



# Personal Relationships Policy and Guidance

## 1. Purpose

- 1.1 The nature and kinds of personal relationship that exist in the University are many and varied. Whilst most social and personal relationships are entirely beneficial in the way that they promote good working relationships and academic collaborations, it is recognised that there will be occasions where a staff member(s) will need to withdraw from involvement in decision making or from undertaking specific roles or duties when a personal relationship could conflict with professional integrity and probity.
- 1.2 The purpose of this policy statement is to provide guidance to all University staff on the protocol for dealing with a personal relationship that overlaps with a working relationship in order to avoid any actual or perceived conflicts of interest, favouritism, disclosure of confidential information, discrimination, or abuse of power and authority.
- 1.3 This policy refers to relationships between: staff and students, members of staff, staff and external parties.

## 2. Definition of a personal relationship

- 2.1 In the context of this policy, a personal relationship is defined as:
  - A family relationship
  - A business/commercial/financial relationship
  - A close friendship
  - An intimate personal relationship<sup>1</sup>
- 2.2 Personal relationships can exist in any form (including social media) and can be of any length. This policy provides examples of the types of relationships that can occur in the University but is not exhaustive.

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<sup>1</sup>Under the OfS condition of registration E6, “intimate personal relationship” means a relationship that involves one or more of the following elements: i) physical intimacy including isolated or repeated sexual activity; or ii) romantic or emotional intimacy.



### 3. Guiding principles

- 3.1 Members of staff should conduct themselves at all times in ways that are consistent with their role and responsibilities, their duty of care and in line with all University staffing procedures (Code of Conduct, Disciplinary etc.).
- 3.2 All staff should be aware of the potential conflicts of interest and/or abuse of power and authority that can arise from personal relationships at work and protect themselves and others by declaring any such relationships in line with this policy.
- 3.3 Members of staff should be conscious that personal relationships often involve power dynamics where some groups of people are, or are perceived to be, more powerful than others.
- 3.4 Given the serious impact that personal relationships can have on members of the University community, failure to declare a personal relationship where an actual or perceived conflict of interest could reasonably have been foreseen may result in [disciplinary action](#). Members of staff should also declare when circumstances have changed since the personal relationship was previously declared.
- 3.5 It is the responsibility of each member of staff to declare any personal relationships to their Head of School/Manager in order to avoid actual or perceived conflicts of interest. When a personal relationship is declared, it is a Head of School/Manager's responsibility to record it and if it is determined that a conflict of interest (actual or perceived) and/or abuse of power and authority exists, seek advice from HR.
- 3.6 The University has a separate policy relating to intimate personal relationships between staff and students. Declarations of these types of relationships should be dealt with in line with that policy.

### 4. Relationships between staff and students

- 4.1 When dealing with students (in any capacity), members of staff should recognise that they are in a position of trust, dependency and that it is their professional and ethical responsibility to protect the interests of students at all times. They should accept the constraints and obligations inherent in that responsibility.
- 4.2 Personal relationships with students could involve **serious complications** rooted in an imbalance of power and maintaining the boundaries of professional and personal life, and compromise the objectivity and professional relationship. Such relationships can also disrupt the teaching and learning environment for other students and for colleagues. In extreme cases, such relationships can result in an abuse of power. Problems may also



occur when a relationship ends or if a consensual relationship later becomes non-consensual or a case of harassment.

- 4.3 If a member of staff has a personal relationship with a student, the member of staff must inform their Head of School immediately (or next line manager if a Head of School/Vice President is making the declaration). Failure to declare a personal relationship may lead to disciplinary action.
- 4.4 The Head of School/Manager will be responsible for ensuring that the member of staff will have no involvement in the student's education, assessment and will separate the member of staff from all direct or indirect involvement in decisions relating to the student (for example academic, administrative and/or pastoral decisions relating to the student). This may require limited sharing of information for operational management, for example with the departmental Director of Learning and Teaching.
- 4.5 No research student will be accepted for study under the supervision of a member of staff with whom they have a personal relationship. Where a relationship develops through the course of studies, alternative supervision arrangements will be made.
- 4.6 The university strongly discourages any member of staff from entering into an intimate personal relationship with a student and has a separate, specific policy and guidance relating to intimate personal relationships between staff and students.
- 4.7 The Sexual Offences Act 2003 makes it an offence for a person aged 18 or over intentionally to behave in certain sexual ways in relation to a child aged under 18, where the person aged 18 or over is in a position of trust in respect of the child. All staff members are considered to be in a position of trust over individuals under 18 and this applies even where the relationship is consensual.

## 5. Relationship between members of staff

- 5.1 Not all personal relationships necessarily constitute a conflict of interest. However staff should declare if they have a personal relationship with other parties that might reasonably be perceived as constituting a conflict of interest. The Head of School/Manager will consult with the members of staff concerned to determine whether there is a conflict of interest or the risk of a perceived conflict of interest, even if an actual conflict of interest does not exist. Where there is a risk of such a conflict the Head of School/Manager will determine the actions required to avoid such a conflict occurring, in consultation with HR.
- 5.2 All cases of personal relationships where one of the parties is in a line management or supervisory role must be declared so that alternative arrangements can be put in place (e.g. change in reporting structure, change of duties). Staff who have a personal relationship must not be involved directly or indirectly in the recruitment, selection, appraisal, promotion or any other activity or process involving the other party.



- 5.3 Where a personal relationship between members of staff could constitute a potential conflict of interest in relation to a specific student, or adversely impact that student's experience, then the Head of School/Manager will determine the actions required in consultation with HR. For example, a PhD student not being jointly supervised by two members of staff who are in a personal relationship.

## 6. Relationships with external parties

- 6.1 Members of staff should be aware that conflict of interest might also arise when a member of staff has a personal relationship with an external job applicant, customer, contractor or supplier.
- 6.2 If a member of staff is involved in a personal relationship with an external job applicant they must avoid any direct or indirect involvement in the recruitment/selection process.
- 6.3 If a member of staff is involved in a personal relationship with a contractor or supplier they must avoid any direct or indirect involvement in the procurement process or decisions to award contracts to that person.

## 7. Declaring personal relationships

- 7.1 Where a member of staff identifies that they are in a personal relationship where there is a level of intimacy with the other party which could reasonable be perceived as constituting a real or perceived conflict of interest or misuse of power, they should declare it in writing to their Head of School/Manager. If for any reason they do not feel able to declare to their Head of School/Manager, they should declare to the next level of authority, or their Faculty/Professional Service HR Manager.
- 7.2 All information provided by staff about personal relationships at work must be treated in a professional, sensitive and respectful manner. Records regarding personal relationships must be kept strictly confidential and in line with the University data protection guidance.
- 7.3 On receiving a declaration a Head of School/Manager will consider the matter and determine whether an actual or perceived conflict of interest exists and if so what actions should be taken to address this. Dependent on the circumstances of the case, the actions could include:
- Removing an individual(s) from any discussions or decision making relating to the person with whom they have a declared personal relationship.
  - Amending an individual(s) job role to remove any conflict of interest, subject to agreed change management policies.
  - Changing reporting lines to remove any conflicts of interest.



- Considering whether other staff in the School need to be aware of the personal relationship.
- 7.4 In considering this matter, Heads of School/Managers should consider not only the direct role an individual(s) plays in decision making, but also indirectly through exertion of influence on those making the actual decisions.
- 7.5 Personal relationships data should be held securely and confidentially in line with GDPR by the Head of School in departmental records, or in any secure University system for this purpose which may be developed. Data should be retained for the period the conflict of interest remains current or up to six years after employment ending. It should be noted that former relationships are likely to remain relevant for conflict of interest purposes for a significant period of time even after the relationship has ended.
- 7.6 Further guidance on potential conflicts of interest in personal relationships can be found at <https://staff.sheffield.ac.uk/hr/personal-relationships>. Human Resources can provide further advice and guidance on specific cases.

## 8. Reporting concerns about relationships

- 8.1 If students or members of staff believe they may be personally affected by a conflict of interest or misuse of power, they should raise this with their Head of School/Manager. If for any reason they do not feel able to raise this with their Head of School/Manager, they should declare to the next level of authority, or their Faculty/Professional Service HR Manager.
- 8.2 Individuals who are witness to an apparent personal relationship that creates a real or perceived conflict of interest or abuse of power should also report their concerns to their Head of School/Manager. If for any reason they do not feel able to raise this with their Head of School/Manager, they should declare to the next level of authority, or their Faculty/Professional Service HR Manager.
- 8.3 All concerns about personal relationships involving a staff member that involve sexual violence/sexual harassment, harassment, bullying, discrimination or victimisation can be reported through any of the following routes:
- Through our online platform Report + Support
  - Your line manager;
  - Another trusted manager or leader;
  - Human Resources contact;
  - For early career researchers, via your faculty lead or Early Career Researchers champion;
  - Head of School;
  - Your trade union representative (if applicable)

## 9. Further advice and support

Staff members and students can access support and contact details for appropriate services via the [Report + Support platform](#). Staff members can also access advice and information on the staff [Bullying, Harassment and Sexual Misconduct policy and web pages](#), through the [Health and Wellbeing hub](#), or enquire via any of the reporting routes in 8.3.

### **Document control**

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