



# Relationships Between University Employees and Students

A Guide for University Employees who Teach or Support Students

**This document provides practical guidelines with respect to consensual intimate or sexual relationships between Employees and Students. For more information, please refer to the [Conflict of Interest Policy](#) and the related [Procedures](#).**

“Employee” here refers to any **University employee** who is teaching, advising, supervising, mentoring, counselling, overseeing the allocation of resources to and/or coaching students. This could be: a faculty member, a sessional employee, a Professor Emeritus, a faculty administrator, someone holding an academic appointment (including nil-salaried), a librarian, a laboratory or other employee, a principal investigator, a teaching assistant, a research assistant, a staff member, a coach or coaching assistant, an academic advisor or a counsellor.

“Student” refers to any person taking full or part-time courses, for credit or not, and includes undergraduate or graduate students, independent students, visiting students, exchange students or interns.

## Conflicts of Interest

A Conflict of Interest is a situation where the personal interests of an Employee **compromise** or have the **appearance of compromising** the Employee’s judgement.

It is a Conflict of Interest under the University’s [Conflict of Interest Policy](#) for an Employee to be in an **intimate or sexual relationship** with a Student that they teach, supervise, advise, evaluate or are otherwise in a position of authority over.

A Conflict can be **potential, actual or perceived**. Even though an Employee might not think their judgement is compromised because of the relationship, others might think that it is.

*An intimate relationship can involve physical and/or emotional intimacy. Emotional intimacy involves trust, vulnerability and openness.*

*A sexual relationship may be a single occurrence or ongoing.*

**REMEMBER** - A Student may also be an Employee and would be in a Conflict of Interest if they were in an intimate or sexual relationship with another student that they teach, supervise, advise, evaluate or are otherwise in a position of authority over.

*The concerns outlined here can also be present in other types of relationships, including senior faculty/junior faculty, faculty/staff and administrator/staff relationships.*

## Disclosure is Mandatory

The University **requires** an Employee to immediately disclose such a relationship in writing to the head of their unit. **Disclosure is protection for both parties.** A plan will be developed to ensure conflicts are avoided, which typically requires the Employee remove themselves from any supervisory role with respect to the Student. This process will follow the steps set out in the University's Conflicts of Interest Procedures. If an Employee does not disclose a Conflict of Interest, they may face disciplinary actions.

Where the Employee does not directly teach/supervise the Student, the University still **recommends** that the Employee disclose the relationship immediately to the Head of their unit in writing.

*It is the duty of the Employee to disclose any Conflict of Interest, not the duty of the Student.*

## Intimate Relationships Between Employees and Students are Strongly Discouraged and Should be Avoided

Employees must recognize the power they have over students: they grade tests and assignments, supervise theses, provide guidance and often give references for future academic endeavours. Because of the inherent power imbalance, even when an intimate or sexual relationship with a student appears consensual, it may not be truly voluntary. Because of concern over the impact it may have on their academic progress, students may not be able to communicate that they do not want such a relationship, or that they want an existing relationship to end.

*An intimate personal relationship with a student may constitute or give rise to a subsequent claim that the relationship constituted sexual harassment.*

## Employee Behaviour

Employees vary in their level of formality in student interactions. While being friendly with students is not inherently problematic (and in fact can convey to students that an Employee is approachable), Employees should be aware that students may perceive behaviour differently than it was intended. Interactions that are perceived as informal and personal may make students feel uncomfortable and may lead them to question the employee's intent.

*An anonymous sexual encounter has the potential to be with a student.  
Geolocating or dating apps that facilitate intimate or sexual encounters may involve students, particularly when University of Manitoba property is identified as a location.*

Among the behaviours that may be perceived differently are:

- A social invitation to an individual student (e.g. for dinner or coffee);
- Commenting on a student's dress or appearance;
- An invitation to an individual student to the Employee's home;
- A gift;
- A proposal to share accommodation (e.g. for a conference or research trip);
- Personal questions or disclosures; or
- Physical contact of any kind.

## Student Behaviour

If a Student displays any of the behaviours described above towards an Employee, the Employee may be concerned that the Student is attempting to initiate an intimate or sexual relationship. When this occurs, the Employee should advise the Student firmly and directly that the behaviour is not acceptable.

### **TIPS FOR MAINTAINING PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS**

- ✓ *Periodically reflect on relationships to ensure that they support students' academic wellbeing and that they maintain professional boundaries.*
- ✓ *Maintain a professional relationship with your students. Don't attempt to be one of them.*
- ✓ *If a student asks for help with a personal issue, be supportive, but avoid taking on a counselling role. Refer them to resources that may be of assistance to them.*
- ✓ *Avoid initiating discussions with students about their social or sexual life, or giving unsolicited advice on personal matters (family, relationships, etc.).*
- ✓ *Be aware that students from cultures different from your own may interpret actions differently than you do.*
- ✓ *Do not physically touch a student.*
- ✓ *Communicate your own boundaries for interactions with students. If a student crosses a boundary, let them know that it is inappropriate in the context of your relationship with them.*

## Need Support?

This Guide aims to provide guidance solely with respect to **consensual** intimate or sexual relationships between Employees and Students.

Any Student with a complaint of discrimination or sexual harassment involving an employee, which may or may not arise from a consensual romantic or sexual relationship, may obtain more information at:

- [Respectful Work and Learning Environment Policy](#)
- [Sexual Assault Policy](#)
- [Sexual Violence Support & Education Webpage](#)

Support is available through the [Office of Human Rights and Conflict Management](#), who can also facilitate reporting of the situation.

Similarly, an Employee who experiences harassment or inappropriate behaviour from a Student may seek the necessary support including from their union and from the resources listed above.