



Whistleblowing Policy

Version History

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4	February 2022	Sarah Edmundson	Formatted and design update
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Introduction

Focus Awards aims to establish and maintain a culture of openness and we want to encourage our staff, Centres, and learners to raise issues which concern them in relation to the delivery of our qualifications and services.

By knowing about malpractice/poor practice we can take the necessary steps to safeguard the interests of our staff, Centres, and learners. In summary, do not hesitate to get in touch with us and 'speak up' or 'blow the whistle'.

However, we recognise that you may be worried that by reporting such issues you may be subject to some adverse action. This Policy provides you with information about the Public Interest Disclosure Act as well as the process by which you may whistleblow. It also explains the protections in place to protect whistleblowers.

Centre's responsibility

It is important that your staff and learners are fully aware of this Policy and its contents as well as our Malpractice and Maladministration Policy.

We also encourage centres to have a culture of openness where staff can freely raise concerns about activities and practices without the risk of adverse consequences to their future employment or career.

Review arrangements

We will review the Policy annually as part of our self-evaluation arrangements and revise it as and when necessary, in response to external feedback, trends from our internal monitoring arrangements, changes in our practices, actions from the regulatory authorities or external agencies or changes in legislation.

If you would like to feed back any views, please contact us via the details provided at the end of this Policy.

What is whistleblowing?

Whistleblowing is when an individual reports suspected malpractice or wrongdoing at work and/or the covering up of malpractice or wrongdoing. Officially this is called 'making a disclosure in the public interest'.

The malpractice or wrongdoing is often committed by the individual's employer or a learner's Centre although this is not necessarily the case.

Whistleblowing is different from both complaints and employment disputes.

- complaints tend to be an expression of personal dissatisfaction (e.g., with a product or service being received and/or encountered) and should be taken forward with the arrangements outlined in our Complaints Policy.
- employment disputes tend to be where a worker has a dispute about his or her own employment position or contract. If you are experiencing such a dispute, you should take this up directly with your employer or another responsible body. We cannot investigate or take any action over such instances.

Individuals can raise a concern with us under the arrangements outlined in this Policy if they have a reasonable belief that malpractice and/or a wrongdoing is occurring or is likely to occur relating to one or more of the following categories (as set out in the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 - PIDA):

- a criminal act (e.g., the unauthorised use of public funds or possible fraud and corruption).
- a failure to comply with a legal obligation the individual/organisation may be subject to
- a miscarriage of justice
- endangering an individual's health and safety
- damage to the environment
- deliberate concealment of information about any of the above

In addition, an individual raising an allegation under these whistleblowing arrangements should have a reasonable belief that the disclosure is in the public interest.

PIDA also gives protection to whistleblowers for disclosures to a number of different people such as to employers, to legal advisers, to Ministers of the Crown and to a number of prescribed regulators (for certain purposes). Ofqual – by whom we are regulated – are a prescribed regulator for:

- matters relating to the development, delivery, and award of regulated qualifications,
- matters relating to National Curriculum assessment arrangements, matters relating to Early Years Foundation Stage assessment arrangements.
- other matters likely to be of relevance or interest to their role as the regulator of qualifications, examinations, and assessments in England and of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland.

As such Ofqual has a public Whistleblowing Policy in which they state that if an individual works for a centre which is delivering regulated qualifications, and they wish to make a whistleblowing disclosure to someone outside of their organisation, they should normally consider making the disclosure to the relevant awarding organisation that has approved their centre to deliver the qualification(s) in question (e.g., us – Focus Awards).

You may also decide to contact the relevant regulator, but they will normally ask the relevant awarding organisation to investigate and report on the subject of the disclosure.

We hope this clarification and Policy gives you the reassurance you need to raise your concern with us. However, we recognise that you may still wish to report a concern to the appropriate regulator. Their contact details are provided below:

- Ofqual – the regulator in England, <http://ofqual.gov.uk/complaints-and-appeals/whistleblowing/>, and
- CCEA in Northern Ireland (email <mailto:whistleblowing@ccea.org.uk>)

Examples of whistleblowing disclosures that could be made to us include:

- a member of staff at a Centre making a disclosure about actual or possible malpractice at the Centre and/or failure to comply with the terms of the Centre's Centre-recognition agreement with us (see our Malpractice and Maladministration Policy for examples).
- making a disclosure about possible malpractice being carried out by a member of Focus Awards.
- a learner or parent/guardian making a disclosure about possible malpractice at one of our Centres.

In case of doubt on how best to proceed you can speak in confidence to the Head of Quality Assurance at Focus Awards (contact details are provided at the end of this Policy) or Public Concern at Work (see next section).

Seeking independent advice

This document sets out our whistleblowing arrangements which are aligned with the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 (PIDA).

This legislation protects workers who make a protected disclosure of information, concerning certain types of matters relating to their employment, from being dismissed or penalised by their employers because of the disclosure.

The Act also has the effect of making confidentiality clauses unenforceable where a protected disclosure is made.

You are recommended to take advice before making a whistleblowing allegation to ascertain your rights under the Act. For example, if you want independent advice at any stage about your rights and protection, we recommend that you contact Public Concern at Work (www.pcaaw.co.uk) which is a registered charity and is the independent authority on public interest in regard to whistleblowing.

How to whistleblow

To raise an allegation under these whistleblowing arrangements please contact the Head of Quality Assurance.

Upon making an allegation it is helpful to provide as much information and supporting evidence as possible to help inform the nature of any investigation we will carry out.

It is important to note that it is not essential to have clear evidence before making an allegation under this Policy, we just ask that you explain as fully as you can the nature of the allegation or circumstances that gave rise to your concern.

Protecting your identity

Sometimes a person making an allegation may wish to remain anonymous, although it is always preferable to reveal your identity and provide us with your contact details. However, if you are concerned about possible adverse consequences that may occur should your identity be revealed to another party then please inform us that you do not wish for us to divulge your identity and we will work to ensure your details are not disclosed.

We will always aim to keep a whistleblower's identity confidential where asked to do so although we cannot guarantee this and we may need to disclose your identity to:

- the police, fraud prevention agencies, or other law enforcement agencies (to investigate or prevent crime, including fraud).
- the courts (in connection with court proceedings), or another person to whom we are required by law to disclose your identity.
- other third parties where we consider it necessary to do so (e.g., the regulator Ofqual).

The investigator(s) assigned to explore the allegation will not reveal your identity unless you agree, or it is necessary for the purposes of the investigation (as noted above). The investigator will advise you if it becomes necessary to reveal your identity against your wishes.

A whistleblower should also recognise that he or she may be identifiable by others due to the nature or circumstances of the disclosure (e.g., the party against which the allegation is made may manage to identify possible sources of disclosure without such details being disclosed to them).

What we will do upon receiving a whistleblowing allegation

Once a concern has been raised, we have a duty to pursue the matter. It will not be possible to prevent the matter being investigated by subsequently withdrawing the concern as we are obliged by the regulators to follow-up and investigate allegations of malpractice or maladministration.

Depending upon the nature of the allegation we will appoint someone to investigate the allegation who has the appropriate level of training and competence and who has not had any previous involvement or personal interest in the matter.

The person(s) appointed to investigate the matter – the investigator(s) – may contact/meet with the person who raised the concern (the whistleblower) as soon as possible to ascertain the details of their concern. If the whistleblower does not wish to make a written statement, the investigator(s) will write a brief summary of the concern(s) that have been raised and the whistleblower will be expected to confirm this as correct. A work colleague, trade union representative or another individual (e.g., friend/independent witness) can accompany the whistleblower at this and any subsequent meeting.

The investigator will then investigate to establish the facts in accordance with the arrangements in our Malpractice/Maladministration Policy.

In all cases, we will keep the whistleblower updated as to how we have progressed the allegation (e.g., we have undertaken an investigation) and the whistleblower will have the opportunity to raise any concerns about the way the investigation is being conducted with the investigator(s).

However, we will not disclose all details of the investigation activities and it may not be appropriate for us to disclose full details of the outcomes of the investigation due to confidentiality or legal reasons (e.g., disclose full details on the action that may be taken against the parties concerned).

While we cannot guarantee that we will disclose all matters in the way that the whistleblower might wish, we will strive to handle the matter fairly and properly.

Outcomes of an investigation

If the investigation results in a proven case of malpractice or maladministration we will act against the relevant parties in accordance with the arrangements in our Malpractice and Maladministration Policy.

If the allegation is not proven by the investigation, provided you (as the whistleblower) did not deliberately raise an allegation which you knew to be untrue, no action will be taken against you by Focus Awards. If the allegation was made due to a genuine misunderstanding, the individual(s) (e.g., Centre or Centre staff member) who have been the subject of the investigation will be expected to bear no malice or ill feeling towards their accuser and that colleagues should not mistreat a whistleblower.

If, however, the investigation concludes that you (as the whistleblower) raised an allegation which you knew not to be true, you should be aware that your employer may decide to take disciplinary action against you.

Contact us

If you have any queries about the contents of the policy, please contact our support team

E: info@focusawards.org.uk

T: +44(0)333 3447 388