



# Staff and Student Professional Boundaries Policy

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## 1. Purpose

Methodist Ladies' College (MLC) Staff hold a unique position of influence, authority, trust and power in relation to students at the College. As such, it is their duty, at all times, to maintain professional boundaries with students.

A breach of Staff and Student Professional Boundaries may in some circumstances be a criminal offence. The *Crimes Act 1958 (Vic)* includes certain offences for persons, including teachers, whose position places them in a position of care, supervision or authority, with a student.

Teachers registered with the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) must also comply with principles set out in the Victorian Teaching Profession's Code of Conduct (VIT Code of Conduct).

The following policy and guidelines are designed to raise awareness of situations where professional boundary violations may occur and some strategies to minimise the risk of boundary violations.

The practice of protective behaviours at all times will also reduce the possibility of vexatious claims being brought against Staff.

## 2. Scope

This policy applies to all staff (teaching, non-teaching and boarding premises), the MLC Board, Volunteers, Third Party Contractors and External Education Providers (together, known as "**Staff**" for the purposes of this policy only). Their age does not matter.

Staff and Student Professional Boundaries apply in all College environments including the VRQA registered boarding premises Tiddeman House and MLC Marshmead. College environments include, physical, virtual and online environments used during or outside school hours, as well as any environment (including those outside the College's grounds) where College-related activities are occurring.

## 3. Policy Statement

### 3.1. Our Policy

MLC is committed to providing a safe physical, virtual and emotional environment where all of our students are respected and treated with dignity in an appropriate professional and caring manner where the risk of child abuse is minimised, and a safe and supportive child safe environment is maintained.

It is our policy that:

- Staff exercise their responsibilities in a way that recognises professional boundaries with regard to their relationships with students at all times
- Staff identify, discourage and reject any advances of a sexual nature initiated by a student
- Staff interaction with students is professional at all times, including inside and outside of school hours

- conflict of interest issues must be reported to the relevant Head of School
- equal learning opportunities are given to each student without discrimination
- appropriate consequences will be applied to Staff who breach professional boundaries.

Any breach of Staff and Student Professional Boundaries is a child safety incident that must be reported internally. Any breach that meets the threshold for external reporting must also be reported to the relevant external authority. For more information, refer to our procedures for Responding to and Reporting Child Safety Incidents or Concerns.

### **3.2. What are professional boundaries?**

Professional boundaries are parameters that describe the limits of a relationship in circumstances where one person (a student) entrusts their welfare and safety to another person (a Staff Member), in circumstances where a power imbalance exists.

The fact that Staff are in a unique position of trust, care, authority, and influence with students means that there is always an inherent power imbalance that exists between them. It also means that professional boundaries must be established, maintained, and respected at all times.

In most cases this power imbalance is clear, however sometimes it may be more difficult to recognise especially for younger Staff who may only be a few years older than their students.

The following guidelines are not exhaustive and given that sometimes “grey areas” may occur, it is expected that all Staff (no matter their age or experience) use their own good judgment, think very carefully about the implications and potential consequences of engaging in certain behaviours with students, and always err on the side of caution.

When unsure about whether professional boundaries are being, or have been, breached, ask yourself:

- Would I modify my behaviour if a colleague was present?
- How would I feel about explaining my actions at a staff meeting, to the Principal or to parents/carers?
- Am I sharing information for the student's benefit, or for my benefit?
- Am I dealing with this student differently from others in similar circumstances?
- Is my language or demeanour different from normal when dealing with this particular student?

### **3.3. Intimate Relationships**

Staff must not initiate or develop a relationship with any student that is or can be misinterpreted as having a romantic or sexual basis, rather than professional. This is regardless of whether the relationship is consensual, non-consensual, or condoned by parents/carers.

Such relationships have a negative impact on the teaching and learning of students and colleagues and may carry a serious criminal and/or reputational risk for the Staff Member and, in turn, negatively impact the College.

The professional relationship of Staff and students may be breached by:

- flirtatious behaviour or dating
- development of an intimate personal relationship
- sexual relations
- the use of sexual innuendo, inappropriate language and/or material with students
- unwarranted and inappropriate touching
- unwarranted and inappropriate filming or photography
- deliberate exposure to sexual behaviour of others (e.g. pornography)
- having intimate contact without a valid context via written or electronic means (e.g. email, letters, telephone, text messages, social media sites or chatrooms)
- going out, whether alone or in company, to social events such as the movies or dinner

- exchanging gifts of a personal nature that encourages the formation of an intimate relationship.

### **3.4. Relationships with Former Students**

Staff should also be aware that developing or encouraging romantic or sexual relationships with recent former students (over 18 years of age) may violate professional boundaries and are strongly discouraged from doing so.

The imbalance of power and authority that exists in the Staff/student relationship does not suddenly disappear after the student finishes their schooling. Staff should not assume that they will be protected from disciplinary action by claiming that a relationship began only after the student left the College as there may be a reasonable belief that the emotional intimacy of the relationship developed while the Staff/student relationship existed.

For registered teachers, it is a breach of the VIT Code of Conduct for a teacher to have a sexualised relationship with a former student:

- within two years of the learner completing their senior secondary schooling or equivalent; and
- in all circumstances, the former student must be at least 18 years old before a relationship commences.

In addition, if any staff member engages in a romantic/sexual relationship with a person who was previously a student at the College, this may generate concerns that the staff member previously crossed professional boundaries while the former student was under the care of the staff member. In particular, concerns may arise that the staff member engaged in grooming behaviour while the person was still a student.

The College will investigate any complaint that a staff member has abused their position and acted unprofessionally by engaging in a relationship with a former student. In considering whether there has been a breach of professional boundaries, the College may take the following factors into account:

- the nature of the relationship, including its closeness, dependence and significance
- the length of the relationship while the former student was attending the College
- any conduct the staff member undertook which gives cause for concern
- the length of time that has passed between when the person was a student at the College and the commencement of the relationship.

By ensuring that their relationships with MLC students do not breach Staff and Student Professional Boundaries, a staff member who subsequently forms a relationship with a former student will be less likely to be considered to have breached professional boundaries in relation to that former student, provided that the former student is at least 18 years old and at least two years have passed between the time when the former student concluded their senior secondary schooling and the commencement of the relationship.

### **3.5. Personal Relationships**

Staff must not initiate or develop a relationship with any student that is or can be perceived or misinterpreted as having a personal rather than professional element. This is regardless of whether the relationship is consensual, non-consensual or condoned by parents or carers.

It is the student's perception of Staff behaviour and not the intention of the Staff Member that is important.

An established and expected professional relationship between Staff and students may be compromised by Staff:

- attending parties or socialising with students outside of organised College events (without parental/carer permission)
- inappropriate sharing of personal details about their private lives with students

- meeting with students outside of school hours without permission from the College and parents.

Staff must recognise at all times that their role is not to be a “friend” or “parent” to a student.

### **3.6. Fair Learning Opportunities**

The main objective of teaching is effective student learning and, as such, teachers are expected to support their students with their professional expertise so as to offer them the best education in their individual circumstances. The quality of teaching and learning between teachers and students characterises their relationship.

Teachers should demonstrate their commitment to student learning by:

- maintaining a safe and challenging learning environment that promotes mutual respect
- recognising and developing each student’s abilities, skills and talents by catering to their individual abilities and respecting their individual differences
- encouraging students to develop and reflect on their own values
- interacting with students without bias
- not engaging in preferential treatment
- not discriminating against any student on the basis of race, sex, sexuality, disability or religious or political conviction
- always making decisions in students’ best interests.

### **3.7. Electronic Communication between Staff and Students**

It is expected that all Staff at the College will adhere to the following guidelines:

- all use of technology should be for educational purposes or for the organisation of co-curricular activities
- all email communication between Staff and students should be via the College email system and reflect a professional Staff/student relationship
- Staff should not communicate with students via text message where it is not in a professional context
- Staff should not give out their personal telephone numbers or social media contact details
- Staff are not to accept or request students as 'friends' on social media or otherwise use social media to communicate in any way that is not condoned or approved by the College
- Staff should not exchange personal pictures with a student
- Staff are not expected or encouraged to respond to concerns of parents/carers or students on holidays, weekends or in the evening
- any student personal contact numbers or other personal contact details made available to the College should only be used for College communications.

### **3.8. Physical Contact with Students**

All Staff should be aware that situations may arise that can be perceived in a manner that was not intended. For this reason, all Staff at the College should adhere to the following guidelines for contact with students both in and outside of College grounds:

- staff should avoid unnecessary physical contact with students
- minimal, non-lingering, non-gratuitous physical contact in the context of the situation is acceptable (e.g. congratulatory pat on the back or handshake)
- contact for sport, drama and dance instruction is acceptable in a class situation but not in a 1:1 situation. If physical contact is required for specific technical instructions, it must be brief and only with the consent of the student. Note that a student may withdraw consent for this contact either verbally or gesturally and staff must remain vigilant whilst engaging in necessary

contact situations. Once consent has been withdrawn no further contact can be or should be made.

### **3.9. Off-Campus Tours and Exchanges**

During off-campus Tours and Exchanges, the same physical contact guidelines apply as well as the following:

- checking of sleeping arrangements, or supervising of students changing should be done, where possible, with another Staff Member present and always in a manner that respects students' privacy and personal space
- always knock and advise of presence prior to entering a bedroom or dormitory
- ensure that while in a bedroom or dormitory a strict Staff/student relationship is upheld and that inappropriate behaviour, such as sitting on a student's bed, is not undertaken.

### **3.10. Managing Conflicts of Interest**

Where personal relationships with students such as family relationships and close friendship networks exist, questions of conflicts of interest may arise. Any relationship that involves or gives the appearance of involving unfair preferential treatment or improper use of their role is inappropriate.

### **3.11. Reporting Concerns**

If College staff members have any concerns or believe an inappropriate relationship is developing, the care of a student is compromised or an inappropriate relationship or situation is observed, they must contact one of the Child Protection Officers. This includes any concerns regarding an MLC student and a member of the MLC community e.g., staff member, volunteer, third party contractor.

**Where a Staff Member breaches this policy, the College may take disciplinary action including, in the case of serious breaches, summary dismissal.**

### **3.12. Implementation**

These guidelines are implemented through a combination of:

- Staff training and development in professional conduct
- student and parent/carer education and information
- effective management of teachers engaging in inappropriate relationships with students
- effective management of conflicts of interest
- effective communication and incident notification procedures
- effective record keeping procedures
- initiation of corrective actions where necessary.

### **3.13. Consequences for Breaching Staff and Student Professional Boundaries Policy**

Where a staff member breaches this Policy, MLC may take disciplinary action including, that may include (depending on the severity of the breach):

- remedial education counselling increased supervision
- the restriction of duties suspension or
- in the case of serious breaches, summary dismissal, termination of employment, contract or engagement.

#### 4. Related Documents

- Child Safety and Wellbeing Policy
- Child Safety Code of Conduct
- Staff Code of Conduct
- Child Safe Program
- Parent Code of Conduct

#### 5. Governance

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