

Peer-to-Peer Guidance for Academic Staff on Staff-Student Professional Boundaries

This guidance has been developed to be consistent with our policy on [Personal and Professional Relationships](#) (personal relationships between staff and students) in which staff are strongly advised not to enter into a sexual or other intimate relationship with a student. This guidance will be kept under review in light of any changes to guidance from our regulators or other authorities.

Introduction:

This guidance has been developed by the [Professional Boundaries Working Group](#), a group of academic staff who worked together between September 2018 and March 2020. It is intended for use by academic staff to help them develop and maintain professional boundaries with students. It is not intended to be rigid, exhaustive or prescriptive but rather to provide support and clarity around behavioural expectations and risks. The guidance was generated by academics from across the institution to ensure that it is relevant, practical and directly shaped by lived experience.

The academic-student relationship is not equal. Academics are in a position of trust, authority and influence with their students which means there is always an inherent power imbalance. Staff should always be sensitive to this. However, we also want to support the rich and fulfilling professional relationships which can develop between staff and students, and which are a key part of the HE experience for both parties. This guidance is intended to try and help balance this dynamic.

We recognise the diversity of our student body across different disciplines, years of study and course levels. This document tries to pick out key principles relevant to all staff/student interactions, but recognise that some guidance will be less relevant to particular situations or student groups.

Seeking Advice:

As an academic member of staff, you are encouraged to seek advice from your Head of Department, Director of Teaching or Studies or [HR Business Partner or Advisor](#) if you are in any doubt about your conduct or that of a colleague or student.

Why are professional boundaries important?

Having boundaries helps protect both staff and students, personally and professionally. Some of the risks of not maintaining them are:

- Perceptions of favouritism or bias affecting the integrity of a person's professional judgement
- Unwittingly entering into compromising situations
- Feeling and/or taking on an overwhelming or inappropriate level of responsibility for a person e.g. around solely supporting a student through mental health issues
- Individuals feeling uncomfortable, anxious and/or harassed or bullied
- Perpetuating and reinforcing inequalities
- HR and/or legal issues, for example a staff disciplinary case

There have been multiple cases at the University of Bath that have involved the transgression of professional boundaries between academics and students and a number of these have led to findings of misconduct, serious misconduct, and a lack of suitability/fitness to teach. It is therefore important for each member of academic staff to understand the potential risks and maintain safe boundaries with students in their work.

What are professional boundaries?

Professional boundaries relate to a set of principles and ways of behaving in a professional context that help protect our relationships with others, our ability to successfully perform our role, and to meet our responsibilities. Maintaining professional boundaries:

- Helps us maintain our professional integrity
- Avoids placing ourselves at risk
- Provides clarity regarding roles and relationships

All roles and relationships are complex, and 'grey areas', ambiguity or miscommunication can complicate boundaries, even when this is not intentional. We nevertheless have a responsibility to consciously consider the implications of our behaviour in every situation and to strive to ensure all colleagues and students are treated with dignity and respect. This means being continually self-aware, exercising careful judgement, and being aware of the potential consequences for students, academics and the University of engaging in certain behaviours.

Appendix A (attached at the bottom of this document) includes some examples of behaviour that could breach professional boundaries, and which should always be avoided.

Managing your risks in maintaining professional boundaries

You may find our [Risk Assessment Tool for Events & Social Spaces](#) may be useful in helping you to reflect on your behaviours and identifying opportunities to manage risks better. When you are unsure, you might find it helpful to ask yourself some general questions:

- Would you be comfortable discussing all of your actions, and the rationale for them, in a meeting with your line manager or supervisor?
- Would you be uncomfortable about a colleague or your manager observing your behaviour?
How might others judge your actions?
- If challenged, could you explain why you have behaved in this way?

Do your actions comply with relevant policies (for example [Dignity and Respect Policy](#), [Dignity and Respect Procedure](#) and the [Personal and Professional Relationships](#))?

Peer-to-Peer Guidance on Key Themes examined by the Working Group

General points on using this guidance:

The guidance is divided into key themes and topics that the PBWG examined between 2018 and 2020. In using this guidance it is important to keep the following general principles in mind:

- **Records:** Keep clear, factual records of your meetings with students, including the reason for the meeting, to help keep your interactions open and transparent. Advice can be found in the [guidance for personal tutors](#).
- **Approach:** If you are unsure how to approach a particular situation, take a 'consult and calibrate' approach. Ask the student what they would like from the interaction and (if appropriate) adjust accordingly. For example, if you are meeting a student one-to-one you could ask if they would prefer to leave the door open for your meeting.
- **Expectations:** Make your expectations, for example around level of formality, the best way to contact you, your availability etc, clear and explicit, as students may be unfamiliar with the conventions of higher education and your role.
- **Look after yourself:** Whilst we all have a responsibility as a member of our University community to support others, you should not do so at a cost to your health and wellbeing.
- **Work within your competence.** It is important you understand the limitations of your role and your personal capabilities, and when to refer to other professionals or to seek further support and advice.
- **Differences in Power:** Remember that as an academic you are in a position of power and authority over students. Be sensitive to this, and the potential implications and consequences – unintended or otherwise.
- **Be an 'active bystander':** in setting and establishing your boundaries. Challenge inappropriate behaviour and/or language when you see it occur, either directly or by reporting it.
- **Seek advice and support:** If you are unsure, seek advice from colleagues and/or University support services – see below:

Reminder on accessing urgent support and advice:

If you require urgent advice, guidance and support in dealing with student-related issues please contact the Student Services Staff Advice line on 4321.

The Key Themes considered by the Working Group / PBWG:

The Working Group considered the following themes below, with our main guidance identified set out in the following sections of this report:

Theme 1 - Mental Health and Student Wellbeing

Theme 2 - Personal Relationships

Theme 3 – Communication

Theme 4 - Socialising and Events

Theme 5 - Cultural Awareness

Theme 1 - Mental Health and Student Wellbeing:

All members of our University have a role to play in supporting the wellbeing and mental health of our students and staff. However, there is also a need to balance this support with protecting our health, and ensuring students and staff receive the most appropriate levels and types of support from those whose role it is to take this responsibility.

Our key points of guidance are set out below:

- a. The fundamental responsibility of academic staff in offering pastoral support is to take an individual's experience seriously and direct them to support. If a student shares a concern with you:
 - 1) **Listen** to them and their needs.
 - 2) **Acknowledge** their experiences and feelings.
 - 3) **Signpost** them to support from [Student Services](#)
- b. If you are not sure what is the most suitable source of help for the student you can ask them questions about how they would feel most comfortable in accessing a service – in person, online, etc. If in doubt, suggest they visit the [Wellbeing drop-in service](#).
- c. You are not expected to offer counselling or extensive pastoral support to a student. This places undue strain on you, may complicate boundaries with the student, and you may not be best qualified to offer support. Instead, signpost that individual to relevant support such as the [Wellbeing drop-in service](#).
- d. You cannot force a student to seek help. Your responsibility is to make every reasonable effort to support that individual and to encourage them to access support. However, if you think there is a risk to the student or others you must contact Student Services on 4321 (01225-384321 if calling from outside of the University) for advice. Outside core working hours ring Security on 666.
- e. If a student shares something with you confidentially, you should respect that confidentiality unless you believe the individual may be a danger to themselves or others. More guidance on supporting a student in distress can be found on the [Student Services pages](#).
- f. If you are unsure as to whether you can share information with others, you can always discuss cases hypothetically using the Student Students Staff Advice line on 4321.

Additional guidance:

- i. [Supporting students in distress](#)
- ii. [Guidance for personal tutors](#)
- iii. [Student Services guidance pages](#)
- iv. [Guidelines for supervisors of doctoral students](#)
- v. [University's Safeguarding Policy](#)

Theme 2 - Personal Relationships:

The University has a formal policy on [personal and professional relationships between staff and students](#).

Key points from this policy and its application are that:

- a. The University strongly discourages any member of staff from having, or pursuing, a personal or intimate relationship with a prospective or current student.
- b. Where there is a pre-existing relationship or one develops, the Head of Department should be informed immediately, so that safeguards can be put in place or other relevant actions taken.
- c. Failure to declare a relationship of this nature could lead to disciplinary action.
- d. It is important to be aware of the nature of your relationships with individual students and review how these may be changing over time. It is important to prevent these relationships from blurring into something inappropriate and/or which may create a conflict of interest. Examples of personal relationships that staff should avoid are: a business or commercial relationship; financial relationship; sexual/romantic relationship; and a close friendship of a social nature.
- e. If you feel a student is making inappropriate overtures you should:
 - i. Seek advice and support from your Head of Department and/or HR
 - ii. If you feel safe to do so, explicitly tell the student that their behaviour is not appropriate within the bounds of your academic working relationship; sensitively request the student desist and indicate that if this continues a change in supervisor or other more formal steps may be necessary.
 - iii. Avoid situations where you are alone with them
 - iv. Ensure you keep a personal record of interactions with that individual
- f. Always seek to avoid any favouritism with students, for example by avoiding in-jokes and ensuring all students have equal access to office hours and other contact opportunities. This may include offering the option of virtual meetings, or pair/group meetings.
- g. Set limits on how much time you spend with individual students. If they need substantial support, direct them to other more appropriate sources relevant to their support needs, such as [the Skills Centre](#).
- h. You might see students' profiles on a dating or meetup app. You should not 'connect' with a student through these apps and should be sensitive to what personal information about you is provided through them. If you are using a dating app yourself, you should be careful to set it up in such a way as to protect yourself and avoid interacting or connecting with a student through it.

Additional guidance:

- i. [Dignity and Respect Policy](#),
- ii. [Dignity and Respect Procedure](#) and
- iii. [Professional and Personal Relationships](#)
- vi. [University's Safeguarding Policy](#)

Theme 3 – Communication:

There is a need in all communication to strike a balance between allowing students and staff to build rapport, networks, and a sense of academic collegiality and ensuring that appropriate/professional boundaries are maintained.

Our guidance is on key points to consider are set out below.

- a. **Be aware:** Academic staff should be sensitive to how their communication could be perceived or construed and make an informed and conscious choice in its tone and nature.
- b. **Methods of communication:** Staff should use University of Bath means of communication with students, rather than personal or private methods.
- c. **Time of communication:** Staff are not required or expected to communicate with students at weekends or outside of normal working hours (9.00 – 17.20) unless there is an emergency.
- d. **Social media:** Be cautious in your use of social media. We do not recommend that staff share their personal social media accounts with students, and if staff do feel social media has an important pedagogical role to instead create a separate professional account. You should ensure that any mention of your teaching practice on social media remains respectful and protects our students' and staff integrity and anonymity.
- e. **Personal phone number:** We recommend not sharing your personal phone number with students. If staff do need to contact students over the phone – for example, as a health and safety consideration in lab work – we recommend staff have a dedicated work phone for this purpose. [Teams Telephony](#) now allows calls to your office phone number to be picked up through Teams via your laptop or tablet.
- f. **Expectations of Unit Convenor communications:** Unit Convenors may find it helpful to clarify expectations around communication with each cohort on a unit and/or programme of study. Some considerations are:
 - i. **Email response times:** Students should always receive a response to any correspondence from an academic. However, it may be helpful to explicitly state a timeframe for this response, such as: "I will respond within 5 working days".
 - ii. **Working/response hours:** Staff may want to clarify on which days students can expect a response from them – for example, that staff will only respond to student requests on weekdays. Some students may need the meaning of an 'Out of Office' explicitly explained.
- g. **Formality of tone:** Staff may need to explain the level of formality expected from students in email correspondence, as some students may be unfamiliar with email etiquette.

- h. **Inappropriate personal comments:** You may find students make personal comments which you feel are not appropriate, for example, *“I really like the way you look today.”* If you feel uncomfortable with the comment, you are encouraged to sensitively explain its inappropriateness to the student, both to help you feel comfortable and to educate students on norms in a professional context.
- i. **Meeting places:** Whenever possible arrange to meet students on University premises, not in private cafes, bars or restaurants.

Additional guidance:

- i. [Email Policy](#)
- ii. [Social Media Guidance](#)
- iii. [IT Acceptable Use Policy](#)
- iv. [Guidelines for supervisors of doctoral students](#)
- v. [University’s Safeguarding Policy](#)

Theme 4 - Socialising and Events:

Socialising with students can be an important way to build networks, rapport, and relationships that enrich the learning experience for staff and students. However, it can also be a difficult area within which to manage boundaries.

Staff should also be sensitive regarding students' ability to participate in all events – students with children or caring responsibilities, international students, students with disabilities or students from certain religions may have particular factors to consider when socialising.

You may find our [risk assessment tool](#) helpful in planning social events.

Below are some key points and principles that we have identified as a working group that we believe will help to keep you and your students safe while not hindering effective engagement of your students.

- a. One-to-one meetings (e.g. teaching, tutorial or supervisory meetings) with students should preferably be held during normal University hours, although it is recognised that there are some occasions where this will not be possible.
- b. We would recommend socialising with students is normally done at University-organised events – for example, departmental socials or networking events.
- c. Avoid visiting a student at their home or halls, or inviting students to your home.
- d. Avoid discussing students' learning or progress at informal social events, so that there is a clear distinction between teaching/supervisory roles and social events.
- e. Social events should always be genuinely optional – they should not be a place where progression or academic matters are discussed. Take care to avoid displaying favouritism to regular attendees. Recognise that finances, caring responsibilities and/or personal preference may affect a person's ability to attend events, and they should not feel penalised for this.
- f. If students are unable to attend events you may find it useful to seek feedback as to why – it may be due to timing, location, or other factors that could be easily changed.
- g. Some factors to consider when organising a social event are:
 - i. **Location:** Make sure where possible that the location/venue is 'neutral' – for example, events at the pub have certain connotations which not all participants may feel comfortable with.
 - ii. **Timing:** Wherever possible, events should be scheduled within working hours (9.00 – 17.20), on weekdays and during the daytime. Some attendees may have children or other caring responsibilities which make attendance outside these hours more difficult.
 - iii. **Accessibility:** Ensure you are sensitive to any students with mobility or other access needs when scheduling events.
 - iv. **Ask:** If in doubt, ask your intended attendees what option they would prefer. Be open and responsive to their feedback.

- v. **Alcohol:** Try and avoid events or locations where alcohol is a key focus – for example, drinks receptions or the pub. Some attendees may not feel comfortable around alcohol, whether for reasons of culture, religion or personal preference.
- vi. **Theme:** in choosing a theme or type of social event consider choosing those that will appeal across a broad range of groups, cultures, interests etc. If you are having several events, have a variety of types, so that a greater diversity of students are engaged.
- vii. **Socialising:** Be cautious when socialising with students. Don't drink too much, don't gossip or vent about colleagues or other students, and avoid getting drawn into overly personal conversations.
- viii. **Hosting a conference:** If you are hosting or organising a conference, you might want to consider a formal 'Conference Code of Conduct' clarifying expectations and appropriate behaviour – you can find an example here - [Code of Conduct](#)

Additional guidance

- i. [REACH Inclusive Conference Guide](#)
- ii. [University's Safeguarding Policy](#)

Theme 5 - Cultural Awareness:

The University is enriched by its diverse and international community. We need to recognise and navigate intercultural differences to fully benefit from the diversity of experience of our members.

A lack of sensitivity to intercultural differences may offend, upset students, perpetuate or reinforce group-based inequalities, or limit individuals' ability to engage with academic and/or pastoral support.

Engaging with the potential issues raised by differences, seeking advice, and acting in an informed manner gives the best chance to ensure all individuals have the opportunity to respect, share and celebrate different cultures. Below are some further points of guidance that we identified as a working group:

- a. **Seek information and advice** - Uncertainty or anxiety about our behaviour can inhibit us and make us less likely to engage. We can channel this desire to be inclusive into learning more about other cultures through reading and consulting with colleagues with specific expertise.
- b. **Show openness to learning** - and take the 'consult and calibrate' approach where possible. If unsure, create opportunities to gather anonymous feedback from students about whether your practices are inclusive, and adjust accordingly.
- c. **Explain why** - When teaching, be explicit not only about your expectations of students and your preferred approach but *why* that is the case - explain the rationale. For example, if you want students to speak up in lectures because you feel it helps encourage a particular form of engagement with subject material explain this and create reasonable steps for them to work on this skill progressively. Different students will have had different educational experiences and may require different techniques to learn and practice new skills.
- d. **Avoid deficit approaches in teaching** - Our focus should be on facilitating *all* student's ability to interact with material by providing different options, rather than insisting on traditional UK teaching practice. For example, tools like [Padlet or post-it notes allow students to express themselves to the class in writing which they may feel more comfortable with. Incorporating such methods promotes inclusion not only of students who are operating in a second language but also those who are building their communication skills and confidence more generally.](#)
- e. **Be reflective of your own cultural identity** - Culture is not just something 'other' nationalities have, everyone has their cultural views, values, expectations and behaviours. Be reflective on your own cultural identity and how it influences your behaviour and approach.
- f. **Avoid the 'deficit model'** - in thinking and communicating about differences, where students with marginalised backgrounds are positioned as lacking skills in relation to the norm of the dominant social group. In dealing with the factors that marginalise them within a particular context (e.g., language, financial status, housing or asylum status) individuals have developed additional skills that are often invisible and can be better valued.
- g. **Be self-aware** - Be sensitive to your use of idiomatic expressions, and if you do use them explain them.
- h. **Be aware of some key areas of intercultural difference** - to be sensitive to areas that include:
 - i. **Differences in personal space**: Different cultures have different norms around personal space. If you feel a student is standing too close or encroaching on what you feel constitutes your personal space, politely ask them to step back.

- ii. **Gender:** Some students may have different assumptions around gender roles and behave accordingly. For example, some students may feel uncomfortable being alone with a member of staff of the opposite sex, in which case we need to make reasonable accommodations. Outline your expectations clearly and seek support if needed.
 - iii. **Formality of tone:** Some students may be used to having a more deferential relationship with their teachers and academics than would be the norm in the UK. Be clear, but flexible, on how you would like to be addressed by your students, and listen to their feedback on how they like to be addressed too.
- h. **Take opportunities to build awareness** - Seek opportunities to build intercultural awareness and engagement through your teaching – for example, through induction activities.
- i. Make use of [tips](#), support and guidance offered by the Centre for Learning and Teaching around interculturally inclusive learning and teaching.
- j. Avoid homogenisation of ‘international students’ – they will all have different experiences and expectations.

Additional guidance

- [Centre for Learning and Teaching resources](#)
- Contact the Centre for Learning and Teaching for support in developing intercultural understanding in learning and teaching and to join a community of practice
- [Student Journey Game that provides insights into experiences of students of colour, produced by academics of the Building the Anti-Racist Classroom collective](#)
- [Reading list for developing and supporting anti-racist practices](#)

Q&A – Other questions and answers that arose during our consideration

1. What should I do if I feel a colleague or student is breaching professional boundaries?

If it is a student, and you do not feel unsafe, communicate explicitly about why their behaviour is inappropriate. Seek to distance yourself from the student, document your interactions, and seek support from a colleague or your line manager or [your HR Business Partner or Advisor](#).

If it is a colleague, depending on your relationship with them you may want to discuss it directly with them and explain why their behaviour is inappropriate. If you do not feel comfortable doing this, or if the behaviour continues, seek advice from your Head of Department and/or HR.

2. What do I do if I feel out of my depth?

If you find yourself in a position where you fear you have breached or are in danger of breaching boundaries seek advice from your Head of Department/and or your [HR Business Partner or Advisor](#) or Deputy Director (HR Services). Make every reasonable effort to remove yourself from the situation, particularly if you are in a place of academic or pastoral responsibility towards the individual involved. Be open and honest to help manage the situation and avoid further difficulties.

3. What if I don't feel comfortable raising the matter with my Head of Department?

If you don't feel able to seek support from your Head of Department you could speak to a trusted colleague or mentor, a member of HR or the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team. You can also seek independent advice through the [Employee Assistance Programme](#).

4. What can I do if I am concerned about a student's or a colleague's mental health?

There are a wide range of sources of support for your colleague and you that can be taken forward. These are set out below.

Support for students:

- **[Student Services](#)**: Provide students with support and guidance, including counselling and mental health, disability support, money management and international student advice.
- **[SU Advice and Support](#)**: Offer confidential, independent and non-judgemental information, advice, support and representation for students.
- **[Be Well – Talk Now \(bath.ac.uk\)](#)**: A confidential service to give students immediate advice and support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year via telephone or live chat.
- **[Security](#)**: Available 24/7 365 days of the year to support student and staff welfare and safety.
- **Departmental**: The student's personal tutor or doctoral supervisor should be their first source of support and advice, or their unit convenor if it is linked to a specific unit. The Director of Studies/Director of Doctoral Studies is also available to provide pastoral support.

Support for staff:

- **Departmental support**: Do you/they have a trusted colleague to speak to in confidence, or the Head of Department?
- **Human Resources**: you and/or a colleague can receive advice and support from [your HR Business Partner or Advisor](#).

- **Security**: Available 24/7 365 days of the year to support student and staff welfare and safety.
- **Student Services**: Can provide confidential advice to staff through the 4321 staff advice line.
- **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion**: provides advice, support and guidance on equality and diversity-related issues.
- **Employee Assistance Programme**: provides free and confidential counselling service available to all University staff
- **Education Support Partnership**: provides free confidential support, counselling and independent guidance to all University and Higher Education employees.

Appendix A: Example of behaviour which could breach Professional Boundaries

Breaches of Professional Boundaries

Professional boundaries may be categorised into specific types of boundaries, although these categories cannot be considered mutually exclusive – see this research paper¹.

The table below lists some different types of breaches of boundaries and gives examples of behaviours which might be described as breaching professional boundaries in the areas described and which should always be avoided.

Type of breach of Professional Boundaries	Potential Situations
Emotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing preferential treatment to particular students. • Acting outside one’s professional role e.g. as a ‘friend’ or ‘personal counsellor’.
Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging in intimate, romantic or sexual relationships with a student. • Engaging in flirtatious behaviour with a student. • Intimate gesture or touch. • Expressing romantic feelings towards a student • Meeting a student alone outside University without a justifiable context. • Favouring a particular student, with no educational or valid purpose, for example by regularly driving the student home.
Reward/Punishment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privately giving a student a gift, e.g. money, mobile phone or a meal. • Using academic authority to harm or threaten to harm a student. • Withholding information from a student to manipulate the student. • Rewarding or punishing a student based on what the student does for the staff member. • Using a student to gain a personal benefit, such as monetary gain, goods, services or useful information. • Bribing a student into silence about the staff member’s inappropriate conduct.

¹ Aultman, L.P., Williams-Johnson, M. and Schuts, P. “Boundary dilemmas in tutor-student relationships: Struggling with ‘the line’”. *Teaching and Teacher Education Journal*, 25 (2009) pp 640- 644
http://66.199.228.237/bounary/boundary_violations_and_physician_impariment/boundary-issues.pdf at 1 December 2016 – and ATRA’s *Managing Professional Boundaries Guidelines for Teachers* pp 3-4; and QCT’s *Professional Boundaries*.

Type of breach of Professional Boundaries	Potential Situations
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Threatening to use professional credibility to undermine or derail a student’s research or professional career.
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talking or joking with a student about personal matters or sexually inappropriate matters, including where that conversation is instigated by the student. • Comments about a student’s appearance, including excessively flattering comments. • Vilifying or humiliating students. • Facilitating or allowing access to pornographic or overtly sexual material (except where it forms a legitimate part of the academic curriculum). • Failing to respond to sexual harassment between students. • Using pet names for a few particular students. • Engaging in correspondence of a personal nature with students, including letters, phone, SMS texts and social media. • Using social media to interact with a student without a valid context. • Offering advice on personal matters to a student, where it is not done in an authorised situation, such as an authorised pastoral care situation. • Asking a student questions about personal/sexual matters. • Not immediately stopping, respectfully, discussions of a personal/sexual nature, even if they are initiated by a student. • Breaching the confidentiality of others with a student e.g. talking about the personal life of other staff or students to a student.
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unwarranted, unwanted and/or inappropriate touching of a student, personally or with an object, such as a pencil or ruler. • Initiating or permitting inappropriate physical contact by or on a student, e.g. massage or tickling games. • Allowing students to push too close, or otherwise make inappropriate contact.