



HEARING

DISCIPLINARY COMMITTEE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF CHARTERED CERTIFIED ACCOUNTANTS

REASONS FOR DECISION

In the matter of: Miss Nan Chen

Heard on: Friday, 15 December 2023

Location: Hearing held remotely by MS Teams

Committee: Mr Michael Cann (Chair),
Mr Trevor Faulkner (Accountant),
Mr Andrew Skelton (Lay Member)

Legal Adviser: Mr Richard Ferry-Swainson

**Persons present
and capacity:** Ms Michelle Terry (Case Presenter)
Miss Mary Okunowo (Hearings Officer)

Summary: Allegations 1(a), 1(b), 2(a), 2(b), 4 and 5(a) found proved.
Member excluded from Membership with immediate effect.

Costs: £5,600

INTRODUCTION/SERVICE OF PAPERS

1. The Disciplinary Committee (“the Committee”) convened to consider a number of Allegations against Miss Chen, who did not attend, nor was she represented.

2. The papers before the Committee were in a main bundle numbered 1 to 245, an additional bundle of 53 pages and a supplementary bundle of 64 pages. The Committee was also provided with a service bundle and a costs schedule.
3. Ms Terry made an application to proceed in Miss Chen's absence.
4. The Committee first considered whether the appropriate documents had been served in accordance with the Complaints and Disciplinary Regulations ("the Regulations"). The Committee took into account the submissions made by Ms Terry on behalf of ACCA and also took into account the advice of the Legal Adviser.
5. Included within the service bundle was the Notice of Hearing, dated 17 November 2023, thereby satisfying the 28 day notice requirement, which had been sent to Miss Chen's email address as it appears in the ACCA register. The Notice included details about the time, date, and remote venue for the hearing and also Miss Chen's right to attend the hearing, by telephone or video link, and to be represented, if she so wished. In addition, the Notice provided details about applying for an adjournment and the Committee's power to proceed in Miss Chen's absence, if considered appropriate. There was a receipt confirming the email had been delivered to Miss Chen's registered email address.

PROCEEDING IN ABSENCE

6. The Committee received and accepted legal advice on the principles to apply in deciding whether to proceed with the hearing in Miss Chen's absence. The Committee was satisfied that the Notice had been served in accordance with the Regulations, which require ACCA to prove that the documents were sent, not that they were received. Having so determined, the Committee then considered whether to proceed in Miss Chen's absence. The Committee bore in mind that although it had a discretion to proceed in the absence of Miss Chen it should exercise that discretion with the utmost care and caution.
7. Miss Chen did not respond to the Notice of hearing sent on 17 November 2023. However, in an email dated 30 March 2023, Miss Chen acknowledged receipt of the papers in this case. Furthermore, in the Case Management Form dated 13 April 2023, Miss Chen

indicated that she would not be attending the hearing, nor would she be represented, and she consented to the case proceeding in her absence.

8. The most recent correspondence from Miss Chen was an email dated 29 September 2023, indicating she had received an additional statement in this case sent to her by ACCA.
9. On 17 November 2023, a Senior Investigations Officer at ACCA sent an email to Miss Chen acknowledging her completion of the Case Management Form and her indication that she would not be attending and checking whether her position on that had changed. No response was received.
10. On 22 November 2023, the Hearings Officer attempted to call Miss Chen on the telephone number held by ACCA. The call went unanswered and there was no option to leave a voice message. The same day, the Hearings Officer sent an email to Miss Chen, indicating that she had tried to call her and asking her if she would be attending the hearing. No reply was received.
11. On 05 December 2023, the Hearings Officer again attempted to call Miss Chen, with a similar result. The same day the Hearings Officer sent an email to Miss Chen, indicating that she had tried to call her and asking her if she would be attending the hearing. No reply was received.
12. On 07 December 2023, the Hearings Officer emailed Miss Chen advising her that some new panel members in training would be sitting in on the private deliberations of the panel, although only observing and playing no part. Miss Chen was asked if she objected to this. She was also asked once again to confirm whether she would be attending the hearing. No reply was received.
13. On 12 December 2023, the Hearings Officer again attempted to call Miss Chen on two occasions but with the same results as before. An email was then sent to Miss Chen informing her of these latest attempts to contact her and asking her to confirm whether she would be attending. No reply was received. The same process was carried out on 14 December 2023, with the same result.

14. Notwithstanding her recent lack of engagement, on 14 December 2023 the Hearings Officer nonetheless sent Miss Chen the link for today's hearing so that she could join, if she so wished.
15. The Committee noted that Miss Chen faced serious allegations, including an allegation of dishonesty, and that there was a clear public interest in the matter being dealt with expeditiously. Miss Chen had been given the option to apply for an adjournment and had not done so, indeed she had consented to the hearing proceeding in her absence. There was nothing before the Committee to suggest that adjourning the matter to another date would secure Miss Chen's attendance. In light of her recent lack of engagement with ACCA and her clear indication in the Case Management Form that she would not be attending, the Committee concluded that Miss Chen had voluntarily absented herself from the hearing and thereby waived her right to be present and to be represented at this hearing.
16. In all the circumstances, the Committee decided that it was in the interests of justice and in the public interest that the matter should proceed, notwithstanding the absence of Miss Chen. No adverse inference would be drawn from her non-attendance.

ADMISSIONS

17. Miss Chen completed the Case Management Form dated 13 April 2023. In that form she admitted Allegations 1(a), 1(b), 2(a) and 2(b). Accordingly, the Chair announced that those allegations were found proved. Miss Chen denied Allegation 4.

ALLEGATIONS/BRIEF BACKGROUND

18. It is alleged that Miss Chen is liable to disciplinary action on the basis of the following Allegations:

Miss Nan CHEN ("Miss Chen"), at all material times an ACCA trainee,

1. Applied for membership to ACCA on or about 02 September 2020 and in doing so purported to confirm in relation to her ACCA Practical Experience training record:

- a) Her Practical Experience Supervisor in respect of her practical experience training in the period from 01 July 1992 to 31 August 2020 was Person 'A' when Person 'A' did not supervise that practical experience training in accordance with ACCA's requirements as published from time to time by ACCA or at all
 - b) She had achieved the following Performance Objectives which was not true:
 - Performance Objective 1: Ethics and professionalism
 - Performance Objective 2: Stakeholder relationship management
 - Performance Objective 3: Strategy and innovation
 - Performance Objective 4: Governance, risk and control
 - Performance Objective 9: Evaluate investment and financing decisions
 - Performance Objective 17: Tax planning and advice
2. Miss Chen's conduct in respect of the matters described in Allegation 1 above was:
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- a) In respect of Allegation 1a), dishonest, in that Miss Chen sought to confirm her Practical Experience Supervisor did supervise her practical experience training in accordance with ACCA's requirements or otherwise, which she knew to be untrue.
 - b) In respect of allegation 1b) dishonest, in that Miss Chen knew she had not achieved all or any of the performance objectives referred to in paragraph 1b) above as described in the corresponding performance objective statements or at all.
 - c) In the alternative, any or all of the conduct referred to in Allegation 1 above demonstrates a failure to act with Integrity.
3. In the further alternative to Allegations 2a), 2b) and or 2c) above, such conduct was reckless in that Miss Chen paid no or insufficient regard to ACCA's requirements to ensure:

- a) Her practical experience was supervised;
 - b) Her Practical Experience Supervisor was able to personally verify the achievement of the performance objectives she claimed and/or verify they had been achieved in the manner claimed;
 - c) That the performance objective statements referred to in paragraph 1b) accurately set out how the corresponding objective had been met.
4. Failed to co-operate with ACCA's Investigating Officer in breach of Complaints and Disciplinary Regulation 3(1) in that she failed to respond fully or at all to any or all of ACCA's correspondence dated:
- (a) 19 August 2022;
 - (b) 05 September 2022;
 - (c) 20 September 2022.
5. By reason of her conduct, Miss Chen is
- (a) Guilty of misconduct pursuant to ACCA bye-law 8(a)(i) in respect of any or all the matters set out at 1 to 4 above; in the alternative in respect of allegation 4 only
 - (b) Liable to disciplinary action pursuant to bye-law 8(a)(iii).
19. Miss Chen became a student of ACCA on 16 July 2015 and was admitted as an Affiliate on 01 August 2020. She was then admitted as a Member on 11 September 2020.
20. Upon an ACCA student completing all their ACCA exams, they become an ACCA affiliate. However, in order to apply for membership, they are required to obtain at least 36 months' practical experience in a relevant role ('practical experience'). It is permissible for some or all of that practical experience to be obtained before completion of ACCA's written exams.

21. A person undertaking practical experience is often referred to as an ACCA trainee. An ACCA trainee's practical experience is recorded in that trainee's Practical Experience Requirement (PER) training record, which is completed using an online tool called 'MyExperience' which is accessed via the student's MyACCA portal.
22. As part of their practical experience, each trainee is required to complete nine performance objectives (POs) under the supervision of a qualified accountant. An accountant is recognised by ACCA as a qualified accountant if they are a qualified accountant recognised by law in the trainee's country and/or a member of an IFAC (International Federations of Accountants) body. Once a trainee believes they have completed a PO, they are required to provide a statement in their PER training record describing the experience they have gained in order to meet the objective. Given this is a description of their own experience, the statement should be unique to them. Through the online tool, the trainee then requests that their practical experience supervisor approves that PO.
23. In addition to approval of their POs, the trainee must ensure their employment where they have gained relevant practical experience has been confirmed by the trainee's line manager, who is usually also the trainee's qualified supervisor. This means the same person can and often does approve both the trainee's time and achievement of POs.
24. If the trainee's line manager is not qualified, the trainee can nominate a supervisor who is external to the firm to supervise their work and approve their POs. This external supervisor must have some connection with the trainee's firm, for example as an external accountant or auditor.
25. Once all nine POs have been approved by the trainee's practical experience supervisor (whether internal or external) and their minimum 36 months of practical experience has been signed off, the trainee is eligible to apply for membership.
26. During 2021 it came to the attention of ACCA's Professional Development team that between 16 December 2019 and 29 January 2021, 100 ACCA trainees had completed their PER training record in which they claimed their POs had apparently been approved by a particular supervisor, namely Person A (referred to as Person A in the Allegations).

27. A person purporting to be Person A registered as each trainee's supervisor on the basis of them being a member of the Chinese Institute of Certified Public Accountants (CICPA) - an IFAC registered body.
28. Person B, Manager of ACCA's Professional Development Team, provided a statement for the purposes of these cases. They stated they would not expect a supervisor to have more than 2-3 trainees at any one time. It is accepted all these trainees had different periods of training and some periods overlapped. ACCA is unable to produce precise figures as to how many trainees Person A allegedly supervised at any one time. A person claiming to be Person A had apparently supervised a very significant number of ACCA trainees at, or about, the same time.
29. A review was also carried out by the Professional Development Team which indicated the PO statements had been copied amongst a large number of these 100 trainees, who had all claimed to have been supervised by the same supervisor, namely Person A.
30. In light of the above, ACCA contacted Person A via CICPA. Person A denied having supervised any ACCA trainees. During this contact Person A provided ACCA with their email address.
31. As a result of the above, all 100 trainees were referred to ACCA's Investigations Team. By this date many of these trainees had obtained ACCA membership.
32. During ACCA's investigation of these cases, Person A was contacted, and they agreed to provide a statement. In their statement (provided to the Committee) they stated that although initially they advised ACCA, they had never supervised any ACCA trainees, they did then recall having supervised a single ACCA trainee. Person A provided ACCA with the name of the trainee, which was not Miss Chen.
33. ACCA's records confirm Person A did act as a supervisor for this one trainee, who is not one of the 100 cases under investigation. In addition, they acted as supervisor for this trainee only to the limited extent of approving one of their nine POs, which they confirmed in their statement.

34. The reason this ACCA trainee was not included in these 100 cases under investigation is because Person A had been issued with a different supervisor registration number by ACCA and their details were different to the 'Person A' who had apparently supervised these 100 other trainees. This included their email address. The email address that was registered by 'Person A' in connection with these 100 trainees was [PRIVATE]. This was different to the email address provided by Person A to ACCA. In their statement to ACCA Person A stated they have never had an email address containing '[PRIVATE]'.
35. The 'Person A' who was registered as supervisor for the 100 trainees under investigation, provided a copy of a CICPA registration card. The 'Person A' ACCA has contacted has confirmed in their statement this is their registration card, but they did not provide this to ACCA.
36. Person C, Senior Administrator in ACCA's Member Support Team, provided a statement explaining ACCA's membership application process. They stated that once an application is received, this is recorded in ACCA's Prod database by an automated process. Person C exhibited to their statement a sample record. The corresponding record for Miss Chen was provided to the Committee and records her application being received on 02 September 2020.
37. Person B confirmed in their statement the following:
 - POs and ACCA's exams are closely linked so that the knowledge and techniques the trainee develops through their studies are relevant in their workplace. The tasks and activities a trainee will be asked to demonstrate in the POs are also closely related to the type of work they will undertake on a regular basis in an accounting or finance role.
 - Each PO comprises 3 parts; (i) a summary of what the PO relates to, (ii) 5 elements outlining the tasks and behaviours a trainee must demonstrate to be able to achieve the PO and (iii) a 200 to 500-word concise personal statement in which a trainee must summarise how they achieved the PO.

- In total a trainee is required to complete nine POs. The POs numbered 1 to 5 are compulsory. There are then a number of 'Technical' POs, from which the trainee needs to choose 4. ACCA recommends to trainees that they choose the technical POs that best align to their role so that it is easier to achieve the PO. In that regard the ACCA's requirements as published in the 2019 guide, and subsequently, explain the following:

'The performance objectives you choose should be agreed with your practical experience supervisor. You should consider the following points when selecting which performance objectives to target

... ..

Match any business objectives you have been set at work with the performance objectives. This will allow you to work towards your business objectives and your PER at the same time.'

- In their personal statement for each PO, a trainee needs to provide a summary of the practical experience they gained. They must explain what they did, giving an example of a task. They must describe the skills they gained which helped them achieve the PO and they must reflect on what they have learned including what went well or what they would have done differently.
- A trainee's personal statement for each PO must be their own personal statement that is unique to them and their own experience. This has been consistently referred to in ACCA's published guides (which Person B exhibited to their statement). Trainees must not, therefore, use a precedent or template or another trainee's personal statement, which would undermine the PER element of the ACCA qualification. The 2019 published guide concludes:

'Your situation and experience are unique to you, so we do not expect to see duplicated wording, whether from statement to statement, or from other trainees. If such duplication occurs, then it may be referred to ACCA's Disciplinary Committee.'

- ACCA's PER guides are available online in China. Although the Guides are printed in English, all Chinese trainees will have taken their exams in English and therefore it would follow that they have a reasonable command of the English language.
- A practical experience supervisor means a qualified accountant who has worked closely with the trainee and who knows the trainee's work. "Qualified accountant" means a member of an IFAC member body and/or a body recognised by law in the trainee's country.
- A practical experience supervisor is usually the trainee's line manager. However, where the trainee's manager is not IFAC qualified, the trainee can appoint an external supervisor who is. In all but one of the 100 cases, including this case, Person A was recorded as an external supervisor. ACCA's PER guide (as exhibited to Person B's statement) states:

'If your organisation does not employ a professionally qualified accountant who can sign-off your performance objectives then you could ask an external accountant or auditor who knows your work, to be your practical experience supervisor and work with your line manager to sign off your objectives.'

- Trainees must enter their practical experience supervisor's details using the MyExperience online recording tool which generates an invitation to their nominated supervisor to act as their supervisor. If the supervisor accepts that invitation, the supervisor is required to record their details using the same recording tool. On the dates Person A was allegedly appointed supervisor for these 100 trainees, there was no requirement for the supervisor to provide the name of their employer. Instead, they were only required to register their job title and provide their email address.
- All practical experience supervisors have to be registered with ACCA and as part of that registration process have to provide evidence, they are a qualified accountant. A 'Person A' apparently provided evidence to ACCA in the form of a registration card from CICPA. As such they were, from ACCA's point of view, a 'qualified accountant'. (A copy of this registration card is exhibited to Person B's statement)

38. Information has been obtained from one of ACCA's China offices in China about the support given to ACCA trainees in China, as follows:

- ACCA's Customer Services Team in China email all ACCA affiliates in China inviting them to regular webinars provided by ACCA staff who can advise on the PER process.
- The Committee was provided with a list of webinars (translated using Google translate) relating to ACCA's membership application process dated from 14 December 2016 to 27 August 2022. There are a number dated in 2019 including one dated 30 May 2019, further details of which were provided to the Committee. The details include reference to:

'...Record 36 months of accounting-related work experience in myACCA , and complete 9 Performance Objectives, which will be confirmed online by your Supervisor...'

- These are live webinars and therefore trainees can ask ACCA China staff questions.
- The webinar details refer to encouraging affiliates to join the ACCA WeChat group of their regional service group and provides details of how to join. All the webinars listed include the same details about these WeChat groups. ('WeChat' is a social media app available globally but used extensively in China). In these WeChat groups, ACCA trainees can ask ACCA China staff questions including about the PER process.
- In addition to the WeChat groups, ACCA China uploads to its WeChat platform articles relevant to the ACCA membership process. Provided with the papers for the Committee was a list of those articles (translated using Google translate). This included an article 'How to become an ACCA Member Series 1/ Practical Experience Requirement (PER) Quick Guide', dated 15 January 2020. A copy of the article was also provided. The article refers to a mentor, which is the same as a supervisor. Under the heading 'Find a mentor' the article states in particular:

'Your experience must be under the supervision of a mentor to count towards PER. You must find a mentor with real work experience to monitor and confirm your work hours and performance goals...'

- Under the heading 'Determine performance goals' the article states in particular:

You have to choose which performance goals to accomplish, here are some points to keep in mind:

- *You need to complete 9 performance goals, including all 5 core goals and any 4 technical goals;*
- *Work with your practical experience mentor to develop a plan to achieve performance goals;*
- *Choose technical goals that are relevant to your day-to-day work, as they are easier to achieve;....*

39. Miss Chen's PER training record indicates that she was employed by one firm, namely Firm A. In particular it records the following:

- Miss Chen claims that she trained at Firm A from 01 July 1992 in the role of Tax collector. No end date is included in the record. It is therefore assumed Miss Chen remained in this employment until at least up to the date her time / experience was approved on 31 August 2020.
- The PER records this as '350 months claimed' of relevant practical experience but actual experience was 336 months.
- In this role, the training record refers to two supervisors, Person A, who was authorised to approve her POs only and a 'Person D', who was authorised to approve her experience / time claim only.
- In relation to the POs, the PER records that Miss Chen requested Person A to approve all nine POs on 31 August 2020 and Person A apparently approved all nine POs on the same day.

- The Supervisor details for Miss Chen records that Person A was an external practical experience supervisor, hence why Person A only approved Miss Chen's achievement of her POs and not the period of employment in the organisation referred to.
 - Person D approved Miss Chen's period of employment at the firm on 31 August 2020.
 - The Supervisor details for Miss Chen record that Person D was a 'non IFAC qualified line manager' and hence why Person D only approved Miss Chen's time / experience claim.
40. As referred to by Person B, all PO statements should be unique and must not be copied from other trainees or from templates as this undermines the PER element of the ACCA qualification.
41. As part of ACCA's investigation a careful analysis was carried out comparing the POs of each trainee who claimed to have been supervised by Person A. The purpose of this analysis was to determine if the PO statements of any one trainee were identical or significantly similar to the POs of any other trainee who claimed to have been supervised by Person A.
42. Where PO statements were the same or significantly similar to the POs of any other trainees, this would suggest at the very least, the trainee had not met the objective in the way claimed or possibly at all. That further, the practical experience claimed, had not been supervised by a practical experience supervisor, who would or should have knowledge of the trainee's work.
43. This analysis was made possible in part by the company which provides ACCA with the online PER tool providing an Excel spreadsheet with all the POs downloaded from these 100 trainees. ACCA's Investigating Officers were then able to analyse these POs from that spreadsheet. In carrying out this analysis, ACCA has been careful to record the PO statement for any one PO which was first in time, on the basis this statement may be original and therefore written by the trainee based on their actual experience, unless there is evidence suggesting otherwise.

44. The 'first in time date' is the date the trainee requested that Person A approve the PO in question within their PER. This is on the basis that as soon as the PO narrative had been uploaded to the PER, the trainee would have then requested approval from Person A.
45. In relation to Miss Chen the analysis revealed:
 - Two of her statements were first in time;
 - Six of her nine PO statements were identical or significantly similar to the POs contained in the PERs of many other ACCA trainees who claimed to have been supervised by Person A.
46. Following referral of this matter to ACCA's Investigations Team, a member of that team sent an email on 19 August 2022 to Miss Chen's email address, as recorded on ACCA's system. Attached to the email was a letter which set out the complaint and requested that Miss Chen respond to a number of questions by 02 September 2022. The letter also referred to Complaints and Disciplinary Regulation 3(1) requiring Miss Chen to cooperate with the investigation by responding to the questions by the deadline.
47. Given Miss Chen did not respond by the above deadline, a further email was sent on 05 September 2022 with a copy of the letter attached to the previous email. In the covering email she was reminded of her obligation to cooperate by responding to the questions in the letter and to do so by 19 September 2022.
48. No response was received to this first reminder and therefore a second and final email was sent to Miss Chen on 20 September 2022 with a copy of the letter attached to the initial email. In the covering email Miss Chen was again reminded of her obligation to cooperate by responding to the questions by 04 October 2022 and that if she failed to do so ACCA would raise an allegation of failure to cooperate against her. No response was received.
49. ACCA has attempted to call many of the trainees who are being investigated but the telephone numbers have not been recognised. However, shortly after the initial email was sent to all trainees, ACCA's China office sent a mobile message to each trainee who had a

recognisable mobile number recorded in ACCA's records. The extracts from ACCA's database for Miss Chen include a telephone number, namely [PRIVATE]. The message sent by ACCA's China office using this mobile number read as follows:

Please note ACCA has sent you a password protected email on 19 August 2022 to your ACCA registered email address. Attached to the email is a letter. It is important you read this letter as soon as possible and respond by the deadline of 2 September 2022. If you have not received this password protected email or you have but cannot open the letter, please immediately notify ACCA at complaintassessment@accaglobal.com providing your full name, ACCA ID and date of birth.

50. ACCA's China Office confirmed that the message was sent on 22 August 2022 and was successfully delivered to Miss Chen's mobile number that day. No response was received from Miss Chen.

51. Miss Chen did not attend the hearing, nor did she provide any written submissions for the Committee to consider other than the completed Case Management Form.

DECISION ON FACTS/ALLEGATION AND REASONS

52. The Committee considered with care all the evidence presented and the submissions made by Ms Terry. The Committee accepted the advice of the Legal Adviser and bore in mind that it was for ACCA to prove its case and to do so on the balance of probabilities.

Allegation 1(a) - proved

53. Admitted and found proved.

Allegation 1(b) - proved

54. Admitted and found proved.

Allegation 2(a) - proved

55. Admitted and found proved.

Allegation 2(b) - proved

56. Admitted and found proved.

57. Having found Allegations 2(a) and 2(b) proved it was not necessary for the Committee to consider Allegations 2(c) or 3(a), (b) and (c), which were alleged in the alternative.

Allegation 4 - proved

58. There was no evidence that Miss Chen had responded at all to the emails sent to her on the three dates particularised in Allegation 4 and she admitted as much.

59. However, in the aforementioned Case Management Form, Miss Chen denied Allegation 4. She went on to explain that she never received any of these particular emails as they were not forwarded to her cellphone. This was because the forwarding function was shut down by the administrator of the mailbox and she did not realise this until 30 March 2023. She said that had she known about the emails she would have responded to the questions. She also claimed not to have received the text message sent to her phone by the China Office (referred to in paragraph 49 above). She concluded by saying she did not intentionally fail to co-operate with the investigation.

60. The Committee was advised by the Legal Adviser that the duty to co-operate with an ACCA investigation is absolute, that is to say every relevant person is under a duty to co-operate with any Investigating Officer and any Assessor in relation to the consideration and investigation of any complaint. A failure, or partial failure, to co-operate fully with the consideration or investigation of a complaint shall constitute a breach of the Regulations and may render the relevant person liable to disciplinary action. Miss Chen failed to respond at all to the correspondence sent to her by the Investigating Officer on 19 August 2022, 05 September 2022, and 20 September 2022. In the correspondence sent on each occasion Miss Chen was warned that a failure to respond could result in an allegation of failure to cooperate with ACCA. The Committee noted that the correspondence was sent by email to

Miss Chen's email address provided by Miss Chen when registering with ACCA and used by her at that time when corresponding with ACCA.

61. The Committee noted Miss Chen's claim not to have received these emails. The Committee considered it significant, however, that ACCA China office had used Miss Chen's mobile to send the message on 22 August 2023 saying that she would have received messages and to look at those emails and deal with them promptly and there is evidence that that message was sent successfully, notwithstanding her claim not to have received it. It was, therefore, beholden on Miss Chen to have gone and accessed her emails directly and not through her phone, if there was an issue with emails being forwarded. The Committee had evidence that the original email address was operating as there was correspondence between ACCA and Miss Chen to that email address.
62. The Committee was thus satisfied that Miss Chen had failed to co-operate as alleged and found Allegations 4(a), (b) and (c) proved.

Allegation 5(a) - proved

63. Having found the facts proved in Allegations 1(a), 1(b), 2(a), 2(b) and 4, the Committee then considered whether they amounted to misconduct. The Committee considered there to be cogent evidence to show that Miss Chen sought the assistance of a third party to provide false POs and to act as her PES in order to allow her, Miss Chen, to illegitimately qualify as a member of ACCA. This pre-meditated and calculated, dishonest behaviour demonstrated a complete disregard for ACCA's membership process and allowed Miss Chen to become a member of ACCA when not qualified to be so. Such behaviour seriously undermines the integrity of the membership process and the standing of ACCA. It brings discredit upon Miss Chen, the profession and ACCA. The Committee considered this behaviour to be very serious; it would be considered deplorable by other members of the profession and the public and the Committee was in no doubt it amounted to misconduct.
64. The Committee was also of the view that failing to co-operate fully with an investigation being carried out by her Regulator into her alleged misconduct is a serious matter. A member should not be able to frustrate, delay, or derail completely an investigation into their conduct. Being a member of ACCA brings with it a duty to co-operate, both in relation to

compliance with the Regulations and into the investigation of a complaint. The Committee was satisfied that such behaviour represented a serious falling short of professional standards and brought discredit upon Miss Chen and also upon the profession and ACCA as Regulator. It therefore decided that Miss Chen's behaviour in failing to co-operate amounted to misconduct.

65. The Committee therefore found Allegation 5(a) proved in relation to the matters set out in 1(a), 1(b), 2(a), 2(b) and 4 inclusive.
66. Having found Allegation 5(a) proved in relation to Allegation 4, it was not necessary for the Committee to consider Allegation 5(b), which was alleged in the alternative.

SANCTION AND REASONS

67. In reaching its decision on sanction, the Committee took into account the submissions made by Ms Terry. The Committee referred to the Guidance for Disciplinary Sanctions issued by ACCA and had in mind the fact that the purpose of sanctions was not to punish Miss Chen, but to protect the public, maintain public confidence in the profession and maintain proper standards of conduct, and that any sanction must be proportionate. The Committee accepted the advice of the Legal Adviser.
68. When deciding on the appropriate sanction, the Committee carefully considered the aggravating and mitigating features in this case.
69. The Committee considered the misconduct involved the following aggravating features:
 - A deliberate, repeated, dishonest act for personal benefit at the expense of the public and the profession;
 - An element of premeditation, planning and collusion with a third party;
 - Undermining the integrity, and thereby undermining public confidence, in ACCA's membership process;
 - Membership of ACCA obtained by fraudulent means;
 - The potential for harm to the public as she held herself out as qualified when not in a position to do so;

- The significant period during which Miss Chen continued to hold herself out as a Member of ACCA when aware that she had relied on false POs prepared by a third party in order to do so;
 - Apart from making some admissions, a lack of insight into her behaviour;
 - No evidence of remediation, regret or remorse.
70. The Committee considered there to be the following mitigating factors, namely the absence of any previous disciplinary history with ACCA and admissions to allegations 1 and 2.
71. The Committee did not think it appropriate, or in the public interest, to take no further action or order an admonishment in a case where a member had disregarded the membership requirements and acted dishonestly when submitting information in connection with her PER and also failed to co-operate with the Regulator.
72. The Committee then considered whether to reprimand Miss Chen. The guidance indicates that a reprimand would be appropriate in cases where the misconduct is of a minor nature, there appears to be no continuing risk to the public and there has been sufficient evidence of an individual's understanding, together with genuine insight into the conduct found proved. The Committee did not consider Miss Chen's misconduct to be of a minor nature and, whilst she had admitted dishonesty, she had shown no insight into her dishonest behaviour or failure to cooperate. The Committee noted that when addressing factors relevant to seriousness in specific case types, ACCA's Guidance indicates that non co-operation is considered to be very serious. Dishonest behaviour is also very serious. Accordingly, the Committee concluded that a reprimand would not adequately reflect the seriousness of the misconduct in this case.
73. The Committee then considered whether a severe reprimand would adequately reflect the seriousness of the case. The guidance indicates that such a sanction would usually be applied in situations where the conduct is of a serious nature but where there are particular circumstances of the case or mitigation advanced which satisfy the Committee that there is no continuing risk to the public and there is evidence of the individual's understanding and appreciation of the conduct found proved. The Committee considered none of these criteria to be met. The guidance adds that this sanction may be appropriate where most of the following factors are present:

- The misconduct was not intentional and no longer continuing;
- Evidence that the conduct would not have caused direct or indirect harm;
- Insight into failings;
- Genuine expression of regret/apologies;
- Previous good record;
- No repetition of failure/conduct since the matters alleged;
- Rehabilitative/corrective steps taken to cure the conduct and ensure future errors do not occur;
- Relevant and appropriate references
- Co-operation during the investigation stage.

74. The Committee considered that virtually none of these factors applied in this case and that accordingly a severe reprimand would not adequately reflect the seriousness of Miss Chen's behaviour. Her misconduct was intentional and could have caused harm to the public. Other than admitting the dishonesty, she has not demonstrated any insight into her dishonest behaviour and lack of cooperation. She has offered no expression of regret or apology. She does have a previous good record, but there has been no evidence of rehabilitative steps. She had provided no references and she failed to co-operate during the investigation stage. Furthermore, to allow someone to remain as a Member of ACCA who has gained membership under false pretences and thus when not qualified to be so, would be contrary to the whole process of qualifying as a Member of ACCA.

75. The Committee noted that the Association provides specific guidance on the approach to be taken in cases of dishonesty, which is said to be regarded as a particularly serious matter, even when it does not result in direct harm and/or loss, or is related to matters outside the professional sphere, because it undermines trust and confidence in the profession. The guidance states that the courts have consistently supported the approach to exclude members from their professions where there has been a lack of probity and honesty and that only in exceptional circumstances should a finding of dishonesty result in a sanction other than striking off. The guidance also states that the public is entitled to expect a high degree of probity from a professional who has undertaken to abide by a code of ethics. The reputation of ACCA and the accountancy profession is built upon the public

being able to rely on a member to do the right thing in difficult circumstances. *“It is a cornerstone of the public value which an accountant brings.”*

76. The Committee bore in mind these factors when considering whether there was anything remarkable or exceptional in Miss Chen’s case that warranted anything other than exclusion from membership. The Committee was of the view that there were no exceptional circumstances that would allow it to consider a lesser sanction and concluded that the only appropriate and proportionate sanction was exclusion. The Committee was cognisant of the severity of this conclusion. However, providing false information about one’s practical experience supervisor in order to satisfy one’s PER represents behaviour fundamentally incompatible with being a member of ACCA and undermines the integrity of ACCA’s membership process. The PER procedure is an important part of ACCA’s membership process, and the requirements must be strictly adhered to by those aspiring to become members.
77. In the Committee’s view, Miss Chen’s dishonest conduct was such a serious breach of by-law 8 that no other sanction would adequately reflect the gravity of her offending behaviour. In addition, it was not known if Miss Chen had the relevant practical experience to have ever become a member in light of the way she went about securing her membership. An additional concern is that, as a Member of ACCA, Miss Chen could decide to become a Practical Training Supervisor herself and could then be supervising trainees when not herself qualified to be a Member, further undermining ACCA’s membership process. Miss Chen’s behaviour was further exacerbated by her failure to respond to questions put to her by the Investigations Officer.
78. The Committee also considered that a failure to exclude a member from the Register who had behaved in this way would seriously undermine public confidence in the profession and in ACCA as its Regulator. The public needs to know it can rely on the integrity, ability and professionalism of those who are members of ACCA. In order to maintain public confidence and uphold proper standards in the profession it was necessary to send out a clear message that this sort of behaviour is unacceptable.
79. The Committee therefore ordered that Miss Chen be excluded from membership.

COSTS AND REASONS

80. ACCA applied for costs in the sum of £6,188.75 to cover the costs of bringing this case. The Committee was provided with a schedule of costs. The Committee was satisfied that the costs claimed were appropriate and reasonable. The costs of the Hearings Officer and Case Presenter were included in the sum quoted and based upon a full day when in fact the hearing took less than a whole day. Accordingly, the figure would be reduced to reflect this.
81. Despite being given the opportunity to do so, Miss Chen did not provide any details of her means or provide any representations about the costs requested by ACCA. There was, therefore, no evidential basis upon which the Committee could make any reduction on this ground.
82. The Committee had in mind the principle that members against whom an allegation has been found proved should pay the reasonable and proportionate cost of ACCA in bringing the case. This was because the majority of members should not be required to subsidise the minority who, through their own failings, have found themselves subject to disciplinary proceedings.
83. In deciding the appropriate and proportionate Order for costs the Committee took into account the above factors and decided to make an Order for costs in the sum of £5,600.00.

EFFECTIVE DATE OF ORDER

84. In light of its decision and reasons to exclude Miss Chen from ACCA, the seriousness of her misconduct and the fact that she should not have been on the Register, the Committee decided it was in the interests of the public to order that the sanction have immediate effect.

Mr Michael Cann
Chair
15 December 2023