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Staff Code of Conduct

1. Introduction

Veritas Mediation Academy (VMA) is committed to providing a **safe and supportive learning environment** that promotes the **well-being and success of all learners**. This document outlines **expected professional behaviour**, clarifies **illegal conduct** and **misconduct**, and provides **guidance on safe practices**.

Failure to comply with this **Code of Conduct** may result in **disciplinary action**.

In some instances, staff members may face **situations not explicitly covered** by this document or may need to make decisions that **contradict the outlined guidance**. In such cases, **staff (including directors and volunteers)** must inform their **managers** of their reasoning and actions.

2. Core Principles

- The **welfare of learners** is the highest priority.
- Staff are accountable for their **actions and behaviour** and should **avoid any conduct** that may raise concerns about their **motivation or intentions**.
- Staff should operate in an **open and transparent manner**.
- Any **incident that raises concerns** should be promptly reported to a **manager**.
- Staff should **document incidents** and any related decisions.
- Professional standards should align with the organisation's **Equality & Diversity Policy**.
- Breaches of **laws or professional guidelines** could lead to **criminal or disciplinary action**.

3. Purpose of the Guidance

This guidance aims to:

- Create a **safe learning and working environment**.
- Protect **learners regardless of their age, sexual orientation, gender, religion, etc.**
- Reduce the risk of **false allegations** against staff.

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4. Duty of Care

Staff are responsible for:

- **Exercising authority**, managing risks, and using resources responsibly.
- Protecting learners from **discrimination and harm**.
- Developing **respectful, caring, and professional relationships** with learners.

Employers also have a duty to:

- Provide a **safe working environment**.
- Offer **guidance on safe working practices**.

5. Professional Judgment

- This guidance does not cover **every possible scenario** but highlights **illegal, inappropriate, or inadvisable behaviour**.
- In **exceptional cases**, staff may need to act **outside of this guidance** to protect learners.
- Staff should **exercise sound judgment** in all situations and ensure their actions are **reasonable and in the best interests of learners**.

6. Power and Positions of Trust

- Staff working in **education** hold a **position of trust** over learners.
- **Power imbalances** must not be used for **personal gain or gratification**.
- Professionalism must be **maintained at all times** to avoid **misinterpretation**.
- Attempting to establish **sexual relationships with former learners** who have only recently left the programme is a **serious breach of trust**.

7. Confidentiality

- Staff may access **confidential information** about learners as part of their role.
- **Confidential or personal information** must never be used for **personal gain, intimidation, or embarrassment**.
- Information should be shared only on a **need-to-know basis**.
- If **abuse is suspected**, staff must report it immediately to the **safeguarding officer**.

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- Staff must **never promise confidentiality** to learners.

If unsure about sharing information, staff should seek advice from their **manager or Data Protection Officer**. **Media and legal inquiries** must be referred to the Head of Quality & Learning.

8. Professional Conduct

- Staff must uphold **high standards of behaviour** to maintain **public trust**.
- **Personal conduct**, both inside and outside the workplace, should not compromise the **organisation's reputation**.

9. Dress and Appearance

- Staff should dress **professionally** to reflect their **role and responsibilities**.
- Learners are required to **dress smartly**—staff are expected to **lead by example**.
- Clothing should be **modest, safe, and appropriate** for the workplace.

10. Gifts

- Staff must not accept gifts that could be **perceived as bribes** or suggest **preferential treatment**.
- Small tokens of appreciation from learners (e.g., at Christmas) are acceptable.
- Staff should never give **personal gifts** to learners—however, offering **small prizes for competitions or tasks** is acceptable.
- If there is uncertainty about gift-giving, staff should seek guidance from one of the senior management team by email.

11. Learner Infatuations

- Some learners may develop **infatuations** with staff.
- Such situations can lead to **misinterpretation or allegations**.
- If a staff member becomes aware of **inappropriate feelings from a learner**, they should **immediately inform a manager**.

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12. Personal Boundaries and Living Space

- Learners must **never be invited to or enter a staff member's home**, unless formally agreed upon with a **manager**.

13. Communication with Learners (Including Technology Use)

- Staff must maintain **clear professional boundaries** when communicating with learners.
- This applies to all communication methods, including:
 - **Phone calls and text messages.**
 - **Emails and online messaging.**
 - **Social media platforms, blogs, and gaming.**
- Staff should **not share personal contact details** with learners unless authorised by a **manager**.
- Any **unauthorised personal communication** with learners may result in **disciplinary action or criminal investigation**.
- Staff must also be cautious when communicating with **former learners**—they may still be in contact with current learners.

Engaging in behaviour that **damages the company's reputation** may lead to **disciplinary procedures**.

14. Social Contact

Staff must **not seek or encourage** social contact with learners or their families **outside of their professional role**. Even if a learner initiates contact, staff should use their **professional judgment** in responding and must **consult with a manager**. Any social contact **could be misinterpreted**.

Staff should **not share personal details** with learners, such as **home addresses, personal emails, social media profiles, or gamer tags**. If a learner discovers a staff member's gamer tag, the **staff member must change it**.

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15. Physical Contact

While physical contact with learners **may sometimes be necessary**, it must always be **appropriate, limited, and professionally justified**. A "no-touch" policy is **impractical**, but staff must **exercise professional judgment** when making physical contact.

Physical contact must **never be secretive**, for **personal gratification**, or used to **exert authority**. If there is **any possibility of misinterpretation**, staff should **inform a manager**.

Regular physical contact with a specific learner should be **documented** and should form part of an **approved care plan**, particularly for learners with **special educational needs or disabilities**.

16. Supporting Learners in Distress

If a learner is **upset or distressed**, staff may offer **comfort and reassurance**, which may sometimes include **appropriate physical contact**.

However, staff must:

- Be **self-aware** to prevent actions from being **misinterpreted**.
- **Avoid intrusive gestures** or excessive physical contact.
- Seek **managerial advice** if unsure about how to respond appropriately.

17. Behaviour Management

All learners have a **right to dignity and respect**. Staff must **never use degrading treatment, sarcasm, or insensitive comments** as a disciplinary method.

While humour can be useful in **diffusing situations**, it must **never be demeaning** or at the expense of a learner's **self-esteem**.

18. Physical Intervention

Staff may physically intervene only in situations where:

- A learner may **harm themselves or others**.
- A learner is **committing a criminal offence**.
- There is a need to **prevent serious damage to property**.

Physical force **must never be used as punishment**. Any **unwarranted use of force** may constitute a **criminal offence**.

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Whenever physical intervention occurs, staff must:

- **Document the incident.**
- **Report it to management** immediately.

19. Inappropriate and Sexual Conduct

Any **sexual behaviour** by staff **toward a learner** is **strictly prohibited** and may be **illegal**.

Staff must be aware that:

- **Learners are protected by law** from non-consensual sexual behaviour.
- Even if a learner consents, **staff in positions of trust are legally prohibited from engaging in sexual relationships** with them.
- Non-contact sexual behaviour, such as encouraging a learner to **watch explicit material**, is also illegal.

Staff should be particularly cautious of **grooming behaviour**, which involves **manipulating trust to facilitate abuse**.

20. One-to-One Situations

Working alone with learners **can increase the risk of allegations**. To mitigate this risk:

- Meetings should be **planned** and **conducted openly**.
- Safety measures should be in place for **both staff and learners**.

21. Photography and Videos

Staff may take **images or videos** as part of:

- **Educational activities.**
- **Celebrations of learner achievements.**
- **Publicity efforts.**

However, staff must:

- Ensure **images are not misused**.
- Confirm **consent** before publishing learner images.

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- Avoid sharing images on **external websites or public platforms** without explicit permission.

22. Internet Use and Digital Safety

Staff must comply with the company's:

- **Data Protection Policy (GDPR).**

Staff **must never**:

- **Access inappropriate content.**
- **Store or distribute** indecent material.
- Use **company devices for personal online activities.**

Engaging in **illegal online activities** may lead to **disciplinary action and legal consequences.**

23. Whistleblowing

Staff should **report any concerns** about misconduct **without fear of retaliation.**

Whistleblowing helps:

- Protect the **safety and well-being of learners.**
- Ensure **staff accountability.**

For guidance, staff should refer to the company's **Whistleblowing Policy.**

24. Reporting Concerns and Recording Incidents

If an incident occurs that could be **misinterpreted**, staff should:

- **Record the event clearly and promptly.**
- **Report it to management.**

If staff members have **concerns about a learner's behaviour or welfare**, they should **seek managerial guidance immediately.**

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25. Guidelines for Online Meetings

Appropriate Conduct for Online Sessions

Before the Meeting:

- Ensure that you have the **latest version** of your **video conferencing software** (Teams/Zoom) installed and **test your audio and video settings** beforehand.

During the Meeting:

- If you feel **uncomfortable** about anything said or done during a one-on-one session, **end the call immediately** and report concerns to your **manager or safeguarding officer**.
- **Record sessions** to provide a reference if concerns arise. Remind participants that recordings are for **safeguarding purposes** and will not be routinely shared.
- **Be punctual and professional**. Introduce yourself properly and take note of others' names to address them appropriately.
- **Ensure professionalism in conduct and appearance**, just as you would in an **in-person** meeting.
- Conduct calls from a **quiet, appropriate workspace**, not in personal areas such as a bedroom.
- **Maintain eye contact with the camera** when speaking and **be attentive to others**.
- **Use an approved virtual background** (e.g., VMA's background) and ensure **no people, pets, or distracting items** are visible.
- **Proper lighting** is essential. Use a **light source from the front** rather than harsh overhead or backlighting.
- Dress **professionally and appropriately** at all times.
- **Mute your microphone** when not speaking to prevent background noise.
- Keep sessions **concise and structured**.

After the Meeting:

- If needed, follow up by **posting comments or questions** in the **Team Chat** after the session.

Things to Avoid in Online Meetings

- **Do not conduct a video meeting** in situations where an **in-person** meeting would be deemed **inappropriate**.
- **Avoid multitasking**, as it can be **distracting** for others.

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- **Do not raise your voice unnecessarily**—participants will inform you if they cannot hear.
- **Eliminate distracting habits** such as clicking a pen or tapping on the desk.
- **Refrain from eating or drinking**, except for water.
- **Close unnecessary applications** to prevent lag and **avoid accidental sharing of sensitive information**.
- **Do not wear clothing with heavy patterns or stripes**, as they may cause pixelation on camera.

