



UNIVERSITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE

# Staff and Students Relationships Policy

July 2024

## **Staff and Students Relationships Policy**

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## 1. Statement of Policy

- 1.1. Positive professional relationships between members of staff and students are an essential part of supporting our students' educational development and ensuring their welfare whilst at the University. However, when relationships between staff and students become personal in nature, they may lead to actual or perceived imbalances of power or authority, accusations of bias or exploitation, and questions about the nature of consent. This can undermine trust and confidence in the academic process, impair academic progress and negatively affect the welfare of the student.
- 1.2. To provide a positive, safe and supportive learning and working environment, this Policy sets out the University's position on personal relationships between staff and students, where these are of an intimate or close personal nature.
- 1.3. The Policy applies to all staff, but particular provisions are set out for those members of staff who have direct or indirect academic responsibilities, or other direct professional responsibilities, in relation to a student (referred to as Relevant staff members).
- 1.4. **Relevant staff members are prohibited** from pursuing or entering into an **intimate relationship** with any student for whom they have any direct or indirect academic responsibilities, or other direct professional responsibilities. Failure to comply with this Policy will be considered as a disciplinary matter.
- 1.5. **Relevant staff members are strongly discouraged** from entering into a **close personal relationship** with any such student for whom they have any direct or indirect academic responsibilities, or other direct professional responsibilities. When such relationships do occur, they must be declared so that an assessment can be made of any potential conflict of interest and influence. Failure to comply with this Policy will be considered as a disciplinary matter.
- 1.6. Relationships that are coercive, exploitative or sexualised are always unacceptable and must not occur. All staff have a duty to behave appropriately towards students, to act with integrity in their work and to avoid placing themselves in positions of actual or perceived conflict.
- 1.7. Where an intimate or close personal relationship exists when a member of staff is appointed or when a student enrolls at the University and the member of staff would ordinarily be a Relevant staff member to a student, it is the responsibility of the member of staff to inform their Head of Institution (or nominated representative), in order that alternative arrangements can be made. Please refer to [Section 6](#) of the Policy.
- 1.8. This Policy concerns consensual relationships between members of staff and students; non-consensual behaviour (or allegations of behaviour where consent has been put into doubt) is covered at section 12 and in the University's Dignity at Work Policy.
- 1.9. This Policy is accompanied by [guidance](#) to support the implementation of the Policy. The [guidance](#) includes further information to support Heads of Institutions, staff and students, including direction on staff responsibilities for a student, managing a declaration of a close personal relationship and details of appropriate and inappropriate behaviours.
- 1.10. This policy is not contractual and may be amended from time to time, in light of changes in legislation or operational requirements.

## 2. Purpose of this Policy

- 2.1. This Policy seeks to protect members of staff and students from misconduct and allegations of actual or perceived conflicts of interest by providing a framework of guidance and regulations and by ensuring appropriate safeguards and processes are in place to prevent abuses of power and sexual misconduct.



- 2.2. In particular, the Policy aims to prevent **intentional or unintentional conflicts of interest or abuses of power** that may occur within seemingly consensual relationships between students and Relevant staff members. Students could potentially experience the negative effects of an inherent power imbalance, even where a Relevant staff member does not seek to abuse their power. For example, a student may feel pressured to commence an intimate relationship with a Relevant staff member, take such a relationship further than they might otherwise wish or not feel able to end such a relationship, on the basis that to do so may result in detriment.

### 3. Who is this Policy for?

- 3.1. This Policy applies to **all members of University staff** as defined in [Section 5](#).
- 3.2. This Policy does not apply to employees and workers solely engaged by the Colleges, who should refer to their College's policies and procedures on relationships between staff and students. College employees and workers are expected, however, to behave in a manner that is consistent with the [University Code of Behaviour](#) if undertaking their work or services specifically in the University environment.
- 3.3. This Policy does not apply to students. Their attention, however, is drawn to the Policy and the terms and requirements placed on members of staff as defined above.

### 4. Roles and responsibilities

- 4.1. **All members of staff** (as defined in [Section 5](#)) must act in compliance with this Policy.
- 4.2. **Staff responsible for HR in their area** are responsible for providing advice and support in accordance with this Policy.
- 4.3. **The [HR Business Partnering Team](#)** are responsible for providing advice and support to institutions about this Policy.
- 4.4. **[Dignity at Work Contacts](#)** are a group of trained volunteers from across the University responsible for providing support to members of staff who have experienced or been accused of alleged inappropriate behaviour.
- 4.5. **All roles involved in providing direct guidance and support to members of staff and students** are responsible for ensuring that information is handled confidentially. Further information is set out in [section 14](#).
- 4.6. **The Human Resources Division** is responsible for ensuring that this Policy is maintained and that appropriate supplementary [guidance](#) is provided to support its use.
- 4.7. **Heads of Institutions** are responsible for ensuring that members of staff within their institutions, plus any external or student members of their institution's committees, are made aware of this Policy; ensuring that up-to-date records of declarations and conflicts of interests are maintained; and for determining and recording how to manage each.
- 4.8. The **Head of School/Non-school Institution**, with support from the relevant [HR Business Partnering Team](#), will periodically review disclosures within the institution relating to the Policy and any resulting protective actions and measures taken.

## 5. Definitions

- 5.1. **Abuse of power** is where a position of power or authority is used in an unacceptable manner. This can take various forms and may include, but is not limited to, grooming, manipulation, coercion and pressurising others to engage in conduct they do not feel comfortable with.
- 5.2. **Adult at risk** is someone aged 18 years or over who may be in need of community care services by reason of mental or other disability, age or illness; and who is or may be unable to take care of themselves, or unable to protect themselves against significant harm or exploitation.
- 5.3. **Close personal relationship** excludes intimate relationships, but means a relationship where the nature, content, involvement and/or frequency of interactions and/or communications between a staff member and a student transgress the boundaries of professional conduct or may be reasonably perceived to do so.
- 5.4. **Grooming** is when a person builds a relationship with a child, young person or an adult who is at risk so they can abuse them and manipulate them into doing things. The abuse is usually sexual or financial, but it can also include other illegal acts.
- 5.5. **Head of Institution** includes Heads of Departments and of other academic Institutions, Chairs of Faculty Boards not divided into Departments, and the administrative Heads of Institutions.
- 5.6. **Institution** means all academic and academic-related departments, including administrative units, libraries, museums, and any other person sections or units of the University.
- 5.7. **Intimate relationship** is a consensual relationship characterised by emotional, physical, and/or sexual intimacy, which may be conducted in person and/or online and/or via electronic or any other form of communication. This includes brief relationships and one-off occurrences, through to marriage or life partnerships, regardless of gender, gender identity or sexual orientation.
- 5.8. **Member of staff** includes any person working within the University under a formal contract of employment or as a casual worker or any person to whom the University offers any of the privileges or facilities normally available to its employees (such as visiting academics) or any individual working within the University under a contract for services and/or in a self-employed capacity. Where postgraduate students work for the University in a teaching, pastoral or supervisory capacity this Policy applies to them in that capacity as members of staff.
- 5.9. **Relevant staff member** means a member of staff who has direct or indirect academic responsibilities, or other direct professional responsibilities, in relation to that student.
- 5.10. **Responsibility for a student** is defined widely and includes any teaching, professional, pastoral or administrative responsibility or authority over a student, whether temporary or permanent, whether formally conferred on or voluntarily assumed by the staff member and whether the responsibility arises in a University or a college context. This includes but is not limited to lecturing, teaching classes or seminars, overseeing projects or fieldwork, supervising, and setting and/or marking of examinations or other assessments of any type. It also includes acting as a mentor or college advisor.
- 5.11. For the purposes of this Policy, **Sexual Misconduct** means any unwanted or attempted unwanted conduct of a sexual nature and includes but is not limited to:
- (i) sexual harassment as defined by section 26(2) of the Equality Act 2010;
  - (ii) assault as defined by the Sexual Offences Act 2003;
  - (iii) rape as defined by the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

- 5.12. **Student** includes any person currently studying for an undergraduate or postgraduate qualification, or on any course arranged by or through the collegiate University, including visiting and exchange students, applicants, and offer-holders. It includes students from other Higher Education providers who are completing placements at the University. It covers all students who are registered for a course even if their status is suspended but does not include former students who have finished their courses, unless they are current applicants or offer holders for another University course.

## 6. Terms and Disclosure

- 6.1. With effect from the Policy commencement date:
- (i) Relevant staff members are prohibited from pursuing or entering into an intimate relationship with any student. Failure to comply with this Policy will be considered as a disciplinary matter.
  - (ii) Relevant staff members are strongly discouraged from having any close personal relationship with any student and must declare if such a relationship has developed, is developing or appears likely to develop between them and any student. A failure to declare will be considered as a disciplinary matter.
- 6.2. With effect from the Policy commencement date Relevant staff members must not take on or assume a professional responsibility for a student:
- (i) with whom they are in an existing intimate relationship or with whom they previously had such a relationship; or
  - (ii) with whom they are in any close personal relationship or with whom they previously had such a relationship without first declaring this to their Head of Institution, to enable them to assess the risk of conflicts of interest and put appropriate measures in place as necessary.
- 6.3. If at the Policy commencement date, a Relevant staff member:
- (i) is already in an intimate or any close personal relationship with any student;
  - (ii) or has previously been in an intimate or any close personal relationship with any student:
- they should declare that relationship to the Head of Institution by 31 October 2024, even if the relevant responsibility for the student has ended.
- 6.4. If a member of staff is in an intimate or any close personal relationship with a student for whom they do not currently have any direct or indirect academic responsibilities, or other direct professional responsibilities, but where it would be reasonable to assume that the member of staff may in the future have responsibility for the student (for example where a member of staff and student are in the same Institution); the relationship should be disclosed to the relevant Head of Institution to assess the risk of any conflict of interest arising and put appropriate alternative and/or protective measures in place as necessary.
- 6.5. If it is found this Policy is breached unintentionally, for example where a member of staff is unaware that the other party is a student, and had no reasonable basis to suspect it, the member of staff should inform their Head of Institution as soon as they become aware of the situation. If a member of staff is unsure whether a relationship with a student should be disclosed under this Policy, the member of staff should disclose it.
- 6.6. A declaration of any close personal relationship should be made using the Staff Declaration form in the [Supplementary Guidance](#).

## 7. Close Personal Relationships

- 7.1 The University does not seek to discourage positive relationships between staff and students, and it may be appropriate for staff and students for whom they have responsibility to jointly participate in informal, social or leisure activities, providing careful consideration is given to potential conflicts, professional norms and boundaries and to how any such behaviour might be perceived.
- 7.2 Staff must be mindful of professional boundaries in all relationships with students and must act in a way which safeguards student welfare and ensures standards of academic integrity are upheld. Even where a staff member does not have and is not likely to have responsibility for a student, staff should be very aware of and consider the potential for an actual or perceived imbalance of power or authority, accusations of bias or exploitation, and questions about the nature of consent, before embarking on an intimate or close personal relationship with a student. The risks of such are likely to be heightened where there is a significant age difference between the staff member and the student; the student is an undergraduate; and/or the student is more vulnerable for any reason.
- 7.3 It is impossible to cover every potential situation which might involve, or be perceived to involve, transgression of the boundaries of professional conduct but any relationship which involves (or is perceived to involve) any of the following characteristics will be considered to do so and must be declared:
- (i) any form of dependence, whether emotional, practical, financial or otherwise, and whether the student appears dependent on the member of staff; or***
- (ii) favouritism towards any student (which might include, for example, circumstances where a student is treated in a way that is exclusive or exceptional).***
- 7.4 If there is any uncertainty, the best course is to declare a relationship, or any interaction with a student that is of concern, so that appropriate measures (to protect both the student and the member of staff) can be considered.

## 8. Relationships with students under the age of 18 or Adults at Risk

- 8.1. Members of staff who have responsibility for any students must never enter into an intimate relationship with a student or any other person under eighteen years of age or with a student who is an adult at risk, irrespective of whether the member of staff has any responsibility for the student or other person.
- 8.2. Staff are reminded that intimate relationships involving students (including applicants or offer-holders) under the age of eighteen where the staff member is in a position of trust or where the student is an adult at risk could fall within the scope of the Sexual Offences Act 2003.
- 8.3. Anyone suspecting a member of staff of acting inappropriately towards a student or any other person under the age of 18 or an adult at risk should refer to the [Children and Adults at Risk Safeguarding Policy](#) and contact the Designated Safeguarding Officer, who may contact the local authority designated officer and/or the Police.

## **9. Relationships and the Colleges**

- 9.1. If a University Relevant staff member is also undertaking duties for a College they may be subject to College policies, additionally or alternatively to University policies, depending on whether the professional connection arises in a University or College context, or both.
- 9.2. The Policy applies to Relevant staff members of the University even where the responsibility for the student arose, arises or will arise solely in a College context (e.g., in roles such as Admissions Tutor, Director of Studies, Tutor or undergraduate supervisor); such as where the member of staff has a separate College contract of employment or other form of engagement.
- 9.3. Where a person is both a College staff member and a Relevant staff member of the University, irrespective of any action the College may take, the University reserves the right to take action and/or put measures in place under this Policy and their University contract.
- 9.4. Where matters relating to this Policy cause any formal action to be taken by the University which may result in restrictions of the activities of the Relevant staff member, details of those actions and/or restrictions will be reported to (any or all, as necessary) Colleges in the interests of safeguarding student welfare and ensuring high standards of integrity and professional behaviour across the collegiate university. For further information on confidentiality, please see Section 14 below.
- 9.5. Where a University Relevant staff member declares a close personal relationship, the member of staff should also share that same information with their own College and the College of the student. In those circumstances, should the relevant College/s contact the University for further information, the University will provide this on a need to know and confidential basis.

## **10. Admissions and Recruitment**

- 10.1. If an intimate or close personal relationship is pre-existing between any member of staff who has a role in selection of candidates for admission to the University and a candidate seeking admission, that member of staff must inform the Head of Institution or equivalent at the outset of the admissions exercise so steps can be taken to avoid any conflict of interest. The matter will, as far as possible, be handled in a way that respects confidentiality to ensure there is no detriment to the candidate.

## **11. Advice to Students**

- 11.1. Students should be aware of the Policy and the terms and requirements placed on members of staff. Rules of Behaviour for registered students are set out in the Student Disciplinary Procedures.
- 11.2. If an intimate or close personal relationship has developed contrary to this Policy, even if it predates the Policy commencement date, and/or the student is not sure that the member of staff has disclosed it, they are encouraged to advise their Head of Institution, Senior Tutor or any other senior member of their College or School whom they feel able to approach. However, there will be no disciplinary consequences for the student if they do not do so.
- 11.3. The member of staff to whom the disclosure was made will be responsible for reporting the matter to the Head of Institution, [HR Business Partnering Team](#), Head of School or equivalent to ensure that an appropriate risk assessment and resulting action is taken.
- 11.4. Students should particularly note the guidance and support available in any cases of non-consensual behaviour at [section 12](#), and further sources of support



at [section 13](#). Regardless of whether a relationship has been disclosed, students are encouraged to seek support if they experience any inappropriate behaviour from a member of staff during that relationship.

- 11.5. Student behaviour/s towards members of staff that could be interpreted as flirtatious or making advances towards a personal, particularly intimate relationship should, except for trivial cases, be reported by the member of staff to the Head of Institution and/or [HR Business Partnering Team](#). In this event, following consideration and if appropriate, discussion with the Office of Student Conduct, Complaints and Appeals, a record will be kept and measures may be put in place to separate and protect the parties or minimise the possibility of conflicts of interest, concerns or complaints over academic integrity or professional behaviour.
- 11.6. Inappropriate behaviour by a student towards a member of staff or another student that amounts to sexual misconduct, physical misconduct or abusive behaviour, or otherwise breaches the University's Rules of Behaviour, may lead to action being taken under the [Student Disciplinary procedure](#).
- 11.7. Students engaged in an arrangement in an external organisation must adhere to policies on personal relationships between members of staff and students within that organisation. However, if no Policy exists, the clauses in this section will apply.

## **12. Non-Consensual Behaviour**

- 12.1. If a student experiences inappropriate behaviour in breach of this Policy (see the Policy [Supplementary Guidance](#)), is involved in a relationship that they do not consider to be consensual, or if they consider that they have been adversely affected by a misuse of power, authority, or conflict of interest, they should make a report to the Head of Institution or raise a complaint through the [Student Complaints](#) procedure.
- 12.2. Support and advice can be accessed from the [Harassment and Violence Support Service \(HVSS\)](#), [University Counselling Service](#) or College welfare team. Students can also access external advice through the [Student Advice Service](#) or [Student Support](#) and are encouraged to access the support information on the [Breaking the Silence website](#).
- 12.3. Staff who experience inappropriate behaviour from and/or have a complaint against a student should contact their [HR Business Partnering Team](#) who will liaise with the [Office of Student Conduct, Complaints and Appeals \(OSCCA\)](#) to agree appropriate steps.
- 12.4. Support and advice for members of staff can also be sought from local institutional HR or the [Dignity at Work contact](#) service. Staff are also encouraged to access the support information on the University [Breaking the Silence website](#).
- 12.5. In such situations, measures may be put in place to separate and protect the affected parties or minimise the possibility of inappropriate behaviour or complaints, and, in serious cases, including where there has been a course of conduct over time, action may be taken under the [Student Disciplinary procedure](#).

### 13. Further Support available

- 13.1. The University is committed to ensuring the welfare of and providing support for its staff and students and the following support resources are available.
- 13.2. Help for any member of staff or student who has been subjected to sexual misconduct, including sexual assault or rape, is available through the University's [Breaking the Silence website](#). This includes details of services provided by both the University and external specialist organisations.
- 13.3. Information about sources of staff support is available on the University [wellbeing pages](#) and includes the University [Staff Counselling Service](#), [Occupational Health Service](#) as well as support for those who have experienced sexual assault and emergency support for staff in distress.
- 13.4. Members of staff can also access support from their line manager, local HR, [HR Business Partnering Team](#), a [Dignity at Work Contact](#) or [Trade Unions](#).
- 13.5. Talking confidentially to a member of one of the University's [Diversity Networks](#) may also be helpful, particularly if the inappropriate behaviour is perceived to be harassment or discrimination due to a protected characteristic.
- 13.6. Support for students is detailed on the [student support](#) webpages and includes the [Harassment and Violence Support Service \(HVSS\)](#), [Office of Student Conduct Complaints and Appeals](#) and Student [Counselling](#) centre.

### 14. Confidentiality

- 14.1. Concerns raised under this Policy should be treated in confidence as far as that is reasonably possible and consistent with safeguarding the welfare of students.
- 14.2. Information about an intimate or close personal relationship between a member of staff and a student may be placed on the member of staff's personnel file. Communications regarding measures put in place as a result of this Policy should, as far as possible, be neutral, limited to essential facts, and without details published of the situation that gave rise to them. Records will be treated as confidential and be kept no longer than necessary in accordance with relevant data protection principles.
- 14.3. There may be circumstances (as outlined in section 9.4) where it will be necessary for Heads of Institution to notify a member of staff's College. Consideration will be given to whether there is a potential risk to the student and/or other students arising from the nature of the allegations against the member of staff, the welfare of the student and the need to ensure that high standards of academic integrity and professional behaviour are maintained, while taking account of the data protection/privacy rights of the member of staff.
- 14.4. Heads of Institution should consider whether it is appropriate to notify the student's College where an intimate or close personal relationship is made known. In most cases this should only be done with the student's consent, unless there is a serious and compelling welfare concern or risk affecting the student and/or other students.

### 15. Malicious or vexatious complaints

- 15.1. A malicious complaint is one that is made with the intention to intimidate, to lower the reputation of, or otherwise injure or harm a person, through knowingly providing false or misleading information or withholding information about an incident or issue.
- 15.2. A vexatious complaint is either one that is made with the sole or main intention to harass, annoy or subdue somebody, or one that is unreasonable, without foundation, frivolous, repetitive, deliberately burdensome or unwarranted.

- 15.3. If it is found that a person has made a complaint that is malicious or vexatious, the University may instigate a disciplinary process against them. Disciplinary action will not be taken, however, if the matter is mistaken or otherwise ill-founded but not malicious or vexatious.

## **16. Failure to comply with this Policy**

- 16.1. After the adoption of the Policy, Relevant staff members should not pursue or commence an intimate relationship with a student. Should this occur, this will be a breach of the policy and the University will consider this through the staff [disciplinary action, grievances and appeals procedures](#).
- 16.2. Failure on the part of a Relevant staff member to declare an intimate or close personal relationship with a student will be a breach of the policy and the University will consider this through the staff [disciplinary action, grievances and appeals procedures](#).

## **17. Policy Review**

- 17.1. This Policy will be reviewed by the Human Resources Policy and Strategic Projects team 12 months after the implementation date and every 4 years thereafter.



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