

LAW ADMISSIONS CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE¹
DISCLOSURE GUIDELINES FOR APPLICANTS FOR ADMISSION
TO THE LEGAL PROFESSION

These Guidelines have been adopted by the Victorian Legal Admissions Board.

1. PURPOSES OF THESE GUIDELINES

As an applicant for admission, you need to satisfy your Admitting Authority that you are “a fit and proper person” to be admitted to the legal profession.² In all jurisdictions other than South Australia, the relevant legislation also requires the Admitting Authority to consider whether you are currently “of good fame and character”.³ Each of these tests reflects the overarching requirements of the pre-existing common law.

The purposes of these Guidelines are -

- (a) to emphasise that Admitting Authorities and Courts place a duty and onus squarely on *you* to disclose to your Admitting Authority any matter that could influence its decision about whether you are “currently of good fame and character” and “a fit and proper person”;
- (b) to explain that, when you do make a disclosure, you must do so honestly and candidly, and be full and frank in what you say; and
- (c) to remind you that failure to do so, if subsequently discovered, can have catastrophic consequences. You might either be refused admission, or struck off the roll, if you have been admitted without making a full disclosure.

There are many judicial explanations of what the phrase “fit and proper person” means in different contexts. For example -

The requirement for admission to practice (*sic*) law that the applicant be a fit and proper person, means that the applicant must have the personal qualities of character which are necessary to discharge the important and grave responsibilities of being a barrister and solicitor. A legal practitioner, upon being admitted to practice, assumes duties to the courts, to fellow practitioners as well as to clients. At the heart of all of those duties is a commitment to honesty and, in those circumstances when it is required, to open

¹ LACC'S Charter is approved by the Council of Chief Justices which also appoints its Chairman. LACC is not, however, a committee of the Council, nor does it act on the Council's behalf.

² *Legal Practitioners Act 1981* (SA) section 15(1)(a); *Legal Profession Act 2006* (ACT) section 26(2)(b); *Legal Profession Act 2006* (NT) section 25(2)(b); *Legal Profession Act 2007* (Qld) section 35(2)(a)(ii); *Legal Profession Act 2007* (Tas) section 31(6)(b); *Legal Profession Act 2008* (WA) section 26(1)(a)(ii); *Legal Profession Uniform Law* (NSW & Vic) section 17(1)(c)..

³ *Legal Profession Act 2006* (ACT) section 11(1)(a); *Legal Profession Act 2006* (NT) section 11(1)(a); *Legal Profession Act 2007* (Qld) section 9(1)(a); *Legal Profession Act 2007* (Tas) section 9(1)(a); *Legal Profession Act 2008* (WA) section 8(1)(a); *Uniform Admission Rules 2015* (NSW & Vic) rule 10(1)(f).

candour and frankness, irrespective of self interest or embarrassment. The entire administration of justice in any community which is governed by law depends upon the honest working of legal practitioners who can be relied upon to meet high standards of honesty and ethical behaviour. It is the legal practitioner who is effectively the daily minister and executor in the administration of justice when advising clients, acting for clients, certifying documents, and making presentations to courts, governments, other professionals, and so on. The level and extent of trust placed in what legal practitioners say or do is necessarily high and the need for honesty is self evident and essential.⁴

2. STATUS OF THESE GUIDELINES

These Guidelines do not, and cannot, diminish or supplant in any way your personal duty to disclose any matter which may bear on your fitness for admission. They merely provide information about how Admitting Authorities approach the requirement of disclosure. They also give examples of matters which you might otherwise overlook when deciding what to disclose.

The examples given are not, and could not be, comprehensive or exhaustive. You must disclose any matter which is or might be relevant to your fitness, whether or not that matter is mentioned in these Guidelines. Please err on the side of disclosing, rather than concealing, information that might turn out to be relevant in the eyes of an Admitting Authority.

3. RELEVANT PRINCIPLES

Your Admitting Authority will apply the following principles when determining your fitness for admission.

- (a) The onus is squarely *on you* to establish your fitness.
- (b) The statutory test is cast in the present tense – whether you are “*currently* of good fame and character” and, except in South Australia, whether an applicant “*is* a fit and proper person”. Your *past* conduct, though relevant, is therefore not decisive.
- (c) The honesty and candour with which you make any disclosure is relevant when determining your present fitness. High standards are applied in assessing honesty and candour. Full and frank disclosure is essential - although in most circumstances your disclosure of past indiscretions will not result in you being denied admission.
- (d) Your present understanding and estimation of your past conduct at the time you make your application is relevant.
- (e) Any disclosure you make that may be relevant to whether you are currently able to carry out the inherent requirements of practice is confidential.

4. WHAT YOU NEED TO DISCLOSE

Your duty is to disclose any matter that might be relevant to your Admitting Authority considering whether you are currently of good fame and character and are a fit and proper person for admission to the legal profession.

⁴ *Frugtniet v Board of Examiners [2002] VSC 140* per Pagone, J

This means that you *must* state whether any of the matters set out in **Appendix 1** applies to you. Your Admitting Authority has a statutory duty to have regard to each of those matters when considering your application.

But you also need to disclose any *other* matter that might be relevant to your Admitting Authority's decision about whether you are a fit and proper person for admission. Courts now clearly consider that you must disclose any matters relevant to the assessment of your honesty.

Unfortunately it is not possible to provide you with an exhaustive list of everything that might turn out to be relevant to assessing whether you are currently of good fame and character, or a fit and proper person for admission - and which you should therefore disclose.

Generally, however, your duty is to disclose *any* matter which does or might reflect negatively on your honesty, candour, respect for the law or ability to meet professional standards. You need to provide a full account of any such matter, including a description of your conduct (whether acts or omissions).

Avoid editing, or just selecting those matters that *you* believe *should* be relevant to your Admitting Authority's decision. Rather, you need to fully disclose every matter that might fairly assist the Admitting Authority or a Court in deciding whether you are a fit and proper person.

Revealing more than might strictly be necessary counts in favour of an applicant - especially where the disclosure still carries embarrassment or discomfort. Revealing less than may be necessary distorts the proper assessment of the applicant and may itself show an inappropriate desire to distort by selecting and screening relevant facts.⁵

You will find a list of helpful dos and don'ts in item 6 below to help you decide how to frame any disclosure you need to make. Item 8 also includes further information about disclosures about your capacity.

Note that if you don't disclose anything, you must include the following statement in your application -

I have read and understood the Disclosure Guidelines for Applicants for Admission to the Legal Profession. I am and always have been of good fame and character and am a fit and proper person to be admitted and I have not done or suffered anything likely to reflect adversely on my good fame and character or on whether I am a fit and proper person. I am not aware of any matter or circumstance that might affect my suitability to be admitted as an Australian lawyer and an officer of the Court.

5. SOME EXAMPLES

The following are examples of matters which you may need to disclose in addition to the matters set out in **Appendix 1**.

(a) **Social security overpayments or offences**

You should disclose any overpayment to you of any kind of Centrelink or social security entitlements at any time, or for any reason, whether or not you have already repaid the

⁵ *Frugtniet v Board of Examiners* [2002] VSC 140, per Pagone J.

relevant amount; or whether or not you have been prosecuted in relation to the overpayment.

(b) Academic misconduct

You should disclose any academic misconduct. You would be wise to disclose such conduct, whether or not a formal finding was made or a record of the incident retained by the relevant organisation.

Academic misconduct includes, but is not limited to, plagiarism, impermissible collusion, cheating and any other inappropriate conduct, whereby you have sought to obtain an academic advantage either for yourself or for some other person.

(c) Inappropriate or criminal conduct

You may also need to disclose general misconduct which occurred, say, in your workplace, educational institution, volunteer position, club, association or in other circumstances, if such conduct may reflect on whether you are a fit and proper person to be admitted to the legal profession. This is so, even if the misconduct does not directly relate to your ability to practise law.

General misconduct may include, but is not limited to, offensive behaviour, workplace or online bullying, property damage, sexual harassment or racial vilification.⁶

You also need to disclose any misconduct relating to dishonesty on your part, whether or not that conduct may have amounted to an offence; and whether or not you were charged with, or convicted of an offence. This includes conduct that involved misappropriating any sort of property in any way, or making false or misleading statements of any kind.

You should disclose any criminal charges or conviction (including spent convictions) for any offence whatsoever - even if the charge was subsequently withdrawn or you were acquitted.

Any facts that may give rise to a criminal charge might reasonably be regarded as relevant when assessing your suitability for admission.

(d) Intervention orders and apprehended violence orders

(e) Infringement or traffic offences

You may need to declare offences resulting in a court-ordered fine or other sanction or even an administrative penalty, such as traffic or public transport offences. This is certainly necessary if the frequency or number of fines, or your failure to pay fines, could give rise to concern about your respect for the law.

(f) Making a false statutory declaration

⁶ By way of illustration, in *XY v Board of Examiners* [2005] VSC 250, Habersberger, J found that an applicant was under a duty to disclose that a volunteer position had been terminated as a result of making offensive remarks to a fellow worker and that she was also required to disclose property damage she had caused at a meditation retreat, notwithstanding that charges were not laid.

- (g) **Tax Offences**
- (h) **Corporate insolvency, penalties or offences**

You may need to disclose any instances of insolvency, offences or penalties relating to any company or organisation of which you were a director or responsible officer at the time.

6. DOS AND DON'TS

A number of recent cases consider the over-arching obligation to be candid and honest when making a full and frank disclosure of something you choose to disclose. The following dos and don'ts emerge from those cases.

- (a) You need to make sure that what you tell the Admitting Authority is completely accurate.
- (b) Check the relevant facts to ensure that your statement cannot be misleading. If necessary, check those facts with third parties who know about them.
- (c) Even if the matter you are disclosing seems to you to be relatively minor, you must provide full and frank details to the Admitting Authority. You need to include *all matters* that could be relevant to your Admitting Authority's assessment.
- (d) You must do this *when you first make your disclosure*. Don't wait for the Admitting Authority to ask you for further information.
- (e) Failing to make a full and frank disclosure first up may show that you do not fully understand the honesty and candour that a legal practitioner must demonstrate – even if you didn't intend to mislead or conceal information.
- (f) This failure, alone, may show that you are not yet a fit and proper person to be admitted.
- (g) If you deliberately or recklessly misrepresent or conceal facts relevant to your disclosure, you may not be admitted.
- (h) If you are admitted after deliberately or recklessly concealing facts relevant to your disclosure, your admission may well be revoked once your deception is uncovered.
- (i) Make sure that you give the Admitting Authority as much information about the circumstances of the event you are disclosing as will allow it to assess the gravity of the event for itself.
- (j) Give a full picture of the events and a thorough explanation of your conduct.
- (k) Views can differ about what level of detail is sufficient to demonstrate honesty, candour and full and frank disclosure. The Admitting Authority's view may be different from yours. If in doubt, it may be wise to give more, rather than less, information.
- (l) Don't seek to minimise your culpability; to deflect blame onto others; or to conceal information that may be unfavourable to you.

- (m) Try to show the Admitting Authority that you have insight into why and how the event occurred; that you take full responsibility for it; and why the Admitting Authority can be satisfied that you will not do similar things in the future.
- (n) It is not enough simply to express remorse. Because your fitness to practise is assessed at the time you make your application, you need to show the Admitting Authority that what you have done to redeem yourself, or to rehabilitate yourself since the event occurred.
- (o) You may need to produce independent evidence from others to show that you are now a fit and proper person. Your own assertions may not be enough.
- (p) If you can show the Admitting Authority the active steps you have taken to rehabilitate yourself, this may demonstrate that you have appreciated the gravity of your conduct; have accepted responsibility for it; have taken steps to rehabilitate yourself; and understand the obligation of honesty, candour and full and frank disclosure.
- (q) If, however, your past conduct was very serious or involved extreme dishonesty, it may be hard to convince an Admitting Authority that you are a fit and proper person to be admitted.

7. CERTIFICATES OF CHARACTER

Please also note that any person who supplies a certificate of character to support an application -

- (a) must be aware of, and have actually read, any disclosure you make of the type mentioned above; and
- (b) must attest to those facts in the person's certificate of character.

Because of the privacy implications of disclosures about your capacity, a person who supplies a certificate of character need not be aware of any disclosure you have made about your capacity: see item 8.

8. DISCLOSURES ABOUT CAPACITY

8.1 What the law says

An Admitting Authority is also required to consider whether, at the time of making your application, you are able to carry out the inherent requirements of legal practice.

The requirement of capacity is separate and distinct from the requirement to be a fit and proper person or of good fame and character.

The Legal Profession Acts and Admission Rules variously describe matters relating to an applicant's capacity about which an Admitting Authority must satisfy itself, in the following ways

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- (a) whether the person is currently unable satisfactorily to carry out the inherent requirements of practice as an Australian legal practitioner;⁷
- (b) whether the person is currently unable to carry out the inherent requirements of practice as an Australian legal practitioner;⁸
- (c) whether the person currently has a material inability to engage in legal practice.⁹

Further, in deciding whether you are a fit and proper person, most Admitting Authorities also have power to have regard to any other matter it considers relevant, in addition to each of the matters particularly prescribed by legislation.¹⁰

Your precise obligation thus depends on the relevant legislation in the jurisdiction in which you seek admission.

Note, however, that apart from making disclosures which respond to the particular legislative requirement relevant to your capacity, it would be sensible for you to disclose any other matters which an Admitting Authority might think relevant when assessing your current capacity to engage in legal practice.

8.2 What your Admitting Authority does

Your Admitting Authority has a positive, encouraging approach to people seeking admission who experience mental, physical or other health conditions or disabilities. It wishes to ensure that such people are assisted, encouraged and supported to seek admission and to engage in legal practice.

It encourages people to seek medical or psychological help before seeking admission and, indeed, whenever they feel the need. Willingness to seek help counts in one's favour. Seeking early help can both demonstrate appropriate insight into one's condition or disability and also avert the risk of conduct that could become relevant to one's suitability for admission. Seeking psychological or medical help will not, of itself, prejudice one's ability to be admitted. Similarly, telling the Admitting Authority about the circumstances underlying the help received will not, of itself, prejudice one's ability to be admitted. On the contrary, it may show that one has appropriate strategies to deal with any stresses that arise in the course of legal practice; and that any former difficulties have been overcome.

If you happen to have, or to have experienced in the past, a mental, physical or other health condition or disability -

- (a) you are encouraged to obtain medical or psychological help if you feel you need it; and

⁷ *Legal Profession Act 2006* (ACT) section 11(m); *Legal Profession Act 2004* (NSW) section 9(m); *Legal Profession Act 2007* (Qld) section 9(1)(m); *Legal Profession Act 2007* (Tas) section 9(m); Uniform Admission Rules 2015 (NSW & Vic) rule 10(1)(k)

⁸ *Legal Profession Act 2008* (WA) section 8(m).

⁹ *Legal Profession Act* (NT) section 11(1)(m).

¹⁰ *Legal Profession Act 2006* (ACT) section 22(2); *Legal Profession Act 2006* (NT) section 30(1)(b); *Legal Profession Act 2007* (Tas) section 26(1)(b); *Legal Profession Act 2004* (Vic) section 2.3.3(1)(b); *Legal Profession Act 2008* (WA) section 22(1)(b). Section 31(2)(b) of the *Legal Profession Act 2007* (Qld) and section 17(2)(a) of the *Legal Profession Uniform Law* (NSW & Vic) are in similar, though not identical, terms.

- (b) that condition or disability, or the fact that you have sought or are obtaining help, will not necessarily prejudice your application for admission; but
- (c) your Admitting Authority is likely to consider that any behaviour or conduct arising from, or attributable to, that condition or disability is relevant, and should therefore be disclosed.

Your Admitting Authority's task is to determine if you are *currently* able to carry out the inherent requirements of practice. It will do this in the light of any disclosures you make and any supporting information you choose to provide.

Any mental, physical or other health condition or disability which you have, or may have had in the past, will only be relevant if it affects your current ability to carry out the inherent requirements of practice.

Except for the purposes of the administration of its relevant legislation, or as otherwise required by law, your Admitting Authority will not disclose to others (including any prospective employer) any personal or medical evidence that you disclose to it. In order to further protect your privacy, you may make any disclosure about your capacity in a separate statutory declaration lodged with your application.

8.3 When a health condition may be relevant

- (a) Very occasionally, *the mere existence* of a health condition or disability may directly affect your current ability to carry out the inherent requirements of practice. For example, if you earlier had a car accident, or an illness, that means you are no longer able to remember instructions which you are given, you may not currently be able to carry out the inherent requirements of practice. You need to disclose any such difficulties to your Admitting Authority.
- (b) Sometimes your *past conduct* (whether by act or omission) might raise questions about whether you are currently able to carry out the inherent requirements of practice. Repeated instances of certain conduct might cast doubt on your insight, or on your ability to make sound judgments. You need to disclose any such conduct to your Admitting Authority.
- (c) If you think that conduct might be wholly or partly explained by, or associated with, some physical, mental or other health condition or disability (whether diagnosed or not), you can choose to disclose that condition or disability; and may provide any supporting medical evidence that you think might assist your Admitting Authority to decide whether you are currently able to carry out the inherent requirements of practice. Such information may well explain the reasons underlying your conduct; and demonstrate that the underlying cause has been effectively dealt with or appropriately managed.

If you seek to demonstrate that your condition or disability is appropriately managed and stable, a certificate to that effect from one or more of your treating medical practitioners would greatly assist your Admitting Authority.

8.4 Examples

The following examples are merely indicative illustrations. An Admitting Authority responds to the particular circumstances of each application. The examples cannot thus be considered as binding on an Admitting Authority.

- (a) S found first year law very difficult. She wasn't prepared for the work required, and found it hard to meet all deadlines. As she had always done well at school, she was surprised that her law school marks were always bare passes. She became anxious about her capacity, and questioned whether she should be doing law.

On the recommendation of a lecturer, she attended the University's counselling service. The counsellor helped her to recognise the causes of her anxiety; advised her how to manage those causes; and recommended that she should attend a mindfulness course. After working with the counsellor, and undertaking the mindfulness course, S still felt stressed about law school. Having learned how to manage her stress appropriately, however, she successfully completed her law course and PLT course.

S would not need to disclose these circumstances to her Admitting Authority.

- (b) P comes from a family with a history of severe depression and has suffered depression for many years, attempting suicide on several occasions. He managed to get through his law course with difficulty, often requiring substantial special consideration to complete assessments and examinations. He has completed an on-line PLT course, but his depression persists. It severely affects his ability to engage in daily activities; and he often finds that he is unable to get out of bed in the morning.

P would need to disclose his difficulties to his Admitting Authority, as they raise questions about whether he is *currently* able to carry out the inherent requirements of practice. Disclosing his condition to the Admitting Authority does not necessarily mean that he would not be admitted, however. The Admitting Authority would probably wish to know whether, and if so how, his present difficulties might be overcome or managed. It would be sensible for P to answer these questions in his initial disclosure, rather than waiting to be asked for further information by the Admitting Authority.

- (c) M enjoyed the early years of his law course and was doing well. In his third year, however his mother was diagnosed with a serious illness and died late in the year. M was her primary care-giver during her illness and was devastated by her death. He failed several subjects that year, because of the stress of nursing his mother and his inability to talk about his circumstances with others, and obtained special consideration.

Subsequently, however, he became depressed and stopped attending law school. He consulted his GP who diagnosed depression and assisted him to undertake a series of treatments. M found that a combination of medication and counselling helped him regain his equilibrium. He re-enrolled and successfully completed both law and a PLT course. He no longer requires either medication or counselling.

M would not need to disclose these circumstances to his Admitting Authority.

- (d) During his law course, T developed delusions that his teachers were conspiring to have him removed from the law school. He wrote angry, hostile emails to law school and university staff, and alleged serious misconduct and mistreatment on their part to a number of authorities.

When several internal University investigations found no proof of his allegations, he became convinced that the conspiracy was widespread. Several University disciplinary actions followed in response to his behaviour, one of which referred him to his GP who, in turn, referred him to a specialist who diagnosed paranoid schizophrenia.

T would need to disclose the activities which preceded his reference to his GP. Given the seriousness of his diagnosis, it would also be prudent for T to declare that condition and how it is being treated and managed, as each of these matters reflect on whether he is *currently* able to carry out the inherent requirements of practice.

Disclosing his condition and treatment to the Admitting Authority does not necessarily mean that he would not be admitted, however. The Admitting Authority would need to know whether, and if so how, his present difficulties are being overcome or managed.

9. MATTERS PRESCRIBED BY LEGAL PROFESSION LEGISLATION

You must disclose any matter relevant to an applicant's suitability that is prescribed by legislation relating to the legal profession in the jurisdiction where you seek admission. The matters prescribed for Victoria [*Insert name of relevant jurisdiction*] are set out in **Appendix 1**.

10. FORM OF DISCLOSURE

Any disclosure which you are required to make must be included either in your statutory declaration applying for a compliance certificate or, in the case of a disclosure about capacity, in a supplementary statutory declaration, if you prefer. To corroborate your disclosures, you should make any available supporting document an exhibit to your statutory declaration.

3 May 2019

APPENDIX 1

PRESCRIBED MATTERS RELATING TO SUITABILITY FOR ADMISSION

[This Appendix must set out the particular matters relating to an applicant's suitability for admission prescribed by or under legislation relating to the legal profession in the relevant jurisdiction in which these guidelines are issued. The following example is from the Legal Profession Uniform Admission Rules 2015, rule 10, which applies in New South Wales and Victoria.]

As noted in items 4 and 8 of the Guidelines, your Admitting Authority is required to satisfy itself about each of the following matters. Accordingly you need to disclose anything that your Admitting Authority might consider relevant when satisfying itself about each of these matters.

- (1) For the purposes of section 17(2)(b) of the Law, the following matters are specified as matters to which the Board must have regard –
- (a) any statutory declaration as to the person's character, referred to in rule 16;
 - (b) any disclosure or statement made by the person under rule 17;
 - (c) any police report provided under rule 18;
 - (d) any academic conduct report provided under rule 19;
 - (e) any certificate of good standing provided under rule 20;
 - (f) whether the person is currently of good reputation and character;
 - (g) whether the person is or has been a bankrupt or subject to an arrangement under Part 10 of the **Bankruptcy Act 1966** of the Commonwealth or has been an officer of a corporation that has been wound up in insolvency or under external administration;
 - (h) whether the person has been found guilty of an offence including a spent offence in Australia or in a foreign country, and if so –
 - (i) the nature of the offence; and
 - (ii) how long ago the offence was committed; and
 - (iii) the person's age when the offence was committed;
 - (i) whether the person has been the subject of any disciplinary action, howsoever expressed, in any profession or occupation in Australia or in a foreign country;
 - (j) whether the person has been the subject of disciplinary action, howsoever expressed, in another profession or occupation that involved a finding adverse to the person;
 - (k) whether the person is currently unable to satisfactorily carry out the inherent requirements of practice as an Australian legal practitioner;
 - (l) whether the person has a sufficient knowledge of written and spoken English to engage in legal practice in this jurisdiction.