Hierarchy of University Documents

Purpose

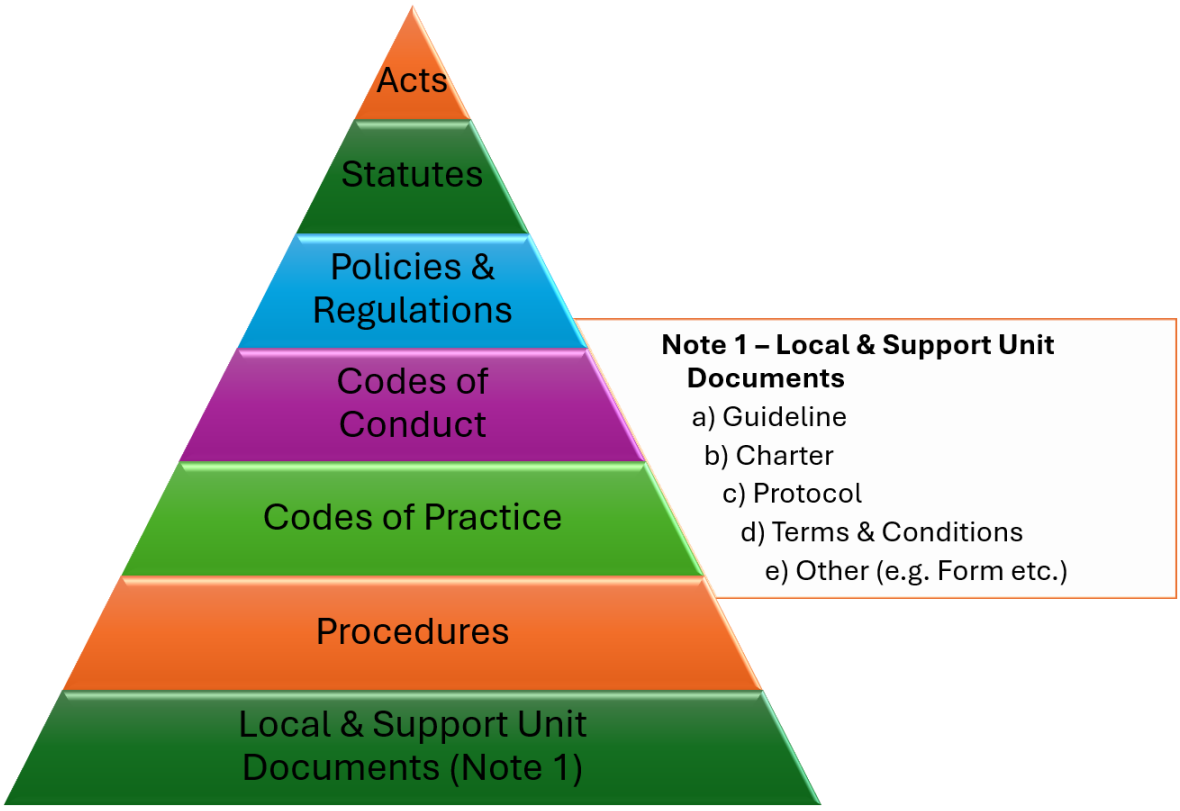
The purpose of this document is to provide guidance on the hierarchy of documents that are commonly used within Dublin City University.

The hierarchy is intended to support the 'Policy on University Policies' and will assist staff in understanding where a document lies within the overall document governance framework for the University. In addition, it also provides working definitions for the various categories of documents used by the University.

Document Hierarchy

The University's document hierarchy is as set out in the diagram below. The higher a document is placed within the hierarchy, the greater its influence on University operations is likely to be.

The correct categorization of a document within the hierarchy is essential to understanding its relative importance to other categories and this will depend upon the nature and purpose of the document. Further guidance on this aspect of the hierarchy is provided in the following sections dealing with 'Rules' and 'Definitions'.



Hierarchy Rules

Rule # 1

When drafting a new document, or revising an existing one, give due consideration to allocating the document to its correct category within the document hierarchy. If the document is to be a policy then it must adhere to the format of a policy as set out in the University's formal Policy Template.

Rule # 2

Avoid designating a document as a 'Policy', 'Regulation', 'Code of Conduct' or 'Practice' unless it actually meets the definition for such documents as described below as it may be more appropriate to use one of the lower ranked categories of documents.

Rule # 3

Where one document conflicts with another document that is placed higher in the document hierarchy, then the higher placed document takes precedence when it comes to interpretation and implementation.

Category Definitions

Acts

The term 'Acts' refers to the entire body of legislation currently in force within the State. In the University's case it refers primarily, but not exclusively, to the Dublin City University Act of 1989 that established its status as a 'University'. In addition, the Universities Act of 1997 sets out how Irish universities in general, including DCU, are to be governed.

For some areas/topics (e.g. Health and Safety, Human Resources, Company Law, Freedom of Information etc.) there is specific legislation in place that will guide the development of relevant University statutes, policies, codes, procedures etc.

Statutes

Statutes are the permanent rules made by the University for the administration of its internal affairs. Statutes can only be approved, amended or removed by the University's Governing Authority.

Example: Statute # 4 – Dispute Resolution Procedures

Policies

A policy is a statement of intent, or a position, on a particular matter, that can be used to guide decision making. It defines the expected organisational approach or behaviour. A university policy may stand on its own or it may be supported and implemented through separate procedures, protocols, guides or other supporting documentation.

University wide policies are generally approved by the University's Executive, the Academic Council, or in some limited cases, by the Governing Authority. Policies which are intended for use only within a certain unit of the University (e.g. a Faculty, School, Research Centre, Professional Support Unit or a Campus Company) may be approved by the Head of Unit.

Once approved, compliance with a University policy is mandatory.

Example DCU Data Privacy Policy

Regulation

A regulation sets out the formal rules to be followed or applied when managing a particular issue or topic.

Example: Academic Regulations relating to Examinations and Marks & Standards

Code of Conduct

A code of conduct is a set of rules outlining the responsibilities of, or the proper practices for, an individual, unit, group or organization.

Examples: DCU Codes of Conduct

Code of Practice

A code of practice is a framework adopted by a profession or organization to regulate its activities. A code of practice can also be styled as a code of responsibility that addresses difficult issues or decisions that need to be made and it will provide a clear account of what behaviour is considered 'ethical', 'correct' or 'right' in the circumstances.

Examples: DCU Codes of Practice

Procedure

A procedure is a series of defined interrelated steps that are designed to achieve a defined outcome. Procedures set out, in a step by step fashion, the organisation's requirements for a particular course or mode of action.

Procedures are often, but not exclusively, the means by which policies are implemented and in many cases they can represent the translation into practice of what has already been defined in a policy. Procedures establish the who, what, where and when in relation to a given activity.

In most cases where a procedure is created or amended to implement a policy it will not require any further approval but they should be reviewed and approved by the Head of Unit responsible for the related or parent policy if applicable.

University procedures should be:

- written in a format and manner that is easy to follow;
- published separately from the policy to which they relate;
  &
- reviewed and updated on a regular basis to check for compatibility with the most recent version of the related or parent policy.

Local & Support Unit Documentation

a) Guidelines
A guideline is used to direct or influence a particular course of action. They explain, in general terms, the background to a particular issue or matter and suggest how it might be addressed. They are 'guidelines', not 'tramlines', so there is a degree of flexibility inherent in guidelines that does not exist in other types of DCU documents (e.g. a Protocol).

Example: DCU Brand Guidelines

b) Charter
A charter sets out the grant of authority, or of rights, from one body or group to another. A charter should identify the main stakeholders and define the scope of their authority. It may also refer to the objectives and participants in a given activity or function.

Example: DCU Charters

c) Protocol
A protocol is a defined set of actions to be taken on the occurrence of a specific defined event.

Example: Protocol on the Death of a Student

d) Terms & Conditions

Terms and conditions are commonly found in contacts or agreements which are entered into by two or more parties. A contractual term is 'any provision forming part of a contract' and they create a contractual obligation for which a breach may give rise to litigation.

Conditions are generally more onerous clauses than terms and are often found in contracts and agreements. A breach of a condition usually repudiates the contract or agreement and it allows the other party(s) to discharge the contract or agreement.

Related Documentation

Policy on University Policies	The 'Policy on Policies' defines the process by which University policies are developed, approved, published and maintained.
Policy Development Guidelines	The guidelines are intended for anyone who is engaged in the process of developing new policies, or amending existing policies, from their initiation right through to having an approved policy published on the University's website.
Policy Template	The University's Policy Template is to be used whenever a new policy is created, or whenever an existing policy is updated.

Contact

For any queries in relation to the University's Document Hierarchy please contact the Risk & Compliance Manager (Ext. 8706).

Version Control

Document Name	University Document Hierarchy	
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Approved by	Risk & Compliance Officer	N/a
Date	June 24nd 2026	N/a

End.