherwise groundless.

7. VEXATIOUS COMPLAINTS

- 7.1. There will be occasions when, despite all stages of the procedures having been followed, the complainant remains dissatisfied. If the complainant tries to reopen the same issue, the chair of the Board of Trustees will inform them in writing that the procedure has been exhausted and that the matter is now closed.

8. TIME LIMITS

- 8.1. A concern or complaint will be acknowledged as soon as it is received and attempts to deal with it informally started as soon as practicable in timescales agreed by all parties (it is recommended

- that, if at all possible, this starts within 5 working days of receiving the concern or complaint and is completed within 10 working days of starting).
- 8.2. Once a complaint has been lodged formally, an investigation should begin within 5 working college days and a realistic but reasonable timescale should be set for completion, etc. It is reasonable for a complainant to expect to receive verbal or written feedback within 10 working college days of an investigation completing.
 - 8.3. However, where further investigations become necessary or delays occur, new time limits can be set and the complainant sent details of the new deadline and an explanation for the delay.

PART TWO – THE COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

9. STAGE ONE: RECEIVING THE COMPLAINT

- 9.1. A complaint from a member of the public, who is not a parent or guardian of a student attending the college, should go directly to the College Principal in the first instance. Parents, carers or guardians wishing should, where possible, contact the member of staff concerned (which may be the College Principal) - by letter, telephone or in person.
- 9.2. Whoever receives the complaint should direct the complainant to the member of staff concerned, or to the College Principal:
 - 9.2.1 if the complainant wants an acknowledgement of the issue, and / or a resolution to a problem which is relatively straightforward, and / or the prevention of a recurrence, this is more likely to be suited by an informal process;
 - 9.2.2 on the other hand, a formal process is required if the nature of the complaint is such that it requires (1) an investigation - rather than, or following, the appropriate person just “making enquiries about” or “looking into” an issue or the complaint - or (2), for the matter to be seen and recorded to have been dealt with.
- 9.3. **A complaint should be acknowledged as soon as it is received.**
- 9.4. If any member of staff receives a complaint, they should not attempt to deal with the issue but should pass it to the appropriate person. Similarly, if a member of staff feels too compromised to deal with the complaint, the matter should be referred to a more appropriate member of staff.
- 9.5. Also, there will be occasions when the complainant may have concerns about discussing their complaint with a particular member of staff, if so the complainant should be directed to address their concerns to the College Principal.
- 9.6. Please note: if the first approach is made direct to a trustee they should direct the complainant to the appropriate person - usually the class teacher. Trustees should not act unilaterally on an individual complaint outside the procedure - such action may compromise future action regarding the complaint.

10. STAGE TWO: COMPLAINT DEALT WITH BY STAFF MEMBER

- 10.1. The class teacher or appropriate member of staff or College Principal will attempt to resolve the complaint using whatever reasonable means are appropriate. This will usually involve meeting the complainant to discuss the matter further, and may also involve talking to students, other staff members or consulting senior staff including the College Principal.
- 10.2. If having raised their concerns with the class teacher or appropriate member of staff, the complainant is still dissatisfied, or if the class teacher or other nominated member of staff is the subject of the complaint, then the complainant should contact the College Principal (unless the College Principal is the subject of the complaint - then the complainant should contact the Chair of the Board of Trustees).

11. STAGE THREE: COMPLAINT DEALT WITH BY COLLEGE PRINCIPAL

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- 11.1. The College Principal will attempt to resolve a complaint using whatever reasonable means are appropriate. This may involve meeting the complainant to discuss the matter further; it may also involve the College Principal interviewing staff members.
- 11.2. The College Principal must be allowed reasonable time to investigate the complaint and gather any information that is required. On this basis, the College Principal should aim to be able to give either verbal or written feedback to the complainant no later than 10 college days after receipt of the complaint.
- 11.3. On some occasions the College Principal may delegate the investigation to a senior member of staff, usually a deputy who has had no involvement with the case: the decision on the appropriate person rests with the College Principal.
- 11.4. If having raised concerns with the College Principal, the complainant is still dissatisfied, or if the College Principal is the subject of the complaint, then the complainant should contact the Chair of the Board of Trustees.

12. STAGE FOUR: COMPLAINT DEALT WITH BY THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

- 12.1. The Board of Trustees has responsibility for ensuring that any formal complaints are dealt with: **complaints must be in writing** – using a specific form if required.
- 12.2. In cases that require urgent consideration the Chair may deal with the matter exclusively and without delay.
- 12.3. Otherwise, the Chair of Trustees should decide if a reasonable attempt has been made by the College Principal or other staff to address the concern or complaint. It is important that concerns or complaints are dealt with appropriately as well as properly, and that staff are not subjected to “double jeopardy”.
- 12.4. The Chair of Trustees may refer to college and the Board of Trustees support for advice and guidance in deciding, and these agencies may deal with the concern or complaint if the nature of it requires this.
- 12.5. If the Chair of Trustees decides that the concern or complaint has been dealt with reasonably, then the complainant should be told that, **and** that their only grounds for appeal may be on the basis of the way in which their concern or complaint was handled (and not against the decision made).
- 12.6. If the Chair of Trustees decides that the concern or complaint may not have been dealt with reasonably, or that a formal appeal is appropriate, or if the College Principal is the subject of the concern or complaint, then a hearing by a Complaint Panel of the Board of Trustees should be arranged.
- 12.7. The Chair will ensure that a designated panel of three or five trustees will be convened to hear the complaint.
- 12.8. Individual complaints would not be heard by the whole Board of Trustees at any stage, as this could compromise the impartiality of any panel set up for a disciplinary hearing against a member of staff following a serious complaint.
- 12.9. The designated trustees will deal with the complaint on an impartial basis via a **panel hearing** – please refer to **Notes for Guidance**.
- 12.10. It is important that any hearing is independent and impartial and that it is seen to be so: no trustee may sit on the panel if they have had a prior involvement in the complaint or in the circumstances surrounding it.
- 12.11. Also, in deciding the make-up of the panel, trustees should try to ensure that it is a cross-section of the categories of trustees and, as far as is practicable, sensitive to the issues of race, gender and religious affiliation.
- 12.12. The clerk to the the Board of Trustees will normally record the proceedings.
- 12.13. The aim of the hearing, which must be held in private, will always be to resolve the complaint and achieve reconciliation between the college and the complainant.
- 12.14. The panel will:
 - 12.14.1 Dismiss the complaint in whole or in part;
 - 12.14.2 Uphold the complaint in whole or in part;
 - 12.14.3 Where appropriate decide action to be taken to uphold the complaint;
 - 12.14.4 Recommend changes to the college systems or procedures to seek to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not recur.

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- 12.15. However, it has to be recognised the complainant might not be satisfied with the outcome if the hearing does not find in their favour, and therefore it may only be possible to establish the facts and make recommendations which will satisfy the complainant that their complaint has been taken seriously.
- 12.16. Following the hearing, the complainant will receive written feedback from the clerk including any decisions, recommendations and the reasons for them and, if appropriate, the next steps. The written feedback should be issued within ten working days after the investigation has concluded.
- 12.17. If the outcome might lead to action under another procedure, e.g. disciplinary, then the complainant need only be told that appropriate action will be taken.
- 12.18. Further, there may be occasions when a panel would wish to resolve an issue by means which are clearly within the responsibility of the internal management of the college: trustees [and College Principal] need to be mindful of their roles and responsibilities in regulation.
- 12.19. Only in exceptional circumstances should trustees consider taking a decision that may undermine the authority of a College Principal or other staff and trustees must consult College and Trustee Support before doing so.
- 12.20. This is the final step of the process for the college (though the recommendations may be such, eg: changes in policy or practice, that it is necessary for the full Board of Trustees to receive a short report regarding the findings of the investigation). Please note: this should not mention names.
- 12.21. The Chair of the Board of Trustees is responsible for ensuring that the correct procedures have been followed.
- 12.22. Of course, there will be occasions when, despite all stages of the procedures having been followed, the complainant remains dissatisfied. If the complainant tries to reopen the same issue, the Chair of the Board of Trustees will inform them in writing that the procedure has been exhausted and that the matter is now closed.

PART THREE – NOTES FOR GUIDANCE

13. THE COMPLAINTS PANEL HEARING

- 13.1. The hearing should be as informal as possible – many complainants feel nervous and inhibited in a formal setting and parents often feel emotional when discussing an issue that affects their child: the proceedings should be as welcoming as possible and the layout of the room should try to ensure the setting is informal and not adversarial, so as to set the appropriate tone.
- 13.2. Any parties being heard may be accompanied by a person of their choice - a friend or representative, and/or a translator - and notes taken should be agreed by attendees.
- 13.3. Trustees on the panel should make themselves familiar with these procedures before any hearing
- 13.4. Witnesses are only required to attend for the part of the hearing in which they give their evidence.
- 13.5. Before the hearing starts, the panel should agree which one of them will chair the hearing
- 13.6. It will not usually be appropriate for the hearing to consider any issues or material which is introduced at the hearing for the first time. The Chair must insist that this is addressed outside this meeting (but through the use of this guidance as appropriate).
- 13.7. The hearing should follow any agreed meetings protocols, and proceedings should be as follows:
 - 13.7.1 After introductions, the complainant should be invited to explain their complaint, and be followed by their witnesses;
 - 13.7.2 The College Principal may question both the complainant and the witnesses after each has spoken;
 - 13.7.3 The College Principal is then invited to explain the colleges actions and be followed by the college's witnesses;
 - 13.7.4 The complainant may question both the College Principal and the witnesses after each has spoken;
 - 13.7.5 Up to this point, the panel may ask questions at any time;
 - 13.7.6 The complainant is then invited to sum up their complaint;
 - 13.7.7 The College Principal is then invited to sum up the colleges actions and response to the complaint;
 - 13.7.8 Both parties leave together while the panel decides on the issues.

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- 13.7.9 The chair explains that both parties will hear from the panel within a set time scale.
- 13.8. It is recommended that any panel or group of three trustees considering complaints be clerked. **The clerk** would be the contact point for the complainant and be required to:
- 13.8.1 set the date, time and venue of the hearing, ensuring that the dates are convenient to all parties and that the venue and proceedings are accessible;
 - 13.8.2 collate any written material and send it to the parties in advance of the hearing;
 - 13.8.3 meet and welcome the parties as they arrive at the hearing;
 - 13.8.4 record the proceedings;
 - 13.8.5 notify all parties of the panel's decision.
- 13.9. The **Chair of the Panel** has a key role, ensuring that:
- 13.9.1 the remit of the panel is explained to the parties and each party has the opportunity of putting their case without undue interruption;
 - 13.9.2 the issues are addressed;
 - 13.9.3 key findings of fact are made;
 - 13.9.4 parents and others who may not be used to speaking at such a hearing are put at ease;
 - 13.9.5 the hearing is conducted in an informal manner with each party treating the other with respect and courtesy;
 - 13.9.6 the panel is open minded and acting independently;
 - 13.9.7 no member of the panel has a vested interest in the outcome of the proceedings or any involvement in an earlier stage of the procedure;
 - 13.9.8 each side is given the opportunity to state their case and ask questions;
 - 13.9.9 written material is seen by all parties. If a new issue arises it would be useful to give all parties the opportunity to consider and comment on it;
 - 13.9.10 the complainant is notified of the panel's decision, in writing, with the panel's response and what further steps may be planned or available; this is usually within the agreed deadline.

14. ADOPTING & PUBLICISING THE PROCEDURES

- 14.1. The Board of Trustees should formally accept and adopt these procedures at a meeting.
- 14.2. The procedures should then be made available to all staff on the common area, as well as on request.
- 14.3. Parents and guardians, etc. should be notified that the college has a complaints procedure and that these are available on request.

APPENDIX 1: OUTLINE COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE: FLOWCHART

	Complaint raised and received and passed to appropriate member of staff = College Principal, if complaint from anyone other than a parent or carer)
	Complaint heard by staff member (informally and as soon as possible)
Issue resolved: (including no further action)	Issue not resolved
	Complaint heard by College Principal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge receipt of complaint • Meet with complainant to clarify complaint • Look into complaint as soon as possible • Inform complainant of outcome (+ write to confirm)
Issue resolved: (including no further action)	Issue not resolved
	Complaint referred to Chair of Trustees <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trustees complaints panel arranged • Issue letter inviting complainant to meeting
	Panel meet: decide to dismiss / uphold / decide action / recommend change and issue letter confirming panel decision *END OF PROCESS FOR COLLEGE*

APPENDIX 2: EXAMPLE FORM TO RECORD A FORMAL COMPLAINT

Please complete and return to _____ (Chair of the Board of Trustees) who will acknowledge receipt and explain what action will be taken.

Your name:			
Students name:			
Your relationship to the student:			
Address:			
Day time telephone number:		Evening telephone number:	
Please give details of your complaint.			
What action, if any, have you already taken to try and resolve your complaint (who did you speak to and what was the response)?			
What actions do you feel might resolve the problem at this stage?			
Are you attaching any paperwork? If so, please give details.			
Signature:			Date:
Official use			
Date acknowledgement sent:		Complaint referred to:	
Acknowledgement sent by:		Date:	