

Guide to good practice

Being open and honest as an education professional

December 2020

Introduction

'Honesty and integrity' are likely to be amongst the highest on the list of a professional's expected character traits if anyone were to ask a member of the public. Being a professional must have honesty at its core – a basic principle simply because each act of honesty and openness builds an impression of someone who can be trusted, respected and can set a positive example.

When you became a practitioner, you committed to behaving with openness and honesty in your professional, and where appropriate, personal life. That said, it is not always easy to get this right every time, and to sometimes accept you have made mistakes and take responsibility. But a professional should be driven by wanting to 'do the right thing', even in difficult circumstances, and learn from any mistakes.

This guide aims to help raise your awareness and understanding of key areas of your professional and personal life where openness and honesty is expected. It cannot address all possible circumstances and is not intended to be an exhaustive list of behaviours, but is rather provided to highlight the importance of your openness and honesty as a registered professional.

The Code

All Education Workforce Council (EWC) registrants are subject to the Code of Professional Conduct and Practice (the Code) which sets out the key principles of good conduct and practice for registrants. This guidance should be read in conjunction with the Code, which can be downloaded from www.ewc.wales/ewccode.

Professional Integrity

The Code states that registrants:

- 2.1 are accountable for their conduct and professional competence;
- 2.2 behave honestly, and with integrity, particularly with regard to:
 - finances and funds in the workplace;
 - personal credentials, experience and qualifications;
 - references, declarations made and signing documents;
 - assessment and examination related tasks;
 - use of property and facilities provided by their employer;
 - communications with the EWC, informing it of any recordable criminal conviction or caution, or restriction placed on their practice by any other body;
 - their employer, and report any matter which is required by their terms and conditions of employment.
- 2.3 handle information and data appropriately, applying the necessary protocols to matters relating to confidentiality, sensitivity and disclosure;
- 2.4 adhere to lawful standards of behaviour, in a manner in keeping with their position as a member of the education profession.

Professional integrity is a **key principle** of the Code. You should keep the Code as an important point of reference – think about the five key principles and the expectations they place upon you. The Code will help you make the right decisions when faced with the challenges covered in this guide.

Fitness to Practise Committees appointed to decide whether a registrant has breached the Code will consider more positively those who admit their mistakes, show insight and a motivation to put things right for the future.

Accountability

There are a number of different areas of life where your honesty and openness as a professional is expected.

Ethically

The public expects you to have a moral code that guides your behaviour, and to understand what is right and wrong with regards to your conduct.

Contractually

Your contract of employment sets out your employer's expectations of you, including your responsibility to adhere to workplace policies and procedures.

Professionally

Your colleagues, learners, parents, carers and the public expect you to behave professionally and to be accountable for your conduct.

Legally

Not only are you expected to be law-abiding, but also to comply with legislation and national guidance which may be relevant to your work. For example, the Wales Safeguarding/Child Protection Procedures, GDPR, Health and Safety.

Mistakes are a normal part of everyday life and are important for personal and professional growth. Admitting them is not always easy, especially if you are a professional and public expectation of you is already high. A mistake might feel like a failing, one which is hard to admit to anyone, and particularly to an employer or someone you are answerable to.

Intentional mistakes on the other hand often require forethought and planning, and can demonstrate wilful and deceitful misconduct.

Whatever the circumstances, hiding a mistake which reflects on you professionally can cause far more problems than the error itself, not least because trust and respect in you may be lost if someone else finds out. It is better to be honest, and admit a mistake quickly.

Here's our advice:

- Before doing anything – keep calm and assess what's happened
- Accept responsibility
- Think about how you can rectify the problem, and put things right if it's appropriate
- Explain what has happened to the person who will need to know, what you have done to resolve it, or how you will
- If you need to apologise, do so as soon as possible
- Try and learn from what has happened, and change something for the future

Fear that being honest might put your job at risk, or make a difficult situation at work worse could stop you from being open and honest. Maybe you left admitting to a mistake for too long, or you simply didn't know how to deal with it at the time. You may have panicked and tried to hide it and now it is even harder to come forward and take responsibility.

If something has happened which, if it were found out, could compromise the trust placed in you as a professional, **telling someone** at the earliest possible stage should not be underestimated. **Ask for help** to make sense of what has happened from **someone you trust**, and find a way to be honest with the person who needs to know. Your union may also be in a position to offer you the support you need to do so.

Remember as a professional, your learners and those involved in their education and training will look to you for the example of how to behave. The Code expects you to be accountable for your conduct, and there is no area more important than your honesty.

Breaches of the Code

The examples below are illustrative of cases where registrants have significantly failed to be open and honest when required, and were subject to EWC disciplinary proceedings as a result.

In all cases, there has been a clear breach of the Code of Professional Conduct and Practice and the registrants received a range of disciplinary sanctions including, in some cases, being prohibited from practicing in the education workforce in the future.

Each registrant was found to be dishonest and lacking integrity. They failed to admit their mistakes, even to the EWC.

A registrant:

- spent £500,000 from school funds on online gambling whilst a headteacher resulting in a criminal conviction and a prison term;
- denied having a sexual relationship with a pupil aged under 16, when in a position of trust as a teacher and a youth leader in a voluntary organisation;
- impersonated a child online, and made serious allegations of sexual abuse against their line manager to a children's charity;
- lied about holding qualifications and grades which were a prerequisite for a post when applying for the position of head of department;
- corrected and added to GCSE Mathematics coursework in order to raise pupils' marks and reflect better on the teacher;
- falsified learners review forms and their signatures as well as falsified timesheets submitted to their employer;
- provided a falsified Disclosure and Barring (DBS) Certificate to a supply agency so as to suggest they had no criminal record, when that was not the case;
- was dishonest about the reasons for their absences from work, and falsified NHS Trust hospital letters to suggest they were receiving treatment for a fabricated illness.

How we can support you further

The EWC offer presentations which focus on fitness to practise. If you or your employer would like to arrange one in the workplace, please contact information@ewc.wales.

The EWC's Code of Professional Conduct and Practice for Registrants with the Education Workforce Council, and information about the EWC's fitness to practise work can be found on our website.

Any queries should be referred to the Fitness to Practise team at fitnesstopractise@ewc.wales.

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