Staff-Student Relationships Procedure

Section 1 - Purpose

(1) This procedure explains RMIT's expectations and staff obligations with respect to staff personal relationships with students (including, but not limited to vocational, undergraduate or post-graduate higher education students, and Higher Degree by Research candidates). It highlights the obligation of staff members to maintain and enforce professional boundaries at all times.

Section 2 - Authority

(2) Authority for this document is established by the Code of Conduct.

Section 3 - Scope

(3) This procedure applies to all RMIT University Council members, Council committee members and controlled entity board members, employees (including employees who are also students), researchers, contractors, volunteers, and visitors (including research fellows) of the RMIT Group both in Australia and overseas (collectively referred to in this procedure as staff).

(4) This procedure applies to staff who are also students. The requirements of this procedure are not lessened or mitigated in any way because either or both parties to the relationship are concurrently both a staff member and a student.

Section 4 - Procedure

(5) RMIT prioritises the welfare of students and their entitlement to learn and undertake research in a safe and respectful environment. RMIT upholds its legal and ethical obligations to ensure that all students:

a. can undertake learning and research without being exposed to risks to their health or safety
b. have equal access to resources and opportunities
c. are treated with dignity, fairness and respect

(6) Consistent with the Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response Policy suite, RMIT acknowledges that:

a. staff members hold positions of power in relation to students through their status within RMIT and ability to affect a student's academic, research and other social outcomes at RMIT
b. there will always be a power imbalance between staff and students, though it is likely to be even greater with younger, female, gender-diverse, neuro-diverse and Indigenous students
c. the power imbalance applies irrespective of the work area of the staff member, though it is likely to be greater when the staff member has influence over or contact with staff within the student's area of study
d. if a staff member takes advantage of or exploits a power imbalance between them and a student, this can

cause harm to the student with respect to their psychological and physical health and safety, and that this affects female, gender-diverse, neuro-diverse and Indigenous students disproportionately to other students

e. power imbalances are inherent in staff-student relationships, and consequently, free consent cannot be assumed on the part of the student

(7) RMIT staff are expected to:

a. act in the best interests of students and not use their position of power and trust to exploit or take advantage of students, whether physically, sexually, emotionally, psychologically, financially or any other way
b. act with integrity and without bias
c. avoid or otherwise manage any conflicts of interest arising from current or previous personal relationships with students, and ensure that they do not use their positions to unduly benefit themselves or another person

(8) All staff members are responsible for setting the tone in the workplace and the teaching, learning and research environment. They must avoid a culture of 'complicity by silence' in relation to the serious harm that can result from the exploitation of the power imbalance between students and staff through inappropriate relationships.

Obligations of Staff

(9) Staff at RMIT must declare any close personal relationship they have, or have had, with a student while that staff member holds, or is likely to hold in the near future, a position of authority in relation to that student in accordance with RMIT's Conflict of Interest Policy. See definitions section below for examples of positions of authority.

Intimate Relationships with Students

(10) Staff must not develop or engage in, or seek to develop or engage in, an intimate relationship with a student while the staff member is, or in the future is likely to be, in a position of authority in relation to that student. This is a breach of this procedure and may also be a breach of RMIT's Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response Policy, Workplace Behaviour Policy, Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest Policy.

(11) Should staff be, or have formerly been, in an intimate relationship with someone who is currently a student, they must declare this at the point where a staff member holds a position of authority in relation to that student or is likely to hold it in the near future. Staff must make this disclosure in accordance with RMIT's Conflict of Interest Policy.

(12) Staff must not engage in sexual activity or engage in conduct which might reasonably be perceived to be building towards a sexual relationship, with any person under 18 years of age, including a student. Such conduct is a breach of the Child Safe Policy and Child Safe Code of Conduct, and may also amount to criminal conduct and be reported to the Police.

Coercive Controlling or Exploitative Relationships

(13) Staff must not develop or engage in, or attempt to develop or engage in, an exploitative relationship or a coercive controlling relationship with any students. Such conduct is a breach of this policy, and may also be a breach of other policies, including the Code of Conduct, Workplace Behaviour Policy and Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response Policy. In certain circumstances, it may also amount to criminal conduct and be reported to the Police.

Maintain Professional Relationship

(14) Staff must ensure that all their interactions and relationships with students are professional and appropriate. Staff who engage in any behaviour that is inconsistent with reasonably understood appropriate professional boundaries between staff and students may be in breach of this procedure, the Code of Conduct, Workplace Behaviour Policy and other RMIT policies.

(15) By way of guidance, behaviour that may be inconsistent with the reasonably understood appropriate professional boundaries between staff and students include (but are not limited to) a staff member:

a. not maintaining an appropriate physical or emotional distance from students
b. failing to perform RMIT duties in the best interests of RMIT without favour towards any individual student over another student
c. having one-on-one meetings or interactions with a student other than through RMIT-approved communication channels (e.g. a private chat message platform) instead of having meetings and discussions with students in public venues during operating hours where practicable, such as libraries or cafes
d. sharing personal contact details, such as their home address, personal phone numbers and personal email addresses where the details are not necessary to support the teaching or supervisory relationship between them; staff should only use their RMIT user profile on official RMIT channels and platforms when communicating with students, such as RMIT email, the learning management system or online communication channels, such as Teams or Webex
e. contacting students about personal matters that are not related to RMIT conduct or teaching or learning, or in an inappropriate manner, or communications outside of the normal operating hours of RMIT
f. seeking personal information from a student that is not relevant to an RMIT process (e.g. medical information for special consideration or as part of academic progress process) or obtaining personal information about a student from RMIT records for purposes unrelated to the staff member's role
g. withholding details of a support facility, or failing to refer a student with a need for support to a facility, in order to create a dependency or closer relationship between the staff member and the student
h. giving or encouraging comments from students that are suggestive, overly flattering, overly personal or otherwise inappropriate
i. failing to actively remove themselves from a situation where a student attempts to form an intimate relationship with the staff member and where the staff member does not put the student on notice that the conduct must stop

Section 5 - Compliance

(16) All staff must report an actual or suspected breach of this procedure as soon as practicable after becoming aware of it, to Safer Community, or otherwise through RMIT's anonymous complaints reporting or whistleblower channels.

(17) Where a staff member becomes aware that a student has engaged in behaviour that is inappropriate or is inconsistent with the boundaries of professional staff-student relationships (such as when a student makes a sexual advance towards a staff member), this behaviour must be reported to the relevant staff member's Dean or immediate supervisor. Even if the staff member has not reciprocated the advance or rejected it, it may still give rise to an actual, potential or perceived conflict of interest for the staff member, and it may be appropriate to manage it through the Conflict of Interest Policy.

(18) Staff can contact Safer Community for advice and support where a student initiates inappropriate behaviour towards them that is inconsistent with professional student-staff relationships as outlined in this procedure.

(19) Any person can make a disclosure, report or complaint in relation to a student via the Student Connect portal or the RMIT Complaints Portal. For RMIT Vietnam, this can be made via Complaints – RMIT University.

(20) Breaches of this procedure may amount to staff misconduct, which are managed in accordance with the Managing Conduct Procedure or the relevant Enterprise Agreement. Other policies and procedures may also apply, such as the Conflict of Interest Policy, Child Safe Policy, Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response Policy and Gender-Based Violence Response Procedure – Vietnam.

(21) In responding to incidents of non-compliance, RMIT will seek to ensure that students are not unfairly disadvantaged or adversely treated for being in an inappropriate relationship with a staff member, and that students and staff members are not unfairly disadvantaged or adversely treated for making a disclosure or report regarding a possible breach of this procedure.

(22) Material breaches of this policy are reported to the relevant governance body through existing channels for reporting staff or student misconduct, conflict of interest, gender-based violence (including sexual harassment and sexual harm) and child safety.

Section 6 - Definitions

Close personal relationships	Relationships that meaningfully exceed that of a purely professional relationship or acquaintanceship, and include, but are not limited to, any of the following: 1. Current or former intimate relationships, including de facto partners or spouses 2. close friendships 3. family or familial-like relationships, including culturally significant relationships 4. relationships that involve financial dependency or joint financial interests
Coercive controlling relationship	Where there is a systematic pattern of behaviour used by one person to dominate and control another person. 1. Coercive control can involve physical or sexual violence, and can also include non-physical behaviours, including emotional and psychological abuse, financial abuse, technology-facilitated abuse, stalking and intimidation. 2. Coercive controlling behaviour can include using a physical body to invade personal space or the removal of physical property, deception, manipulation, isolation, humiliation or gaslighting.
Exploitative relationship	A relationship in which a person uses their position to exploit another for personal gain or benefit. Forms of exploitation that can occur in the context of a staff-student relationship include: 1. denying a student access to fair recompense for work (including unpaid research work) 2. denying a student access to breaks or other entitlements for the staff member's or RMIT's gain 3. exposing a student to unsafe study or work conditions 4. requiring the student to carry out tasks outside of the student's responsibilities, such as performing secretarial duties, domestic labour, childcare, or personal administrative tasks for their supervisor when they are not employed to do so 5. requiring students to live in a property owned or rented by the staff member
Intimate relationships	Romantic or sexual relationships.
Position of authority	Any position in RMIT where a person has a relationship with the student where they have oversight, influence, power, management, or leadership over students, whether that role has actual decision-making responsibilities over that student or not. This may include, but is not limited to: 1. teacher, lecturer, tutor, educational assistant or other student-facing role in a student's class, degree, school or college 2. a person employed in a central RMIT role 3. a student's academic or research supervisor 4. a staff member who holds a leadership role in an RMIT club, union, or society in which the student participates 5. a professional staff member within a student's school or college, such as a Work Integrated Learning (WIL) coordinator 6. a mentor employed or associated with RMIT

Status and Details

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Policy Owner	Gaynor Witts Vice President, People and Culture
Policy Author	Stephen Morrison Director, Strategic Workforce Advisory
Enquiries Contact	Policy and Workplace Relations