

Establishing and Maintaining Staff/Student Personal Relationships/Professional Boundaries **(Information to Support Informed Decision Making)**

Statement

Edith Cowan University (ECU or the University) recognises connecting with students on a friendship basis can be part of being an active member of the University community. However, the relationship between student and staff is essentially one of trust where staff hold an inherent position of power relative to the student, regardless of the student's age or maturity.

By clarifying and defining what is expected in relation to professional boundaries between staff and students, the University is acknowledging this power differential and ensuring a framework is in place which underpins a high quality, supportive and safe learning environment. Staff at ECU are expected to engage with students within these boundaries and, where there may be 'grey areas', are expected to take into account the intent of these boundaries and make decisions that demonstrate the responsibility they hold for establishing and maintaining professional boundaries with students.

A breach of these boundaries exists when staff misunderstand or misuse the power differential, compromising a student's learning experience or welfare. Since respect and trust are fundamental to establishing a high quality, supportive and safe learning environment it is necessary that respect, fairness and good judgement are demonstrated when interacting with students. Behaviours that may reasonably be suspected to constitute harassment, discrimination, bullying, favouritism or exploitation are incompatible with ECU's values and vision of the student experience. Behaviours of this type must not occur.

Guiding Principles Informing Decisions

The following principles are not intended to address every situation or risk that may arise. They are intended to clarify the position of the University and are designed to guide individual thinking and inform individual decisions through the, sometimes, challenging area of setting and maintaining professional relationships and boundaries with students.

1. Relationships between staff and students are respectful

ECU's community is based on foundations where every student and member of staff can work, learn and research in an environment that is safe, inclusive and where everyone is treated with respect.

2. Intimate personal relationships between staff and students are not acceptable to the University

Relationships of an intimate personal nature are not accepted as they can impact unfavourably on a student's learning and research experience and their general well-being. Relationships of this nature can also negatively impact other students who may be aware or suspect an intimate personal relationship exists. They can also detrimentally impact a student's and staff member's integrity, professional reputation, and the reputation of the University.

3. Professional boundaries exist where staff hold a position of power, relative to a student

Staff must exercise their own judgement and common sense in navigating appropriate interactions with students. It is not the responsibility of the student to set appropriate boundaries. Staff who are required to engage and interact with students in the delivery of their role with the University hold a position of influence, assumed trust, and power relative to students.

4. Prevention, support and response

University initiatives that establish and maintain professional boundaries between staff and students focus on prevention, support and response.

Further Guidance

The following tables provide guiding tools and questions aimed at supporting individual decision making specific to the establishment and maintenance of professional boundaries. The information may also help observers evaluate and deal with conduct that might be of concern.

PREVENTION:		How to establish appropriate boundaries
Make it purposeful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure appropriate physical and emotional distance from students is established. • Focus on performing position responsibilities as defined by the University in accordance with the ECU values of respect, rational enquiry, integrity and personal excellence. 	
Make it authorised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only communicate with students via University sanctioned methods such as University provided email and telephone, and official social media channels. • Do not share or exchange with a student personal contact or other personal details unrelated to the work/learning environment. Arrange meetings on campus or other University authorised locations such as a conference venue, meeting rooms or fieldtrip working spaces. Where this is not possible, arrange to meet in a public place, such as a café or public library. • Formally declare any personal relationship that may be viewed as an actual or perceived conflict of interest. 	
Make it consistent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The same guidelines and rules apply when you and the student are participating in fieldwork, conferences and other University activities away from your usual workplace. 	
Make it relevant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refrain from contacting students after hours about University matters. If involved in University activities after hours, maintain interactions to University endorsed situations and avoid socialising that is unrelated to the University activity. 	
SUPPORT:		How to support a student
Make it timely	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know what support services are available to students. • Contact emergency services on 000 where the person is in immediate danger or needs urgent medical attention, and contact ECU Security to seek their help in responding to urgent and significant issues as they occur, understanding that whilst the student may not want this to happen there is an overarching need to protect the best interest of a student and ensure they are receiving the most appropriate supports when they are in crisis. • Refer students to these services. This may include assisting a student with accessing these services. 	
Stay within scope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are not expected to manage the health, well-being or care of a student, unless this is a function of your role. (Noting this is not a function of any academic role). • Stay within the scope of your professional role, knowledge and expertise. • Those with the professional expertise will provide the appropriate care. 	

<p>Actively listen and only ask appropriate questions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only ask personal information from a student where it is relevant to a University process (e.g. medical information for special consideration, or personal circumstances information as part of an academic progress process).
<p>RESPONSE: Things to avoid</p>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting with a student at a private residence, irrespective of whether this is authorised as a place of work • Making close physical contact with a student that is unnecessary in the circumstances. • Social events with students that are not University authorised events. • Having a close personal relationship or engaging in consensual conduct of an intimate personal nature with a student with whom you are required to interact or engage with as part of your role with the University. These relationships can harm the individual student and all associated students. • Paying special attention, making promises to a student, or taking actions beyond the scope of what is expected of your role as University staff which could result in the student feeling indebted. • Using an ECU position relative to a student for some personal advantage. • Discussing intimate details and sensitive personal matters with a student. • Offering advice to students on personal matters or subjects outside the area of expertise which is the basis of employment with the University. • Asking personal questions of a student without their permission or a justifiable reason, such as cultural questions. • Offering, borrowing or accepting money or other gifts from a student or otherwise having a financial interest with a student, except for token gifts after all assessment is completed and in accordance with the 'Acceptance of Gifts by ECU Staff' policy. • Engaging in any conduct towards a student which is unreasonable and unwelcome and could reasonably be expected to make the student feel uncomfortable, confused about boundaries, unsafe, offended, humiliated or intimidated.
<p>REFLECT: Are your actions right for the situation?</p>	
<p>Recognise</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there an issue or problem with my behaviour? • Am I dealing with this student differently from the way I would deal with other students under the same circumstances? • Am I behaving in a way that puts my emotional needs above a student's needs and welfare? • Is this student building a dependency on me?

Find relevant information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find facts. What does the Code of Conduct say? • Do I need to find out more information?
Liase and consult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should I talk to someone about this? • Is the career/professional counselling or personal counselling I'm providing within the scope of my role? • Should I be directing the student elsewhere for support or counselling?
Evaluate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Am I making informed, rational and logical choices? • What is the best thing to do? • What are the risks? • If someone finds out about my decision, what will they think?
Come to a decision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have I recorded my actions? • Have I declared any perceived or actual conflict of interest?
Take time to reflect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Am I happy I made the best decision based on available information? • Am I feeling comfortable with this interaction? • Would I modify my behaviour with a student if someone else were present? • Would I like to see this relationship reported in the news? • Would my actions bring the University into disrepute? • Will this relationship impact on the integrity of the research? • Have I considered the possible negative longer-term impacts of the relationship to the student or myself?

EXAMPLES OF **INAPPROPRIATE** STAFF/STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS/CONDUCT INCLUDE:

Example:
Touching a student or making small talk of a sexual nature, including small talk that is sexually suggestive.
Example:
Arranging to stay at a student's house overnight or inviting a student to stay at a staff member's house overnight.
Example:
A staff member supervises a student with whom they have, or have had, a close personal or intimate relationship.
Example:
A staff member creates and sends a student pornographic or sexually suggestive messages, images or pictures.
Example:
A staff member accepts a gift from a student, unless it is after all assessment is completed and not above a minor token of thanks in accordance with the Acceptance of Gifts by ECU staff policy.
Example:
A supervisor borrows or accepts money from a student, or otherwise has a financial interest with a student.
Example:
A supervisor requests or accepts personal favours from a student, such as assistance moving -house, regular lifts home, shopping or babysitting the supervisor's child.
Example:
A staff member joins students drinking alcohol in a social setting that is unrelated to a University authorised event. This includes socialising past the conclusion of a University authorised event.
Example:
A staff member engages in communication with a student using personal text messages to give compliments or criticism or share opinions about other staff or students.
Example:
A staff member ridicules a student for expressing their discomfort with attending a University authorised event where alcohol is on offer. The student explains that they feel there is an expectation that they must drink alcohol at these events or justify why they don't want to drink alcohol.

EXAMPLES OF **APPROPRIATE** STAFF/STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS/ CONDUCT INCLUDE:

Example:
A student sends a friend request to the personal social media account of an academic who teaches into the unit attended by the student. In response, the member contacts the student via a University authorised channel reminding the student of the importance of maintaining professional boundaries and directing them to the correct authorised channels for all future communications.
Example:
A student shares their history of anxiety and depression with a professional staff member within a School. The member of staff listens to the student, acknowledges their experiences, informs the student of the support services the University provides, and encourages the student to access these services should they feel it would benefit them. The student reaches out again to the member of staff sharing similar experiences and wanting advice about what to do. The member of staff acknowledges the trust the student has placed in them and directs them again to the

support services provided by the University that are operated by appropriately qualified staff. They offer to assist the student with contacting one or more of these services.

Example:

A student pursues a member of staff who they interact with as part of the staff member's role with the University hoping an intimate relationship will develop. The member of staff is unsure of the student's intentions and feels uncomfortable with the interactions. They inform the student of expected professional boundaries and brings their concerns to their line manager.

Example:

A mix of day and evening networking events are organised for students to connect with industry .

Example:

Staff reinforce to students at networking events where alcohol is on offer that there is no expectation of students to consume alcohol.

EXAMPLES OF COERCIVE AND EXPLOITIVE RELATIONSHIPS INCLUDE:

Example of a coercive relationship:

An academic requests that their PhD student meet at the academic's home rather than campus to discuss the student's research proposal. The academic indicates this would be easier than meeting on campus and if the student agreed to this arrangement, they'd likely receive a personal benefit such as an improvement in the level of supervision offered.

Example of an exploitive relationship:

A PhD supervisor asks their student to care for their child whilst they are editing the student's thesis draft.

A staff member asks a student who they interact with in the course of their role with the University to care for their pets whilst they are overseas at a conference.

A student is asked to write or rewrite course material or unit plans.

A staff member repeatedly requests favours from a student or attempts to impose unwanted communication or contact with a student.

A staff member continually singles out a student for praise and compliments making the student feel uneasy and alienating them from their peer group.

A Staff member inappropriately touches a student who they reasonably suspect is unlikely to have the confidence to ask them to stop.

A staff member demands favours from a student of another cultural background as they expect the student will not understand their rights or report the incident.