



Campus Sex: A Cause for Concern?

The problem

Some sexual relationships between members of the university may involve an abuse of trust and/or a conflict of interest. Such relationships are inappropriate. The responsibility for avoiding them should rest with the person in a position of greater power and authority.

A *conflict of interest* arises when the professional responsibilities of a member of staff towards a student or subordinate are affected, or seen to be affected, by a special personal relationship with the student or subordinate. Sexual relationships can cause a conflict of interest, for example when a teacher or supervisor shows favouritism to a student or subordinate due to ongoing sexual involvement with them, or hostility due to previous involvement. Other students and staff can also be disadvantaged by this conflict of interest. Even if there is no favouritism associated with a sexual relationship, there may be an appearance of bias in the eyes of others.

An *abuse of trust* occurs when the trust associated with a professional relationship is destroyed through actions, or requests for actions, of a non-professional nature. Teachers are in a position of authority and trust to foster the intellectual development of their students. When they engage in sexual relations with a student, they violate that trust implicit in a professional teacher-student relationship. Similarly, supervisors are in a position of authority and trust to foster the career development of subordinates.

Some sexual relationships between members of the uni-

Cases of exploitative sexual relationships occur at every

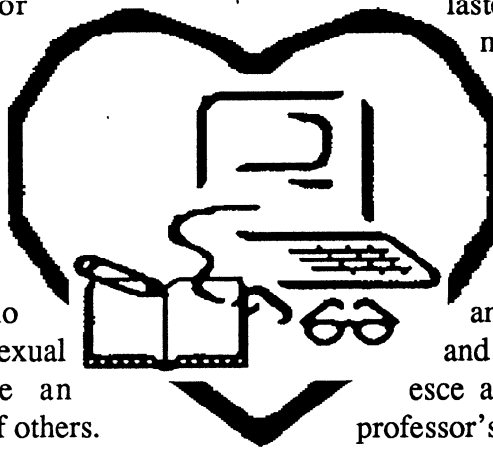
university. There are, for example, cases in which traumatised female students have withdrawn from their studies as a result of such relationships, cases of academics supervising their lovers, and cases of academics who have not withdrawn from selection committees when a lover of theirs was a short-listed candidate. Here are some other types of cases.

- Dr J is a lecturer who has had a series of "serious" relationships with undergraduate women taking his second-year class. Each relationship lasted just one year, typically terminating in a terrible break-up, with devastating effects on the student.

- Professor K expects—and often achieves—some level of sexual intimacy with every new PhD student. Some refuse and worry about their scholarships and supervision; those who acquiesce are afraid to protest about the professor's casual treatment of their feelings and are unable to find a way to withdraw from the relationship.

- Mr L is a charismatic tutor who is always available to discuss issues with his students in informal settings — such as his house. Many young students are attracted by his intelligence and sophistication and eager for a closer relationship. He is willing to oblige. He maintains concurrent sexual relationships with a number of them — at least for the first part of each academic year.

Case studies



Voluntary consent? Even when both parties believe a sexual relationship to be consensual, a student may be influenced by reasons other than sexual attraction, affection or love. The same applies to a subordinate and supervisor when a significant power difference exists between the individuals. Power differences between teachers and students and between supervisors and subordinates are often reinforced by differences in age, gender, culture, income, knowledge and experience.

The attractions of power. The power or intellectual authority of an administrator or teacher can be very attractive to some students and junior staff, who may as a result give attention and flattery to the person with these attributes. The onus is on the administrator or teacher to resist the opportunity to turn this interest in a sexual direction, even if a student or junior staff member requests a sexual relationship.

What about vexatious complaints?

In cases of rape and sexual harassment, it is far more likely for no complaints to be made in real cases than for complaints to be made in fictitious cases.



How does your campus rate?

1. Dr X is notorious for entering into sexual relationships with many of his students, often with traumatic consequences for the students. The university responds by:

- (a) issuing Dr X a stern warning and encouraging students to make complaints;
- (b) doing nothing;
- (c) appointing him dean.

2. Dr A lets it be known that she intends to initiate an affair with a first-year student in her class. The head of Dr A's department:

- (a) insists that the student be transferred out of Dr A's class, and warns her about abuse of trust as well;
- (b) smiles and says nothing;
- (c) throws a party and invites both Dr A and the student.

3. Several students make complaints about conflicts of interest in which *other* students seem to be gaining unfair advantages due to their sexual relationships with academics in Department T. The university:

- (a) carries out an investigation and initiates disciplinary action against academics found guilty of conflict of interest;
- (b) listens sympathetically but does nothing;
- (c) gives the names of the complaining students to the academics in Department T, allowing the students to be victimised.

4. Professor Z appoints attractive young men as his research assistants and has affairs with most of them. After the passion subsides, he lets their contracts expire. The university:

- (a) establishes a policy covering supervisor-subordinate sexual relationships and encourages such staff to make a complaint;
- (b) does nothing;
- (c) awards Professor Z more money to make up for disruption to his research due to changing personnel.

Answers

Score 1 for each (a), 2 for each (b) and 3 for each (c). Total 4-6: Did you answer honestly? Total 7-9: A head-in-the-sand university. Total 10-12: Run don't walk to the Anti-Discrimination Board!

Background to the issue of campus sex

Concern about campus sex grew out of the issue of sexual harassment, which was named as a problem in the late 1970s. Sexual harassment involves behaviours such as leering, touching and grabbing, offers of better marks for sexual favours, and rape. Sexual behaviour in a university context is harassment when it is unsolicited, unwelcome and unreciprocated. A number of governments have legislated against sexual harassment, and there are policies against it at most Australian universities.

Campus sex raises a number of concerns about conflict of interest and abuse of trust that are not officially covered by typical sexual harassment policies. When sex is an accepted behaviour between staff and students, it becomes more difficult to raise concerns about sexual harassment. For example, being asked by an academic for a date can be experienced by some students as unwelcome and intimidating but they may not label it as sexual harassment.

As a result, in the 1980s a number of universities in North America developed policies on this issue. Associated with this was increasing awareness of similar problems in other professions, such as psychiatry and the ministry, in which persons in a formal position of trust took advantage of clients or parishioners.

This issue was taken up by the University of Wollongong Sexual Harassment sub-committee in 1992. A draft document was prepared and circulated, generating considerable debate and discussion; this process was then repeated with a revised draft. Although no formal policy on the issue has been adopted, the debate on campus seems to have had a positive effect in sensitising staff and students to the issue, and specifically to have made students more aware of their right to resist unwelcome advances. This leaflet is a further contribution to the ongoing discussion on this serious issue.

How should you respond?

Students often feel powerless when confronted by sexual invitations from staff, or when drawn into a compromising relationship. What can you do? The first thing to remember is that it is the academic who has breached professional ethics. ***Don't feel guilty.*** Do something so that others are not hurt.

Reporting the problem is crucial. Contact a student counsellor, a women's officer in the students' association, an equal opportunity officer or a worker at the local women's centre. If other students have also reported problems with the same academic, your information helps put together a stronger case. The person you contact can help you decide whether or not you wish to confront the academic personally or take some other action.

Getting student representatives to make complaints at departmental meetings or even at university council can be most effective. No names need be mentioned; the message will soon get through.

Unfortunately, when procedures are not seen to be effective some students take direct action with anonymous leaflets, graffiti in toilets or even letters to the media.

Academics and administrators need to acknowledge this problem does occur. They also need to support the continuing maintenance of effective procedures. When everyone has confidence in the procedures then everyone benefits.

No academic should be able to make the excuse that he or she "didn't know."

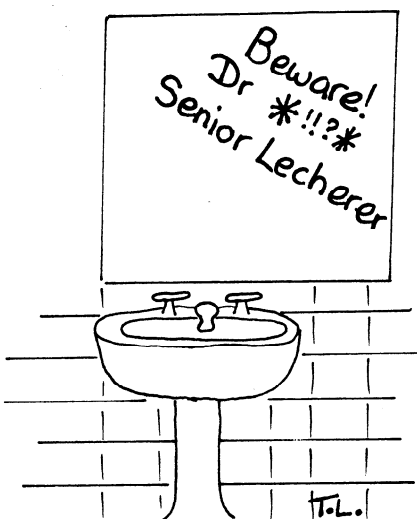


Policies

Guidelines on sexual relationships should not be aimed at prohibiting love or sexual attraction, but at stopping the serious problems of conflict of interest and abuse of trust. If a relationship involves both love and a conflict of interest, what is the resolution? Sensible guidelines discourage those relationships which are exploitative or destructive without inhibiting or interfering with those that are not. The choice is not between regulation and no regulation, but over what sorts of behaviour are appropriate in an educational setting.

Does love erase power? The fact that people say and believe they are in love does not mean that other considerations—notably, differences in power—no longer play a

role or may be overridden with impunity. This especially applies to the person with greater power in the academic context, who may attempt to rationalise or justify a conflict of interest or abuse of trust through reference to love.



Many people, once they are made aware of the issues, will do their best to avoid causing a conflict of interest or abuse of trust. But in order to handle complaints about problems that persist, grievance procedures are necessary. The challenge is to develop procedures that target the serious problems and do not seriously restrict people whose relationships cause no problems.

Carol Bacchi (see below) suggests that only the individuals directly affected by a conflict of interest or abuse of trust be entitled to make a complaint. This is one of a number of possible approaches that have been proposed or implemented at various universities around the world. Developing suitable guidelines and grievance procedures is a sensitive process that requires consultation, testing and refinement.

Further reading

- Carol Bacchi, 'Sex on campus—where does "consent" end and harassment begin?', *Australian Universities' Review*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1992, pp. 31-36.
- Billie Wright Dziech and Linda Weiner, *The Lecherous Professor: Sexual Harassment on Campus* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).
- Louise F. Fitzgerald, Lauren M. Weitzman, Yael Gold and Mimi Ormerod, 'Academic harassment: sex and denial in scholarly garb,' *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 12, 1988, pp. 329-340.
- Michele A. Paludi (ed.), *Ivory Power: Sexual Harassment on Campus* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).
- Peter Rutter, *Sex in the Forbidden Zone: When Men in Power—Therapists, Doctors, Clergy, Teachers, and Others—Betray Women's Trust* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1990).

Comments are welcome on this leaflet as well as suggestions on how to deal with sexual harassment and related problems on campus.

Contacts

University of Wollongong
Northfields Avenue, Wollongong NSW 2522