

HIGHER EDUCATION

Students prey to staff harassment

Sex must be banned

By BRIAN MARTIN

IN July 1990, Professor Ken McKinnon, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wollongong, made an important statement against sexual harassment. In it he also raised an even more sensitive topic: sexual relations between staff and students.

The Vice-Chancellor's statement included the following sentences: "Of particular concern in universities are situations with students when positions of privilege are abused. For instance, normal social relationships among staff and students must never develop into closer individual relationships in which students may feel their academic progress depends upon compliance with the wishes of a staff member or members."

This mild-sounding statement is dynamite in the university context. No one knows the prevalence of sexual activity between staff and students at universities in Australia but it is undoubtedly higher than many would imagine.

Take the case of a lecturer who has had a series of "serious" relationships with undergraduate women whom he met in his second-year class. Each relationship lasts just one year, typically terminating in a terrible break-up with devastating effects on the student.

Then there is the charming professor who expects — and often achieves — some level of sexual intimacy with every new female PhD student. Some refuse to be won over and worry about their scholarships and supervision; those who acquiesce may become afraid to protest about the professor's casual treatment of their feelings and unable to find a way to withdraw from the relationship.

Finally, there is the charismatic first-year lecturer who is always available to discuss issues with his students in informal settings — such as his house. Many young female students are attracted by his intelligence and sophistication and eager for a closer relationship. He is willing to oblige. He maintains sexual relationships with five or six of them at a time — at least for the first part of each year.

Let's be clear what's being discussed here. These cases represent something different from sexual harassment, which means forms of sexual behaviour that are unsolicited, unwelcome and unreciprocated.

Sexual harassment can include sexual remarks or gestures, pinching, touching, kissing, sexual propositions, grabbing at women's bodies, rape and other sexual violence.

Sexual harassment also includes propositions to women promising bet-

Comment

'Normal relations should not develop further'

ter marks in exchange for sexual favours ("an A for a lay"). Female workers as well as students are potential targets of sexual harassment. Only a tiny proportion of sexual harassment is directed against men.

Sexual harassment has been on the agenda in universities and other organisations for years. There are policies against it and committees to hear grievances. Professor McKinnon's statement was primarily about sexual harassment. But it went further.

The women in these cases entered into sexual relationships with staff members without being forced. Yet, it can be argued, these relationships are most inappropriate.

University teachers hold positions of trust. They are expected to design teaching programs and carry out their teaching duties to help their students develop as mature thinkers.

Conflict of interest

This may involve close working relationships in tutorials or laboratories, individual meetings to discuss projects or essays, and more casual occasions for intellectual give and take.

For impressionable young students, the boundaries between intellectual development and personal life may become blurred. Some academics can easily move from intellectual to personal to sexual relationships.

In the book *The Lecherous Professor* — in which a US "professor" means, in Australian terms, any academic — Billie Wright Dziech and Linda Welner argue that: "Few students are ever, in the strictest sense, consenting adults. A student can never be genuine equal of a professor insofar as his professional position gives him power over her ... Whether the student consents to the involvement or whether the professor ever intends to use his power against her is not the point. The issue

is that the power and the role disparity always exist."

As well as an abuse of trust, sexual relationships between teachers and students represent a serious conflict of interest. The possibility of favouritism in assessment is obvious, as is the possibility of harsh marking for those who have broken off relationships.

But this is only the beginning of the problems. Even if academic evaluations are kept completely independent of personal involvements, it is likely there will be an appearance of bias in the eyes of other students and staff.

Another real problem arises when an academic — especially a powerful academic — has a relationship with a student in a colleague's class.

Pressure may be brought to bear on the colleague to give preferential treatment to the student, such as better marks, extensions on essays, or extra help.

Even without pressure, preferential treatment may be provided to avoid risking the colleague's displeasure.

Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable. But a few things should be clear. Sexual relationships should not be permitted between a teacher and the students in his own class or under his supervision. If a relationship is anticipated, then mutually agreeable arrangements should be made to change teaching or assessment.

To some, this will sound like common sense, and they may argue that restrictions should go much further. Others may see such a prohibition as unduly restrictive. But it is no different from what is expected of doctors in relation to patients.

A tough policy against staff-student sex, implemented over the past decade, would reduce sharply the ranks of many university departments. Those affected could legitimately say they "didn't think it was wrong".

That indeed is the problem. Abuse of trust and conflict of interest from staff-student sexual relationships are all too common because administrators have been too blind or unconcerned to take a stand against them. Universities need to develop clear and firm policies against sexual abuses so that no academic can make the excuse that he "didn't know".

Professor McKinnon is preparing a new, stronger version of his previous statement. Let us hope that other universities build on this precedent.

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