



Guidelines for Professional Conduct with Students

Guidance name	Guidelines for Professional Conduct with Students
Responsible Team	Human Resources
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1) Purpose

This guidance complements the [Personal Relationships Policy](#) to help staff maintain clear, respectful and professional relationships with students. It supports staff in managing their professional, pastoral and academic responsibilities, while protecting both staff and students from issues related to abuse of power, breaches of trust, unfairness or conflicts of interest. Ultimately it contributes to a safe, fair and supportive environment for everyone, free from bias, favouritism, harassment, sexual misconduct and victimisation.

2) Why Professional Boundaries Matter

Professional boundaries help create a safe, respectful, and inclusive learning environment. They give students clarity and confidence about how they will be treated, and ensure that staff are protected from misunderstandings, blurred roles, or the risk of conflicts of interest.

Boundaries are not about being distant or unfriendly, they are about being clear, consistent, and fair. Many students, especially those unfamiliar with higher education, may look to staff for guidance not just academically, but emotionally or socially. Clear boundaries help staff provide meaningful support while ensuring relationships remain appropriate and centred on the student's academic development.

Being mindful of your role and position of power in all interactions helps maintain trust in the staff–student relationship, and upholds the University's commitment to professionalism, fairness, and safeguarding.

3) Professional Conduct

3.1 How to communicate professionally

Whenever possible, use University email, phone, MS Teams or other official software to communicate with students. This helps ensure that interactions remain clear, professional and appropriately documented. Occasionally, informal channels like texting or social media may be necessary, but these should only be used when essential for educational or professional reasons.

Set clear expectations around communication early on, including your preferred communication method, level of formality, availability, and response times. Students may be unfamiliar with the conventions of higher education and your role, so setting these expectations can help avoid misunderstandings.

Friendly and approachable communication that fosters a positive and supportive atmosphere is encouraged. However, staff should maintain professional boundaries to protect both themselves

and students. Personal information should only be requested when essential for specific University processes (e.g. medical information for special consideration, or personal circumstances for academic progress process).

Following up phone calls or in-person conversations with a brief summary via the student's University email is good practice. It provides a clear record of any discussions or agreements. Wherever possible, aim to communicate during reasonable working hours, balancing availability with respect for personal time.

Communication should always be respectful and professional. Avoid jokes or 'banter' that could be misinterpreted or feel overly personal, inappropriate or exclusionary.

If a student appears to need additional support, guide them to the relevant University services. Some students may initially prefer to speak with a trusted staff member, in these cases, staff can offer a listening ear while encouraging them to seek appropriate professional help.

When you're unsure how best to approach a situation, consider taking a "consult and calibrate" approach. Ask the student what they would like from the interaction and adjust accordingly where appropriate. For example, if you're meeting a student one-on-one, you might ask whether they would prefer the door open or closed to help them feel more comfortable.

3.2 Meeting students

Whenever possible meetings and discussions should take place on campus or in University-approved locations. If that's not feasible or if an informal setting would help the student feel more comfortable, consider meeting in a public space like a library or a café. For information on meeting students in private homes please refer to the Personal Relationships Policy.

Setting office hours can help manage meetings clearly and professionally. Using physical cues like a desk or a table can help create a clear and professional meeting space.

3.3 Socialising, inclusion and alcohol

Social interactions between staff and students can help foster a positive academic environment, build rapport, and support student engagement. However, they also present risks related to professional boundaries, perceived favouritism, and inclusivity.

To support positive engagement while maintaining clear boundaries, staff should consider the following guidance.

Professional Boundaries and Alcohol:

- To reduce the risk of blurred boundaries or misunderstandings, staff should generally avoid socialising with students outside of university-related events.
- Refrain from drinking alcohol with students, particularly in one-to-one settings, and avoid purchasing alcoholic drinks for them.
- If staff choose to consume alcohol at a student-attended event, it should be done responsibly and in moderation.
- Maintain professional conduct at all times, even in informal or off-campus settings. Keep conversations inclusive and professional, avoid gossip, venting, or overly personal topics.
- Avoid one-to-one social situations, especially those taking place off campus.

Contextual Sensitivity:

In some environments, such as research groups or departmental teams, students (e.g., PGRs or undergraduate researchers) may be integrated into staff teams. In these cases, social interactions, such as informal celebrations or end-of-project gatherings, may occur naturally. Excluding students from such events can feel inappropriate or isolating.

In such contexts, staff should:

- Use professional judgment and remain aware of the staff–student dynamic.
- Make sure social activities are truly optional, students should never feel excluded or disadvantaged for not attending.
- Avoid discussing academic progress or other formal matters in informal social settings.

Please also see the [Policy on Work-Related Health and Safety aspects arising from Alcohol and Drug Use](#) for further information.

3) Quick Summary

- Students may not know what's expected, set clear norms around communication and support.
- Use official University communication channels wherever possible.
- Keep communication professional and respectful.
- Meet students in public or approved spaces; set clear office hours.
- Social interactions can be positive, but boundaries help ensure they remain appropriate and inclusive.
- Be mindful of your role and position of power in all interactions, and model respectful and inclusive behaviour.

4) Real-Life Scenarios

Scenario 1: A student texts you late at night asking for help with an assignment.

Tip: Politely suggest they email you during working hours so you can assist properly.

Scenario 2: A student invites you to meet for a drink off campus after a University event.

Tip: Thank them for the invite and explain that you keep social interactions within university-organised events, to maintain clarity and fairness for all students.

Scenario 3: A student confides in you about personal issues and asks for advice.

Tip: Listen kindly and guide them to the appropriate support services, offering encouragement to reach out for professional help.

Scenario 4: A student gives you a gift at the end of term to thank you for your support.

Tip: If the gift is a modest token of appreciation (e.g. a card, homemade treat, or inexpensive item), it can be accepted in line with the [Anti-Bribery policy](#). If it's more substantial or could be seen as influencing your professional judgement, politely decline and explain the University's policy on gifts.

Scenario 5: A student offers to help you with a personal task, like looking after your pet or helping at an event you're organising.

Tip: Thank them for the offer but explain that students should not be asked or expected to perform personal or work-related tasks outside of formal University employment. Keeping this boundary clear helps maintain a professional relationship.