

# MANAGING CHALLENGING AND DIFFICULT STUDENT BEHAVIOURS

A good practice guide



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## INTRODUCTION

Staff and Students at the Flinders University have the right to be treated with dignity and respect and to work in a safe and harassment free environment. However, staff members may at times find themselves having to deal with a student who is exhibiting challenging behaviour. This can be for a number of reasons including that a student is upset with grades or because there is difficult news, and/or a situation that may lead to high levels of distress or aggression.

The following guidelines have been developed to assist staff to deal with challenging behaviours and situations.

### 1. GENERAL STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS

- Alert your Supervisor/ Manager about any behaviour that is causing you concern.
- Decide whether the situation is safe and manageable or whether you need to implement additional processes to protect yourself. If you hold significant concerns then you may need to arrange for discrete presence of other staff or Security.
- If any student who has previously acted inappropriately are due to gain academic or assessment results that may trigger a further reaction then alert your Dean of Education, Health, Counselling and Disability Service (HCDS) and/ or Security of the potential risk.
- Minimise the potential for confrontation. Before the meeting, communicate expectations with the student about time allocated for the meeting and purpose of the meeting.
- If possible have in mind some strategies to offer choices/options or take up time (time to consider) if a decision is required by the student.
- If a student requests to meet you immediately on receiving an assignment to discuss a poor or failing grade and you are concerned about their response to the grade, postpone the meeting for at least two working days to allow the student time to calm down. If you expect the student to be aggressive or distressed, do not meet with them alone.
- Offer for the student to bring a support person if they wish.
- Have at hand resources to offer the student at the end of the meeting –e.g. HCDS,/Student Learning Centre/FUSA Student Advocacy contact information.
- Try to model calm behaviour yourself and be aware of indications of heightened agitation, anxiety and/or distress for the student.

### 2. MEETINGS FACE TO FACE

- Keep your office door open during the meeting; if the student closes the door then ask them to reopen it. You should never meet a student on your own with your door closed, even if you have no concerns.
- If possible ask another staff member to be present if you are concerned about what may occur when meeting with a student.
- Arrange your office so that you are not sitting with the student between you and the door. If this is not possible then consider holding the meeting in another room where this can be arranged.
- Check your office set up - remove any item from your desk which could be used as a weapon (e.g. letter opener or scissors).

- When it is known that the student may become upset or cause trouble, alert Security and the Dean of Education about the potential risks and of your concerns prior to the meeting. Provide details about the meeting time/location. Ask if Security can be discreetly located in the vicinity.

## Further Considerations

### ❖ *Isolated office*

- If your office is located in an isolated area or in an area where you may be on your own due to colleagues being away (particularly towards the end of the year) discuss this with your Supervisor / manager and consider temporarily relocating to another office/part of the campus where you will be around other staff.
- Consider moving the meeting to a room where a duress alarm is located.
- Alert appropriate colleagues of your concerns and ask if they can check in with you before they leave the area so that you are not left on your own.

### ❖ *When results are due*

- Discuss with your VPED or Dean around working from home or restricting your on-campus hours to those when other staff are likely to be around, ie, 9.00am-5.00pm: Monday – Friday. If you need to work outside these hours, then notify Security of your presence on campus and of the potential risk posed by a student.

### ❖ *Alert Protocols*

If you are meeting with a student and you feel that they may become aggressive or upset it pays to set up prior to the meeting a communication protocol with another staff member so assistance can be sought if needed.

- Ask an appropriate colleague to phone you approximately fifteen minutes into the meeting or pop their head into your office to ‘remind’ you about a meeting. You can have an agreed ‘**code**’ of responses:
  - Thanks for that – I’ve already handed up my apology. **(Everything is OK)**.
  - I had forgotten – can you come and grab me in another 10 minutes. **(I think it is OK but I still need you to keep an ear open)**.
  - I had forgotten – I had better come now, my apologies student xxx – I will email you the information about options for requesting a re -mark. **(I do not need Security – but I need to end the meeting now with you present)**.
  - Did you mean that the meeting with Security? **(GET ME HELP)**.
- Keep calm if a situation deteriorates. Do not raise your voice or use body language that could be seen as aggressive. If you don’t have someone contacting Security for you, or you need it quickly then be ready to **RING SECURITY ON 8201 2880**, or have their number programmed into your phone so that you only have to push one (1) button.

## 3. ONLINE MEETINGS

The move to online meetings (e.g. TEAM or Skype) has some advantages in removing any immediate physical risk of a face to face meeting, however it also potentially removes the student from on campus support services like Health and Counselling.

- It is still important to make sure the same respectful communication strategies are in place regardless if online or face to face. Awareness around protecting yours and the student's emotional welfare needs to be considered in these online forums, as sometimes those physical cues to indicate distress may not be as evident.
- As with face to face meeting try to arrange for them to occur a few days after the student has received any negative results or grades to give them time to calm down.
- If a student becomes abusive during the meeting then calmly inform them that their behaviour is inappropriate and if it continues that you will be terminating the meeting.
- If you have concerns about their emotional or mental safety, make sure to follow the strategies outlined below in section 6. Have on hand information so you can remind them how to access support including HCDS or the **After Hours Crisis support line** on **1300 512 409**.

#### 4. DEALING WITH INAPPROPRIATE EMAIL OR PHONE CONTACT

- Keep email or phone messages that contain inappropriate content as important information can be extracted by IDS to help identify the sender.
- Draft a response to any relevant questions in the email and do not respond to the inappropriate comments. Ask your Dean / Manager or another colleague to read a draft before you send it if you are concerned about your response. Copy the email to your Dean of Education.
- If a student becomes abusive during a phone call then calmly inform them that their behaviour has become inappropriate and that you will now be terminating the conversation. Then gently disconnect the call. Record the details of the conversation including time, date, who, what etc.
- If the student calls back and continues to be abusive, calmly inform them that their behaviour is not appropriate and that you will be terminating the conversation. Disconnect the call, divert your phone to voice mail and contact Security.

#### 5. COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

##### ❖ *Listen and acknowledge*

- It is important to practice 'active' listening such as eye contact, nodding, paraphrasing etc. as opposed to 'pretend' listening.
- Let them know that you are interested in them and their questions or concerns.

##### ❖ *Be empathetic*

Use empathy (not sympathy) to understand how that person might be feeling in this situation.

Understanding how the person might be feeling in this situation is not the same as putting yourself in their shoes. In general, 'sympathy' is when you share the feelings of another; 'empathy' is when you understand the feelings of another but do not necessarily share them.

- Clearly explain information
- If the person does not seem to understand what you are saying you should consider changing the way you explain the information – rather than just repeating the same words in the same sequence over and over.
- Do not be tempted to 'give in' and change the base line information you are providing to what they want to hear.

- ❖ *Ask questions to fully understand what they are after*
  - Use open-ended questions to gain information e.g. “How can I help” vs “Can I help”.
  - Paraphrase in their words to clarify the situation.
  - If the body language does not match their words – check in with them e.g. they state they understand but they look confused with defensive body language.
  - Ignore negative, damaging behaviour
  - Do not reward ‘bad’ or attention seeking behaviour by giving it attention.
  
- ❖ *What to do if the student chooses NOT to understand or they do not want to hear or accept your information*
  - Explain that you are unable to assist any further and ask if they would like you to make an appointment for them to speak with the Dean of Education or other appropriate person.
  - Contact a colleague and explain the student’s concerns/question and the advice you have provided and ask your colleague if they can confirm that the advice is correct and/or if they can think of any other options. Relay their response to the student.
  - Politely and calmly repeat the options one final time – then suggest that they go for a coffee/walk and think through the options and if they still have questions/concerns remind the student that they can make an appointment to come back and discuss them with you or the Dean of Education / Supervisor.
  - If on the phone – clearly state to the person that you have explained the options and, unfortunately, there is nothing else that you can recommend – so you would advise that they take some time to consider what you have explained. Thank them very quickly, say goodbye and terminate the call.

## 6. EMOTIONALLY DISTRESSED STUDENTS WHERE THERE ARE CONCERNS FOR THEIR SAFETY OR MENTAL HEALTH

Consider discussing how to approach students that you feel are distressed to such a state that there may be a risk to their safety with your Dean / Supervisor, Colleagues or [HCDS](#) before the meeting.

- ❖ *If concerned for student safety or welfare*
  - Always check in with them by asking:
    - “This is a difficult time for you. Do you feel safe and OK to manage today/tonight?”*
    - “Is there anyone you can talk to if you need?”*
  - If you are still not confident of their safety/welfare, connect to HCDS.
    - For example:
      - “I’m concerned for you, and I’m going to ask the Health Counselling & Disability Service to call you. Could you keep your phone on you and take their call?”*
      - Or:
        - “I want to make sure you’re OK, let’s call the Counselling Service together while you are here, and arrange for some support.”*

#### ❖ *Notifying HCDS*

- In any contact with the Counselling Service please indicate whether you are seeking prompt response (current high levels of distress) or more general follow up (student has advised that they would like some follow up support).

**Note:** Counselling Services can be called to assist and may be able to come to the location rather than the student leaving without support.

**If there are concerns call HCDS (phone 8201 2118)**

Security can transport a student to the Counselling Service, including students at Tonsley or Sturt Campuses.

#### ❖ *Immediate assistance*

- If the student is very distressed and may need immediate assistance, it may be appropriate to request Security to help escort or support the student to the HCDS or contact SAPOL or SA Ambulance Service.

***For immediate assistance on campus call Security 8201 2880.***

***\* \*Off campus call 000\****

- Students not on Bedford Park campus can be reminded that counselling services are also available over the phone or via skype.
- Remind the student that options for requesting a re-mark are available under the Assessment Policies.
- Advise the student that they have the right to take their concerns to the Dean of Education and suggest that they put their concerns in writing.
- Have a list of colleagues to call so that you can pick up the phone and get someone in the room with you ASAP to provide support.

## 7. FOLLOW UP

It is important that after an incident has been dealt with that the following occurs:

- Keep a record of any incidents, including time, date, who, students name, what occurred etc. and provide a copy of this to your Supervisor, Dean of Education and, if appropriate, Security.
- Email the student after the meeting with a summary of what was discussed, options and services available to them or any other information or outcomes.
- Look after your own wellbeing. Debrief if possible with Supervisor, fellow Colleagues or consider seeking support from one of the University confidential clinical psychology services available under the EAP program.

## 8. EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (EAP) FOR STAFF

- If, after dealing with a student, you feel distressed or would like to talk about the situation, you should make an appointment to speak with the University's confidential EAP provider. Some people find that they cope very well during the immediate situation but some days later require the assistance of the EAP .

- EAP services are also available via Phone and Telehealth.
- If it is felt that immediate support is required due to a significant situation then Critical Incident EAP services can also be offered. Contact the WHS Unit on 82013024.

## 9. CONTACTS AND PHONE NUMBERS

### 1. Security

#### South Australia

- 8201 2880 or on internal phone extension 12880 (available 24/7).
- For Rural and Remote sites – see local area security contacts.
- website: [Personal safety and security - Flinders University Staff](#)

#### Northern Territory

- CDU Security Casuarina Campus (Internal only) - 7777

### 2. Health Counselling and Disability Services (HCDS)

Counselling: [counselling@flinders.edu.au](mailto:counselling@flinders.edu.au), or 82012118 (office hours)

Website information [supporting students - Flinders University Staff](#)

After Hours Crisis support line is also available on **1300 512 409 or text 0488 884 103**

FUSA Academic Advocates

- student.assist@flinders.edu.au
- 82012371
- <https://fusa.edu.au/studentassist/>

### 3. IDS Help Desk

- Call 8201 2345
- website: [Information & Digital Services \(IDS\) - Flinders University Staff](#)

### 4. Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

- website: [Employee assistance program - Flinders University Staff](#)

## 10. RELATED PROCEDURES/ GUIDELINES/ TRAINING

- [Bullying Prevention and Management Guidelines \(flinders.edu.au\)](#)
- [Dealing with Difficult Behaviour – PDU course](#)
- [Assessment Policy](#)
- [Student Complaints Procedure](#)
- [Student Conduct \(statute 6.4\)](#)
- [Work Health and Safety](#)



## 11.CHECKLIST FOR ARRANGING STUDENT MEETINGS

Considerations for arranging a meeting with a student involving the potential for **challenging behaviour, delivery of difficult news, and/or high levels of distress.**

**Prepare**

Check student's contact details including emergency contact.

Have at hand resources to offer – Counselling/Student Learning Centre/FUSA Student Advocacy.

Offer option of a support person to attend.

Consider two staff present if meeting may be difficult.

Before the meeting, communicate with the student expectations about time allocated for the meeting and purpose of the meeting.

**Inform/Consult**

Your College Team/Dean of Education.

If previous incidents or indications of concern, contact Counselling Service and/or Security to arrange discrete presence and/or on-call availability.

**Location**

Access to Duress Alarm.

Other staff nearby/not in isolation.

Ease of access to exit for *both* you and student.

**Timing**

Allow options for follow up during work hours; not late in the day or late in the week.

Preferably not on a Friday when the student may not be able to access assistance through HCDS over the weekend.

**Meeting**

Empower with choices/options if possible.

Offer break.

Offer 'take up time' if decision is required.

Model calm behaviour yourself and be aware of indications of heightened agitation, anxiety and/or distress for the student.

**If behavioural or staff safety concerns**

Be prepared to end meeting and exit.

Use duress alarm and/or call Security.

**If concerned for student safety or welfare**

Always check their emotional status by asking questions as set out in section 5:

***If the student is extremely distressed and at risk of self-harm or harming others call***

***Security 82012880.***

***Off campus call 000***

**Before they leave**

Summarise what you/others are going to do next and confirm their understanding of the outcomes.

**Follow up**

Email student with summary, options and services.

Ensure you manage your own self-care.

If you have any lingering welfare concerns seek advice promptly.