



BPA/SWIP Good Practice Scheme

Staff-student relationships

Introduction

Romantic or sexual relationships that occur in the student-teacher context or in the context of supervision, line management and evaluation present special problems. The difference in power and the respect and trust that are often present between a teacher and student, supervisor and subordinate, or senior and junior colleague in the same department or unit makes these relationships especially vulnerable to exploitation. They can also have unfortunate unintentional consequences.

Such relationships can also generate perceived, and sometimes real, inequalities that affect other members of the department, whether students or staff. For example, a relationship between a senior and junior member of staff may raise issues concerning promotion, granting of sabbatical leave, allocation of teaching. This may happen even if no preferential treatment actually occurs, and even if the senior staff member in question is not directly responsible for such decisions. In the case of staff-student relationships, questions may arise concerning preferential treatment in seminar discussions, marking, decisions concerning postgraduate funding, and so on. Again, these questions may well emerge and be of serious concern to other students even if no preferential treatment actually occurs.

At the same time, we recognise that such relationships do indeed occur, and that they need not be damaging, but may be both significant and long-lasting.

We suggest that departments adopt the following policy with respect to the behaviour of members of staff at all levels, including postgraduate tutors.

Please note that the recommendations below are not intended to be read legalistically. Individual institutions may have their own policies, and these will constitute formal requirements on staff and student behaviour. The recommendations below are intended merely as departmental norms, and to be adopted only where not in conflict with institutional regulations.

For further information on the BPA/SWIP Good Practice Scheme, please see our general guidance notes on the BPA Good Practice website (bpa.ac.uk/resources/women-in-philosophy/good-practice).

Recommendations

- The department's policy on relationships between staff and students (and between staff) should be clearly advertised to all staff and students in a permanent form, e.g. intranet or staff/student handbooks. The policy should include clear guidance about whom students or staff might consult in the first instance if problems (real or perceived) arise.

Undergraduate students

- Staff and postgraduate teaching assistants should be informed that relationships between teaching staff and undergraduates are very strongly discouraged, for the reasons given above.
- If such a relationship does occur, the member of staff in question should:
 - inform a senior member of the department – where possible, the HoD – as soon as possible;
 - withdraw from all small-group teaching involving that student (in the case of teaching assistants, this may involve swapping tutorial groups with another TA), unless practically impossible;
 - withdraw from the assessment of that student, even if anonymous marking is used.
 - withdraw from writing references and recommendations for the student in question.
- It should be made clear to staff and students that if an undergraduate student has entered into a relationship with a member of staff (including a TA), while the responsibility for taking the above steps lies with the member of staff concerned, the student is equally entitled to report their relationship to another member of staff (e.g. Head of Department, if appropriate), and to request that the above steps be taken.

Graduate students:

- Staff and graduate students should be informed that relationships between academic members of teaching staff and graduate students are very strongly discouraged, especially between a supervisor and a graduate supervisee.
- If such a relationship occurs between a member of staff and a graduate student, the member of staff should:

- inform a senior member of staff – where possible, the HoD – as soon as possible;
 - withdraw from supervising the student, writing letters of recommendation for them, and making any decisions (e.g. distribution of funding) where preferential treatment of the student could in principle occur;
 - in the case of PGT students, withdraw from all small-group teaching involving that student, unless practically impossible;
 - in the case of PGT students, withdraw from the assessment of that student, even if anonymous marking is used.
- As much as possible, the Department should encourage a practice of full disclosure in the case of such relationships' continuance. This avoids real or perceived conflicts of interest, as well as embarrassment for others.

Academic staff

Between members of academic staff where there is a large disparity in seniority (e.g. senior staff/temporary lecturer; Head of Department/junior lecturer):

- Disclosure of any such relationship should be strongly encouraged, in order to avoid real or perceived conflicts of interest.
- Any potential for real or perceived conflicts of interest should be removed by, e.g., removal of the senior member of staff from relevant decision-making (e.g. promotions, appointment to permanent positions).