

Guidance: Personal relationship between staff and students

1. Introduction

1.1 The policy concerning consensual personal relationships between staff and students is intended to discourage such relationships of a sexual or other intimate nature occurring where a member of staff has a professional responsibility for a student and to ensure that, in the event that a relationship arises in such circumstances, arrangements are put in place to protect both parties from any perceptions of preferential or other inequitable treatment.

1.2 This guidance is designed to help staff and students, including Heads of Institutions, in determining how the policy should be implemented and provides further information and details about sources of support. It should be read in conjunction with the policy and does not form part of employees' terms and conditions of employment.

1.3 A personal relationship of a sexual or other intimate nature between a student and a member of staff with academic, pastoral or administrative responsibilities towards that student can undermine the relationship of trust and confidence which is intrinsic to interactions between staff and students, and may give rise to an actual or apparent conflict of interest, risk of favouritism, or abuse of authority.

1.4 Members of staff are under a duty to act with integrity and not to place themselves in a position of actual or apparent conflict. A personal relationship in the circumstances described above should consequently be avoided. However, should such a situation arise, the requirements for disclosing the relationship set out in the policy, and the guidance that follows, will apply.

2. Related policies and procedures

2.1 Employing and Working with Relatives

The University has a separate [policy on employing and working with relatives](#). This policy includes partners, dependents, relatives and close friends and aims to ensure that decision on employment and working arrangements are made fairly, impartially and without prejudice.

2.2 Dignity at Work Policy

[Dignity at Work Policy](#)

2.3 Students Complaints Procedure

[Students Complaints Procedure](#)

2.4 Procedure for Handling Student Cases of Harassment or Sexual Misconduct

[Procedure for Handling Cases of Harassment or Sexual Misconduct](#)

2.5 Children and Vulnerable Adults Policy

[Children and Vulnerable Adults Policy](#)

2.6 Staff disciplinary procedures

[Staff disciplinary procedures](#)

2.7 Student disciplinary procedures

[Student disciplinary procedures](#)

2.8 College policies and procedures

<https://www.equality.admin.cam.ac.uk/equality-diversity-cambridge/college-equality-policies>

<https://www.ois.cam.ac.uk/policies-and-protocols>

3. Definitions

3.1 Student

The policy defines a student as any person pursuing a course of study leading to the award of a degree, diploma, or certificate of the University. Where graduate students have teaching or teaching-related (teaching, supervision and/or assessment) duties, this policy applies to them as if they were a member of staff.

3.2 Staff

The policy defines a staff member as including any person who is engaged by the University as an employee or worker and/or who holds a University office or post, as well as any person to whom the University makes available any of the privileges or facilities normally afforded to its employees. This definition will include academic visitors and other classes of temporary, honorary and volunteer staff. As per 3.1, it also applies to graduate students, whether paid or unpaid, when teaching or undertaking teaching-related duties.

3.3 Professional Connection

The policy defines a professional connection as meaning any arrangement where a person in his or her capacity as a member of staff has any academic, pastoral or administrative responsibility for a student, including for acting as a research supervisor for a graduate research student, tutoring, teaching, selecting or assessing the student.

3.4 Personal Relationship

The policy defines a personal relationship as meaning any association, however brief, of a sexual or other intimate nature, either in person or remotely (for example, via social media, email or text messaging). It applies irrespective of sexual orientation, gender, race, and religion.

4. Disclosure

A member of staff must make a disclosure where there is, or has been, a personal relationship, or where a personal relationship arises, between a member of staff and a student, with whom that member of staff also has a professional connection.

The disclosure must be made to the member of staff's Head of Department (or equivalent post-holder) or, if the member of staff would prefer, to a senior member of the HR Division, who will speak to the Head of Department (or equivalent post holder) on their behalf.

The disclosure can be made orally or in writing (including by email). If it is provided orally, it is recommended that the Head of Department (or equivalent post holder) respond in writing to confirm the disclosure. In any case the steps taken to address the matter must be discussed and followed up in writing to the member of staff (see 5 below) and a copy of the letter retained on the individual's personal file.

If a member of staff is unsure whether or not a relationship with a student should be disclosed under this policy, the member of staff should disclose it.

In the event that any member of staff is, or becomes, aware of a relationship which ought to be, but has not been, disclosed under the policy, they are encouraged to draw the relationship to the attention of the relevant Head of Department (or equivalent post-holder) or (if the member of staff would prefer) to a senior officer in the University's HR department.

5. Putting in place alternative arrangements

5.1 Following disclosure, the Head of Department (or equivalent post holder) will ensure as appropriate that the student is aware of the disclosure and that alternative arrangements are put in place to avoid the member of staff having any professional connection with the student.

In practice this may involve:

- consulting with the member of staff and the student to identify any impact their relationship may have within the University;
- facilitating the re-organisation of duties to minimise professional contact and ensure the member of staff is not tutoring, acting as a research supervisor, assessing or examining, providing pastoral care, or professionally responsible for administering activities in which the student is involved; and,
- ensuring that appropriate action is taken to minimise the potential effect of the relationship on other staff and/or students.
- ending or modifying the professional connection between the parties to ensure there is no threat to the integrity of either party.
- withdrawing from writing references and recommendations for the student in question.

5.2 In all circumstances the Head of Department or equivalent post-holder will deal with the situation in a manner that protects the dignity and privacy of all parties, and seek to ensure that the student is neither advantaged nor disadvantaged. Those involved will be expected to comply with any decision or action.

5.3 There may be exceptional circumstances where it is difficult or impossible to avoid some involvement by the member of staff in the student's study, for example where the student is conducting research in a very specialised area and/or where no alternative tutor or supervisor is available. In these circumstances, the Head of Department or equivalent post-holder should consider whether it would be appropriate to engage a co-supervisor or external supervisor, in order to ensure that the member of staff does not have sole responsibility for supervising the student's work or for taking decisions that affect the student.

5.4 Heads of Department or equivalent may seek advice on a confidential basis from their HR Business Manager, HR Adviser, Head/Deputy Head of School or equivalent post-holder.

6. Advice to students

Students are advised not to enter into personal relationships with a member of University staff with any responsibility for them. If such a close personal or intimate relationship develops, and the student is not sure that a member of staff has disclosed it, they are encouraged independently to advise their Head of Department, College Senior Tutor or Tutor or any other senior member of their College or the School whom they feel able to approach in confidence

The member of staff to whom the disclosure was made will be responsible for reporting the matter to the Head of Department, HR Business Manager, HR Adviser, Head/Deputy Head of School or equivalent to the ensure that appropriate action is taken. Alternative arrangements will be put in place to minimise the potential effect of the relationship on other staff and/or students as mentioned in Section 5 above.

7. Failure to comply with the Policy

Staff should be aware that a failure to comply with the policy, including any arrangements which are put in place under it, will be investigated and may lead to disciplinary action being taken.

Refer to the University's [disciplinary action, grievances and appeals procedures](#) for further information.

8. Non-consensual relationships

If any student finds themselves in receipt of unwanted or inappropriate behaviour or involved in a relationship that they do not consider to be truly consensual, or if they consider that they have been adversely affected by a misuse of power, authority, or conflict of interest, they should refer to the University's policy on [Dignity at Work](#). Any complaint by a student should follow the procedure outlined at: <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/univ/so/2016/chapter02-section26.html>

Members of staff who experience unwanted advances and other unwelcome behaviour, to include advances from students, should also refer to the University's Dignity at Work policy <http://www.hr.admin.cam.ac.uk/policies-procedures/dignity-work-policy>.

9. Relationships in a College Context

If a member of staff is also undertaking duties for a College in addition to their University appointment and enters into a personal relationship with a student for which they have any responsibility, that member of staff may be subject to College policies, either additionally or alternatively depending whether the professional connection arises in a University or College context, or both. Where a College policy applies, advice can be sought from the College's Senior Tutor.

10. Further sources of advice

Any member of staff or student who has questions about the policy or guidance and its application should discuss them with their Head of Department or equivalent post-holder.

Additional advice for staff may be sought from their Departmental Administrator, HR Business Manager or HR Adviser, or from a trade union representative.

The University operates a [counselling service](#) for both students and for staff and signposts students and staff to other [sources of advice and support](#).

Additional support for students may be sought from [here](#) or from their College Tutor.