

PUBLIC INTEREST DISCLOSURE POLICY AND PROCEDURE

1 INTRODUCTION

UHI is committed to the highest standards of openness, probity and accountability. It seeks to conduct its affairs in a responsible manner taking into account the requirements of SHEFC and the standards in public life set out in the reports of the Committee on Standards of Conduct in Public Life.

The Public Interest Disclosure Act, which came into effect on 1 January 1999, amends the Employment Rights Act 1996, to give legal protection to employees against being unfairly dismissed or penalised by their employers as a result of publicly disclosing certain serious concerns. It is a fundamental term of every contract of employment that an employee will faithfully service his or her employer and not disclose confidential information about the employer's affairs. However, where an individual discovers information, which he or she believes shows malpractice or wrongdoing within the organisation, then this information should be disclosed without fear of reprisal and may be made independently of line management.

It should be emphasised that this policy is intended to assist individuals who believe they have discovered malpractice or impropriety. It is not designed to question financial or business decisions properly taken by UHI, nor may it be used to reconsider any matters which have already been addressed under harassment, complaint or disciplinary procedures. Once it is in place, it is reasonable to expect employees and others associated with UHI to use it rather than air their complaints outside.

2 SCOPE OF POLICY

This policy is designed to allow employees or others associated with UHI to raise, at a high level, concerns and/or disclose information which the individual believes shows malpractice.

A number of policies and procedures are already in place including grievance, harassment and discipline. This policy is intended to cover concerns, which are in the public interest and may (at least initially) be investigated separately, but might then lead to the invocation of such procedures. These might include:

- financial malpractice or impropriety, or fraud
- dangers to health and safety or the environment
- criminal activity
- academic or professional malpractice
- improper conduct or unethical behaviour
- failure to comply with a legal obligation or with the Instrument and Articles of Government of UHI
- attempts to conceal any of the above

In appropriate cases, such matters may be investigated jointly with any UHI Academic Partner affected.

3 SAFEGUARDS

3.1 Protection

This policy is designed to offer protection to those employees, or others associated with UHI, who disclose such concerns, provided disclosure is made:

1 in good faith;

and

2 in the reasonable belief of the individual making the disclosure that it tends to show malpractice.

The individual will also be protected if they make the disclosure to an appropriate person or body (see section 4 below). It is important to note that no protection from internal disciplinary procedures is offered to those who choose not to use the procedure.

3.2 Confidentiality

UHI will treat all such disclosures in a confidential and sensitive manner. The identity of the individual making the allegation may be kept confidential so long as it does not hinder or frustrate any investigation. However, the investigation process may reveal the source of information and the individual making the disclosure may need to provide a statement as part of the evidence required.

3.3 Anonymous Allegations

This policy encourages individuals to put their name to any disclosures they make. Concerns expressed anonymously are much less powerful, but they will be considered at the discretion of UHI.

In exercising this discretion, the factors to be taken into account will include:

- the seriousness of the issues raised;
- the credibility of the concern; and
- the likelihood of confirming the allegation from attributable sources.

3.4 Untrue Allegations

If an individual makes an allegation in good faith, which is not confirmed by subsequent investigation, no action will be taken against that individual. If, however, an individual makes malicious or vexatious allegations, and particularly if he or she persists with making them, disciplinary action may be taken against him or her.

4 PROCEDURES FOR MAKING A DISCLOSURE

4.1 Initial Step

The individual should make the disclosure to the Designated Person who will normally be the Secretary, who should immediately inform the Principal and Vice-Chancellor and the University Court unless requested not to do so by the discloser.

In cases involving financial malpractice, the Secretary should act throughout in close consultation with the Principal and Vice-Chancellor, as the Designated Accounting Officer for UHI's public funding. In the event that the disclosure relates to the Secretary, then the disclosure should be made to the Principal and Vice-Chancellor or where collusion between the Secretary is thought to exist then disclosures should be made to the Chair or Vice Chair of the University Court or the Chair of the Audit Committee (in a personal capacity)

If the individual does not wish to raise the matter with either the Secretary or the Principal and Vice-Chancellor, then he or she may raise it with the Chair or Vice Chair of the University Court or the Chair of the Audit Committee (in a personal capacity).

4.2 Process

The Designated Person will consider the information made available to him or her and decide on the form of investigation to be undertaken. This may be:

- to investigate the matter internally;
and/or
- to refer the matter to the police;
and/or
- to call for an independent inquiry.

If the decision is that investigation should be conducted by more than one of these means, the Designated Person should satisfy him or herself that such a course of action is warranted. Where the matter is to be the subject of an internal inquiry, the Designated Person will then consider how to conclude whether there is a prima facie case to answer. This consideration will include determining:

- who should undertake the investigation;
- the procedure to be followed; and
- the scope of the concluding report.

4.3 Investigation

Normally an independent officer of UHI will undertake this investigation and will report his or her findings to the Designated Person. Investigations should not be carried out by the person who will have to reach a decision on the matter. Any investigation will be conducted as sensitively and speedily as possible.

As a result of this investigation, other internal procedures may be invoked, including:

- disciplinary;
- grievance;
- harassment;

or it might form the basis of a special investigation.

In some instances, it might be necessary to refer the matter to an external authority for further investigation.

4.4 Feedback

The Designated Person will inform the individual making the disclosure of what action, if any, is to be taken and if no action is to be taken, then the individual concerned should be informed of the reason for this. If he or she remains dissatisfied, the individual may remake the disclosure to another appropriate person. For example, if the initial disclosure was made to the Secretary or the Principal and Vice-Chancellor, then the subsequent disclosure might be made to the Chair or Vice Chair of the University Court or the Chair of the Audit Committee (in a personal capacity). Where a disclosure is first made to the Chair of the University Court, it may be remade to the UHI Rector.

This other person will consider all the information presented, the procedures that were followed and the reason for the original decision. The outcome of this will be either to confirm that no further action is required, or that further investigation is required and will follow the procedures referred to in 4.2 above.

Where a disclosure is made, the person or persons against whom the disclosure is made will be told of it, the evidence supporting it and will be allowed to comment before any investigation, or further action, is concluded. They will also be advised of what action, if any, is to be taken.

4.5 Reporting of Outcomes

A report of all disclosures and any subsequent actions taken will be made by the Designated Person who will retain such reports for a period of three years. In all cases, a report of the outcome will be made to the Chair of the University Court and the Audit Committee. The report to the Audit Committee will be in detail where the issue falls within its purview and, in other cases, in summary form, as a means of allowing the Committee to monitor the effectiveness of the procedure.

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Responsible Body	Audit Committee