

NAVIGATING PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

**GUIDELINES FOR PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES
IN TEACHING AND RESEARCH**

NAVIGATING PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES



Music, dance, and theater are not only physical practices, but often deeply emotional experiences. In teaching it can sometimes be helpful to support physical processes – such as breathing, posture, or movement – through targeted guidance. In all such situations, a respectful and mindful approach is essential.

Where is the line between pedagogically meaningful closeness and inappropriate proximity? And when do words cross a boundary?

What may be perceived as physical, verbal, or non-verbal sexual harassment, or as an inappropriate act, may not always be fully recognized by teaching staff. Such situations can also arise between students, especially in physically close artistic disciplines such as dance or theater. Even with the best intentions, words, gestures, images, or touch can unintentionally trigger negative reactions in others, creating discomfort, insecurity, or hurtful thoughts.

Anton Bruckner University has a responsibility toward its students both in artistic and arts-pedagogical training and in ensuring appropriate professional closeness and distance. The university leadership and all university members are committed to establishing clear guidelines and supportive structures in this area. This responsibility does not lie with teachers and staff alone; it is shared by everyone at the university including students in their interactions with one another.



WHAT IS THIS SPECIFICALLY ABOUT?

Teaching and research at ABU are shaped by the specific conditions of artistic and arts-pedagogical education, as well as the factors listed below. While these conditions can foster success, they also carry the risk that professional closeness may shift into unprofessional proximity. Such unprofessional closeness often manifests as personal boundary violations—through words, images, gestures, or other actions, with or without direct physical contact.



- Frequent one-to-one teaching
- Emotional connection through collaborative work in music, dance, and theater
- Engagement with students' personal concerns
- Long-term, intensive working relationships
- Joint artistic and pedagogical projects within and beyond the university

HEALTHY INTERACTIONS REQUIRE CLEAR BOUNDARIES

VERBALE LEVEL

PROFESSIONAL SPACE

- Mindful choice of words
- Respectful, non-violent tone
- Conscious use of voice and language
- Age-appropriate communication
- Focus on pedagogically relevant topics

PHYSICAL LEVEL

- Appropriate closeness and distance
- Announcing, explaining, and obtaining consent for didactically necessary touch – while typically offering a non-contact form of instruction first
- Noticing, respecting, and responding appropriately to body-language signals (e.g., stepping back, flinching)
- When in doubt, always choose a non-contact option

RELATIONAL LEVEL

- Respectful and appreciative interaction
- Commitment to the educational mandate
- Supporting the development of an autonomous personality and strengthening self-esteem
- Maintaining clear boundaries between professional and private spheres
- Awareness of one's professional role— even outside the university setting
- Recognizing and respecting one's own professional limits
- Referring students to appropriate support services when needed

UNPROFESSIONAL SPACE

- Careless choice of words
- Verbal harassment such as jokes, teasing, remarks about appearance or of a sexual nature
- Insults
- Devaluation / derogatory comments
- Inappropriate volume
- Manipulative communication

- Harassment through facial expressions, looks, behaviour, or body language
- Unannounced physical contact
- Harassment through smells (e.g., smoke, perfume, body or breath odour)
- Lack of personal hygiene
- Any physical contact that serves no pedagogical purpose
- Sexually suggestive gestures or touch
- Ignoring body-language signals and responding inappropriately (e.g., mocking, belittling remarks, downplaying the situation)

- Inappropriate familiarity
- Creating or reinforcing dependencies and undue deference to authority
- Taking on social work, pastoral, or therapeutic roles
- Inappropriate involvement in students' personal or private matters

IN CERTAIN TEACHING SITUATIONS, PHYSICAL TOUCH CAN BE SUPPORTIVE

IN GENERAL, THREE KEY STEPS SHOULD BE FOLLOWED:

1

DEMONSTRATE WHAT YOU INTEND TO DO

"I'll show you now how to ... (perform a specific movement). We can try it using a mirror exercise, or I can demonstrate it by touching you on ... (specific body area)."

2

OBTAIN PERMISSION BEFORE MAKING PHYSICAL CONTACT

"Would you like to try this using the mirror exercise, or would you prefer that I guide the movement by touching your left index finger (your upper arm, your shoulder, etc.)?"

3

EXPLAIN THE PURPOSE OF THE CORRECTION

"This adjustment will help you adopt an ergonomic posture and avoid unnecessary tension..."

These simple forms of communication create safety in situations where physical touch may be pedagogically helpful, provided that every reaction is respected. Students who cannot easily verbalize their boundaries often express them nonverbally: **if someone withdraws during physical contact, the touch may have been too much or insufficiently announced.**

Such reactions must be acknowledged by the teacher and appropriately taken into account when proceeding. Personal boundaries are individual and can vary greatly. Ultimately, the responsibility for maintaining clear and respectful boundaries lies with the teacher. Especially when correcting one another in disciplines such as dance -- students are also responsible for interacting with care and respect.



CONSIDERATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR GREATER SAFETY IN EVERYDAY TEACHING PRACTICE



Respect personal physical boundaries (as a guideline: about an arm's length).



Consider alternatives to physical touch (e.g., using mirrors, demonstrating movements, modelling and repeating).



Make use of group settings for physical work (e.g., breathing exercises, posture adjustments).



Teaching should take place only in official university teaching spaces.



No private invitations to one's home.



Ensure appropriate infrastructure (unlocked teaching rooms, ideally with viewing window, and no fully covered windows).



Offer the option to record the lesson on video if requested by the student.



With prior arrangement, other teaching staff, the Coordinator for Equity, Gender and Diversity, or members of the Equity Committee (AKG) may join or enter a one-to-one lesson.



Teachers are always responsible for maintaining professional conduct and respecting boundaries—even when students make advances.



No means no. If someone **does not want physical contact, they must not be touched.**

EXAMPLES

FOR POTENTIALLY PROBLEMATIC BOUNDARY VIOLATIONS

- A teacher greets a student by saying, "You're looking sexy again today!"
- A teacher places their arm around a student's shoulders.
- A teacher takes a student's hand without any prior announcement.
- A voice teacher touches a student's stomach without any explanation.
- A piano teacher reaches around a student from behind to play the keys.
- An oboe teacher adjusts a student's head position by touching their neck.
- A dance instructor touches the inner thigh of a student without warning and without consent to demonstrate a weight shift.
- A teacher assumes they know what is best without adequate reflection and dismisses the student's perspective.
- A student develops romantic feelings for their teacher and begins to flirt with them.
- A teacher gives feedback such as: "With that attitude, you won't get very far."
- After an ensemble rehearsal, sexualised or inappropriate jokes are made in the presence of students.
- During a team-teaching session, a teacher places their hands on a colleague's hips without prior consent in order to demonstrate posture to the students.



Professional conduct requires self-reflection and an awareness of potential risks—especially when physical touch is involved. Any touch should always be announced, explained, and carried out only with consent. When applied mindfully, physical touch can be an important and valuable pedagogical tool in artistic teaching.

SETTING BOUNDARIES WITH CONFIDENCE

SUPPORTING STUDENTS IN ACTING CONFIDENTLY

Studying means personal growth within a respectful environment. ABU is committed to fostering a culture of care and encourages students to develop their own strategies for navigating uncertainty or potentially inappropriate situations.

- Did I feel treated with respect?
- Was the behaviour appropriate for this situation and this relationship?
- Were my personal boundaries acknowledged or ignored?
- Was there space for my consent or for me to say no?

WHAT CAN YOU DO WHEN SOMETHING DOESN'T FEEL RIGHT?

Not all boundary violations are clear or easy to classify right away. Trust your instincts. Reflective questions can help you assess the situation (see left).

If you answer “no” to one or more of these questions, it may indicate that a boundary has been crossed.



POSSIBLE WAYS TO RESPOND

EVEN AT A LATER TIME

Addressing a boundary violation clearly can bring clarity and relief. Take the time you need to consider how you want to raise the issue. Simple phrases can often help:



- “I would like to ask for a more professional form of interaction.”
- “This touch/comment was inappropriate for me.”
- “I would like more distance in the future.”

Important: Every reaction is legitimate. Even staying silent or stepping back. No one has to justify themselves when their wellbeing has been affected.

You can also respond at a later time.

Having a conversation, writing an email, or contacting a support service are all possible next steps.

If you are unsure how to interpret what happened or how to deal with it, the support services (see last page) are there to help you confidentially, respectfully, and with a solution-focused approach. This also applies if you find yourself wondering whether the behaviour was “bad enough.” Anyone who observes that someone else may have been treated unfairly is encouraged to offer support whether it be by paying attention, offering to talk, or involving a third party. The decision on how to proceed always lies with the affected person. Further information can be found in the ABU “**Guide to Dealing with Bullying, Harassment and Discrimination**” as well as in the Works Agreement on Bullying.

KNOWING WHAT TO DO!

DEALING WITH RUMORS, SUSPICIONS, AND INCIDENT-BASED CASES

Hearing about incidents or suspicions -- whether directly from an affected person or through others -- can trigger strong emotions such as helplessness, uncertainty, or anger. In these moments, calm and responsible action is essential.



Stay calm and proceed with care.



Involve trusted persons—seek advice from appropriate contact points and bring in professional support if needed.



Avoid acting hastily—impulsive steps such as filing an immediate report or making public statements can place additional strain on the person affected.

If you become aware of incidents or suspicions, it is not your role to conduct your own investigation.

No action should be taken without the explicit consent of the person affected.

For your own emotional support, a wide range of professional contact points is available (see last page).

Further important information can be found in the ABU “Guidelines on Dealing with Bullying, Harassment and Discrimination” as well as in the Works Agreement on Bullying.

CONCRETE EXAMPLES

RUMOR/GOSSIP

Case 1: There are rumors that a colleague repeatedly engages in inappropriate behavior during lessons.

Case 2: A colleague frequently makes very direct or sharply worded remarks that others perceive as insulting or demeaning.

Case 3: It is said that colleague X follows the motto: "The shorter the skirt, the better the grade."

Show courage: Ask the person spreading the rumor for concrete facts.

Document what you observe: Record important details in writing (who said what about whom, and when?).

Do not spread rumors, regardless of verification: If there are no concrete indications, ask the person to refrain from passing the rumor on.

CONCRETE EXAMPLES

SUSPECTED CASE

Case 4: A student reports that a teacher regularly gets too physically close, which makes them uncomfortable.

Case 5: A student casually mentions situations that could be perceived as boundary-crossing ("My professor always hugs me when he greets me, I'm his favourite!").

Case 6: A teacher discourages a student by saying, "You'll never achieve anything anyway," and subsequently gives them less lesson time than the others.

- **Stay calm and act thoughtfully:** Avoid making hasty decisions.
- **Do not make premature commitments:** Promises of confidentiality or unconditional support can become problematic later.
- **Be clear about your own role and limits:** Document what you observe and show interest, but do not conduct your own investigation – gathering evidence and carrying out inquiries is not the responsibility of teaching staff.

IF THE SUSPICION PERSISTS:

Contact the Equity Committee (AKG) or the Coordinator for Equity, Gender and Diversity (optionally also the president's or dean's office, or your supervisor)

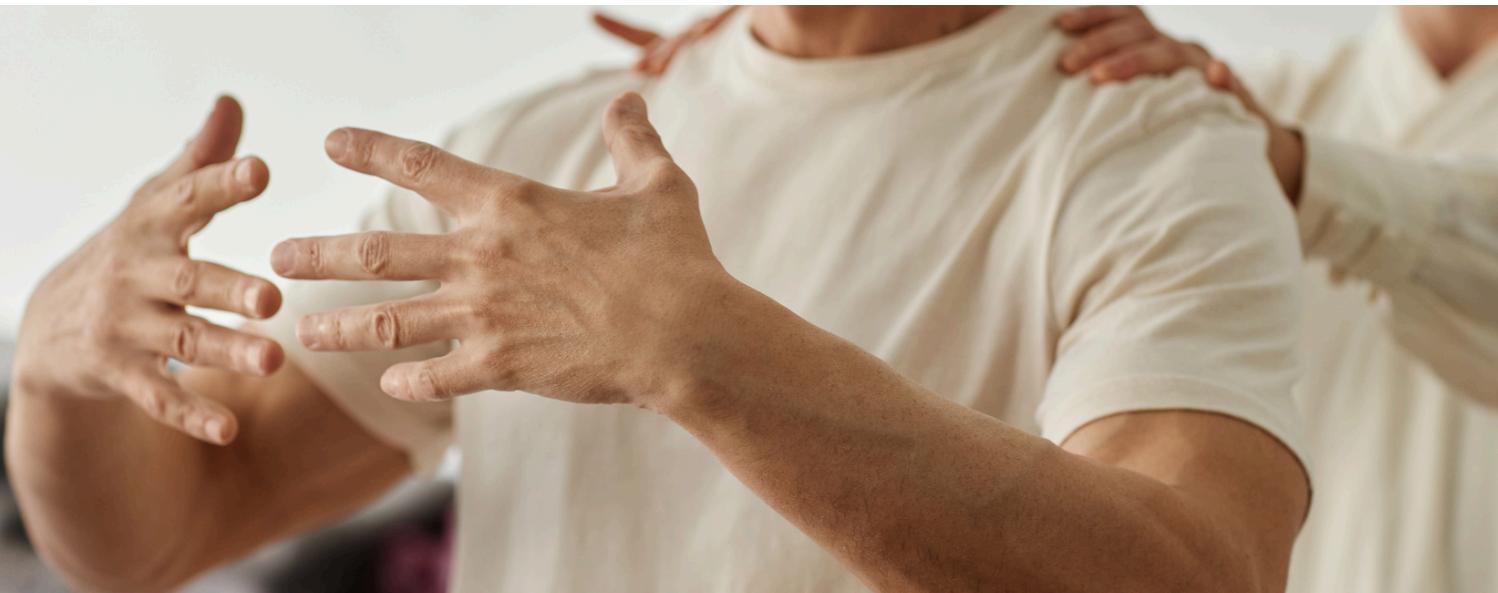
CONCRETE EXAMPLES

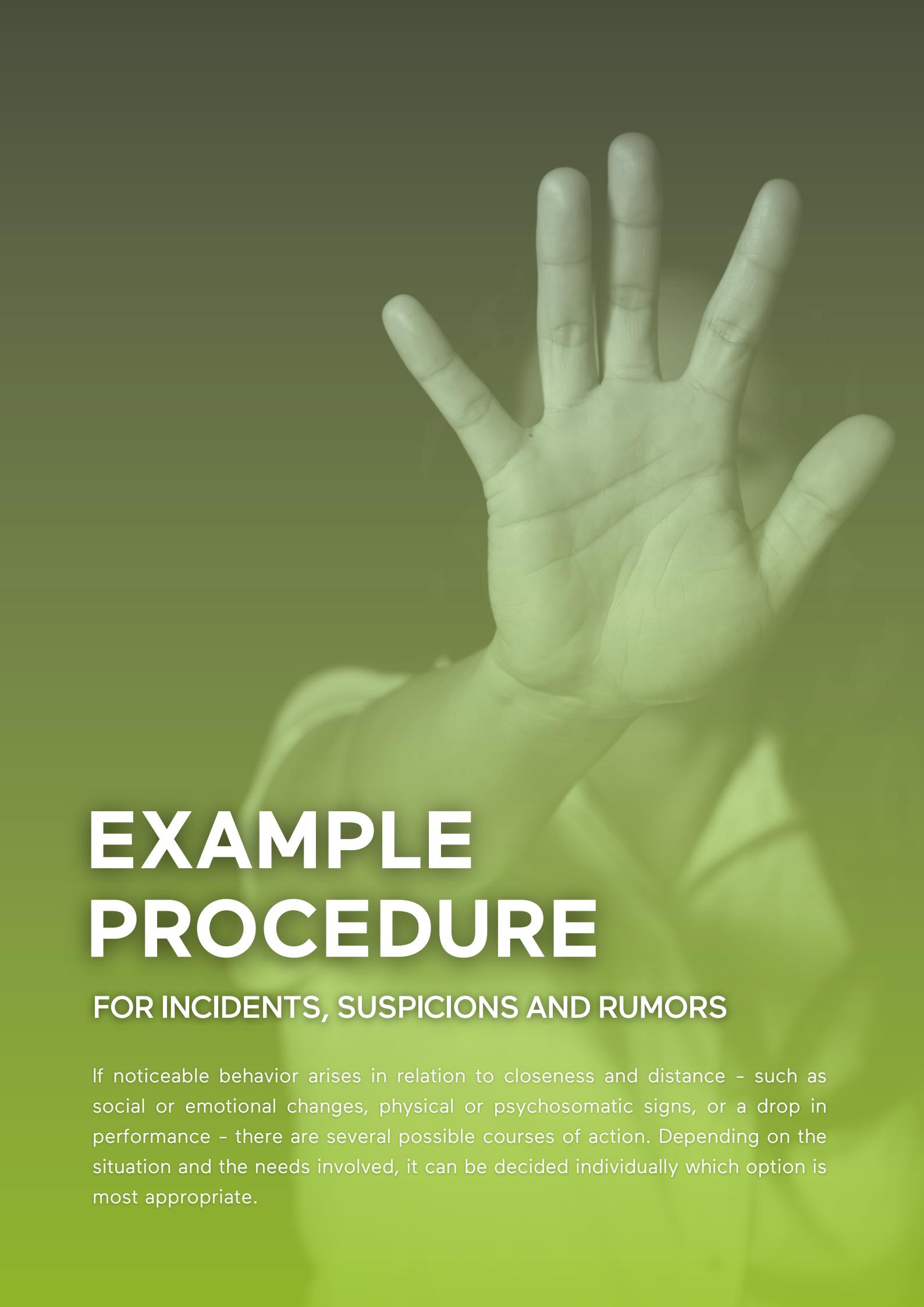
CASE PROMPTING ACTION

Case 8: Teachers witness a verbal assault—for example, when a professor publicly humiliates or belittles a student during a lecture or class.

Case 9: Colleagues happen to witness a professor touching a student's lap, or they overhear him offering better grades in exchange for sexual favours.

In cases of serious incidents, affected individuals or third parties offering support may contact the Equity Committee (AKG) or the Coordinator for Equity, Gender and Diversity confidentially. Reporting the matter directly to the president's office, a supervisor, or the Dean's Office is also possible, but nor required, as the next steps depend solely on the wishes of the person affected. Supervisors are legally obliged to ensure appropriate corrective measures in accordance with the Equal Treatment Act once they become aware of a case.





EXAMPLE PROCEDURE

FOR INCIDENTS, SUSPICIONS AND RUMORS

If noticeable behavior arises in relation to closeness and distance - such as social or emotional changes, physical or psychosomatic signs, or a drop in performance - there are several possible courses of action. Depending on the situation and the needs involved, it can be decided individually which option is most appropriate.

POSSIBLE COURSES OF ACTION

TAKE OBSERVATIONS SERIOUSLY AND DOCUMENT THEM

- Record experienced or observed incidents in writing.
- Reflect on your own perceptions.
- Treat the matter seriously and do not downplay it.
- Acknowledge negative feelings without minimizing or exaggerating them.

SEEK SUPPORT

If desired, counselling/advice is provided by:

- Equity Committee, Ombudsperson for Sexual Harassment and Violence or Coordinator for Equity, Gender and Diversity
- Works Council
- University Leadership
- Anti-Discrimination Officer at the Office of the Upper Austrian Provincial Government
- Violence Protection Center Upper Austria
- Autonomous Women's Center Linz
- Police or other official support services (e.g., Women's Office Linz, Child Protection Center Linz, Men's Counselling Upper Austria, Child and Youth Welfare Upper Austria)

University leadership and supervisors – unlike the AKG or the Coordinator for Equity – are not bound by confidentiality. They must take appropriate steps to ensure protection and support (“adequate remedy”).

A confidential conversation with another teaching staff member

- whom you trust,
- who is supportive,
- who is discreet,
- and who is also willing to express their own opinion.

CLARIFICATION MEETING

If the concerns cannot be resolved despite the above-mentioned steps (observation and internal clarification), a clarification meeting can be sought or, if desired, the university leadership can be informed.

The university leadership would then conduct a confidential conversation separately with both parties and, if necessary, initiates further steps.

If desired, a trusted person or professional support (e.g., moderation, psychological counselling) can always be involved. In case of suspicion, a temporary separation within the teaching environment should be arranged as a precaution to prevent potential harm.

A follow-up with the reporting person takes place no later than 4 weeks after to check whether any further concerns have been observed.

All steps are treated confidentially and documented carefully. Further procedures are decided in close consultation with the affected person. The aim is always to prioritize their protection and wishes.



CONSEQUENCES MEETING

If the suspicion cannot be fully resolved:

Measures within the university setting:

- If not already implemented, the involved persons should be separated in courses or within the organisational unit.
- Contact between the teacher and the student should only take place in the presence of a third person.
- A written warning or, in severe cases, termination can be issued by the President.

Further steps:

- Reporting to the higher authority according to the official reporting line.
- The presumption of innocence applies to everyone. Unfounded accusations may lead to disciplinary consequences. Every incident is examined carefully and thoroughly.

Preventive and follow-up measures by the university leadership:

- Counselling and referral to support services for students.
- Feedback meeting with the reporting person.
- Further observation of the situation, if necessary.
- Informational meetings for other students and their families, if necessary.
- Preventive measures through informational materials, trainings, etc.

Austrian "sexual criminal law"

= Sections §201 to §220 of the Austrian Criminal Code

- § 201 Rape
- § 202 Sexual coercion
- § 207 Sexual abuse of minors (children under the age of consent)
- § 207a Pornographic depiction of minors
- § 207b Sexual abuse of adolescents
- § 208 Moral endangerment of persons under 16 years of age
- § 212 Abuse of an authority relationship
- § 218 Sexual harassment and public sexual acts

"Oö. Antidiskriminierungsgesetz – Oö. ADG"

→ Upper Austrian Anti-Discrimination Act – Upper Austrian ADG

"Oö. Gleichbehandlungsgesetz – Oö. GBG 2021"

→ Upper Austrian Equal Treatment Act – Upper Austrian GBG 2021

INTERNAL SUPPORT SERVICES

Melissa Schimanek – Coordinator for Equity, Gender and Diversity

 +43 732 701000-344
 diversity@bruckneruni.at

Equity Committee (AKG) & Ombudsperson for Sexual Harassment and Violence

 gleichbehandlung@bruckneruni.at

Works Council

 betriebsrat@bruckneruni.at

Safe Spaces – Trusted Persons

Can be recognized by their door
symbol or found on our website

 [www.bruckneruni.ac.at/en/
academics/information/services/
support/trusted-contact-persons](http://www.bruckneruni.ac.at/en/academics/information/services/support/trusted-contact-persons)

Executive Board

 Dean's Office: +43 732 701000-230
 dekanat@bruckneruni.at
 President's Office: +43 732 701000-200
 rektorat@bruckneruni.at

Student Council (StuV)

Room 2.303, 2nd floor next to the large
lecture hall
 stuv@bruckneruni.at

Marc Ernesti – Coordinator for Those with Different Abilities

 +43 732 701000-341
 marc.ernesti@bruckneruni.at

EXTERNAL SUPPORT SERVICES

Anti-Discrimination Office Upper Austria

-  +43 732 77 20-11 759 |  as.post@ooe.gv.at
-  www.land-oberoesterreich.gv.at/antidiskriminierung.html

Equal treatment in the Upper Austrian Public Service

-  +43 732 77 20-11 759 |  gleichbehandlung.Pers.Post@ooe.gv.at
-  www.land-oberoesterreich.gv.at/246246.html

Violence Protection Center Upper Austria

Counselling for psychological, physical, or sexualized violence.

-  +43 732 607 760 |  gewaltschutzzentrum.at/ooe

PIA – Support for Victims of Sexual Violence

Psychosocial and therapeutic support.

-  +43 732 650 031 |  office@pia-linz.at |  pia-linz.at

Men's information hotline

Counselling for men in crisis or violent situations, including perpetrator intervention work.

-  0800 400 777 |  maennerinfo.at

Center for Family Therapy & Men's Counselling Upper Austria

-  +43 732 77 20-53 300 |  zentrum-fm@ooe.gv.at
-  www.zentrum-fm.at

Crisis Support Upper Austria (24/7)

Emergency counselling for psychological crises, suicidal thoughts, and similar situations.

-  +43 732 21 77 |  krisenhilfeooe.at

Child Protection Centers Upper Austria

-  0732 781 666 (Linz) |  www.kinderschutz-linz.at

DEVELOPMENT OF GUIDELINES

The ABU sincerely thanks the team of the Upper Austrian State Music School Network for allowing the adaptation of their brochure "How Much Closeness Is Appropriate?". The structure, core principles, and numerous formulations of the present guide are based on this foundational material and were revised and expanded for the ABU context. Additional ideas from the guide "No Means No 2021" of the HfM Berlin were also incorporated. The further internal development involved many departments, including the: PRAESID, DEK, QUM, AKG, KOM, BR, PER. The content was developed by Melissa Schimanek, Coordinator for Equity, Gender and Diversity. Responsibility for publication lies with the President of the ABU.

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