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Sasha Borissenko: Why Victoria University's intimate relationships ban makes life awkward for creeps



Opinion by

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Victoria University of Wellington has become the first university in the country to prohibit intimate relationships between staff and students.

As I silently sobbed while reading the policy, you could argue the move is one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.

The university is committed to fostering an environment where members of the community behave in a respectful, impartial, and transparent way that demonstrates sensitivity to actual or perceived unequal degrees of power, the policy reads.

The purpose is "to establish the expected standards of behaviour and the processes to be followed when members of the university community have an intimate or close personal relationship with a student, or another member of the university".

The policy prohibits members of the university community from initiating, entering into and/or being in an intimate relationship with a student, where they have direct responsibility for, or involvement in, that student's academic studies or emotional safety and wellbeing.

Political correctness gone mad?

Creeps the world over will be feeling increasingly awkward, saying it's political correctness gone mad. What's next for the fun police, they'll say, where socialising, texting, or heaven forbid - the odd compliment or inadvertent graze against a leg is now prohibited.

But no fear, dear creeps, the policy prefaces the grey area by stating the university recognises that socialising on a platonic basis between members of the university and students, or between colleagues, is often a positive aspect of life at the university.

It also recognises that appropriate personal relationships can form in circumstances where there is no opportunity for an abuse of power.

Potential creeping can be protected too, where the policy aims to protect members of the university from allegations of actual or perceived conflicts of interest, and to limit circumstances where a position of power may be abused.

The policy came into effect on September 1, and those who've previously shacked up with other members of the university must disclose said relationship within a month. Not knowing about the policy will not be a valid reason for failing to make this, or any other disclosure.

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"This is a standalone policy, which supports the university's commitment to ensuring it has safeguards in place to prevent conflicts of interest, abuses of power, and sexual harassment," the policy reads.

Delicious definitions

What does this mean on a practical level? Cue the delicious definitions section. The nature of a "close personal relationship" is defined as where the connection goes beyond a casual acquaintance.

Intimate relationships are defined as a consensual romantic or sexual relationship. It could be brief and includes one-off or sporadic encounters, the policy reads.

A "hello" in the street probably would be considered casual, whereas a smooch or a one-night romp in the lecture theatre (I imagine this is prohibited for health and safety reasons) would have to be disclosed.

Abuse of power is defined as when a person uses their position of power or authority in an unacceptable manner - namely, grooming, manipulation, coercion, putting pressure on others to engage in conduct they're not comfortable with.

Grooming is described as a gradual process that someone in a position of power uses to manipulate someone to do things that they may not be comfortable with and to make them less likely to reject or report abusive behaviour.

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"Grooming will initially start as befriending someone and making them feel special, and may result in sexual abuse and/or exploitation." What a line!

Where does that leave us?

The question is, if there's a power imbalance can you meaningfully consent? Having been groomed in my early twenties without knowing it, it's hard to put your finger on something when you don't quite comprehend what's happening.

I remember feeling comfortable at the time, until I wasn't. Moreover, it's difficult to rectify if you realise years later and you cringe in retrospect.

Power and status imbalances are hard things to rectify. It's the type of conduct that may not be dubious if you explain it but it's something that's felt in the gut region.

Anecdotally, while I might be attracted to the performance element of a lecturer or tutor, would I be attracted to said lecturer if they weren't in a position of power? Probably not.

Vice versa, having had the privilege to lecture myself, I find this dynamic to be interesting because I wouldn't find a student whose brain hasn't developed to be attractive either.

Even at the age of 33, I find it almost impossible to have a conversation with Generation Z. We've absolutely nothing

in common other than having to bear the brunt of being left with a world the baby boomers have exploited.

Would the situation be the same if it concerned a mature student? Probably not. Irrespective of age, it's perhaps the adoration and the vulnerable nature that comes with power imbalances that creeps find appealing.

What's more, this type of conduct generally happens behind closed doors.

As per the university's staff conduct policy, where misconduct is established (either through a formal investigation or informal process) creeps may be subject to a formal verbal warning, a formal written warning, a final written warning, and dismissal.

A level of the penalty imposed can be at any step, and each warning may be given for up to 12 months.

This progressive precedent is great. If you want to muddy the waters, you have to declare it to your manager - no drama. Will it extend to other employment situations? I certainly hope so!