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Independent reviews
for schools,
universities and
colleges

Independent reviews

Allegations of peer-on-peer abuse, bullying and harassment, and other safeguarding issues continue to loom large in the education sector.

When schools, universities and colleges find themselves the target of allegations, often made publicly, they face complex challenges – ensuring that their students and staff are safe, and reassuring the wider community (including protecting their reputation), whilst, all the time, continuing the delivery of their core educational provision.

To help address these challenges, institutions are increasingly looking to authoritative, independent reviewers to scrutinise and advise on their arrangements. At Withers, we have specialists in the key areas needed to conduct such reviews, and we are ready and able to assist. These specialisms include:

- Education and charity law
- Governance
- Criminal law and investigations
- Media and reputation
- Data protection and freedom of information
- Employment law
- Dispute resolution



Why an independent review is important

To help address these challenges, institutions are increasingly looking to authoritative, independent reviewers to scrutinise and advise on their arrangements.

Educational institutions have always had to deal with difficult issues. But now the disclosure by individuals of instances of recent or historic abuse and related matters is, more often than not, made in public, usually on social media. This heightens the tension in what is already a troubling situation.

In such urgent circumstances, it can be very difficult for senior leaders, when managing the situation, to dedicate all the time and effort required not only to investigate the specific claims but also to carry out the necessary root-and-branch scrutiny of policies and practices. And, at times, even their best efforts may lack the visible independence which would provide real assurance to students, parents, regulators and others.

An independent review can help you – demonstrating that you are taking concerns seriously and, whether in relation to specific complaints or not, that you are being proactive in rooting out potential risks to your school or university community, so that the institution will learn and improve from the experience.





Our team

The Withers independent review team

We have highly experienced and specialist lawyers who can offer their independence and expertise to assist your institution with its review.

Our team includes Alison Paines, renowned charity lawyer and chair of governors at a leading independent school, and Carl Newman, an experienced investigator of criminal and other matters for institutions.

Key to any successful review is agreeing the right scope and terms at the outset. We can work with you on the largest and most serious matters, involving full-scale investigation and engagement with law enforcement and regulatory authorities where necessary, or smaller scale matters, for instance with lighter-touch desk-based assessments. In all cases, you could be confident that you would receive clear and robust analysis and guidance.



Our experience

All independent reviews will be informed by our extensive sector experience, for instance:

- Investigating a student's sexual assault within a university campus, interviewing students, reviewing CCTV footage and advising the university on police reports and ultimate disciplinary action.
- Working with a school dealing with bullying and harassment allegations and advising on potential criminality of the actions involved.
- Advising a school on its co-operation with investigative authorities after a criminal complaint made about a teacher's behaviour.
- Advising a school in relation to an organised campaign against its management and senior leadership, including assisting with responding to complex freedom of information requests, assisting with handling press enquiries where the proposed publication was inaccurate and misleading and other external communications issues.
- Assisting a school to manage a difficult situation where parents were repeating false claims about pupils on social media.
- Supporting institutions facing Charity Commission statutory inquiries and other regulatory engagement, including the submission of serious incident reports, working to resolve the Commission's concerns in the case of historic abuse allegations, and reviewing and advising on safeguarding policies, procedures and practices.



Our dedicated team

Advising independent schools across the UK.



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