

## University of Oxford – policy concerning relationships between students and staff

1. Positive professional relationships between members of staff and students are central to students' educational development and welfare. However, intimate or close personal relationships between students and staff who have responsibility for them can cause significant problems because of conflicts of interest, imbalance of power and authority, perceived favouritism, and undermining of trust and confidence in the academic process. Being a member of University staff brings with it certain duties and responsibilities. If a staff member behaves in an unprofessional way towards a student it may have negative consequences for student welfare, and may cause risk to both the staff member themselves and the wider University. This policy concerns consensual relationships - non-consensual behaviour is covered at Annex 7 and in the [University's harassment policy](#).
2. To protect the welfare of students, and in the best interests of staff, the University:
  - a. **Prohibits** staff from entering into an intimate relationship with a student for whom they have any responsibility; and
  - b. **Strongly discourages** any other close personal relationship between a staff member and student for whom they have any responsibility that transgresses the boundaries of professional conduct, and requires such relationships to be declared
3. Terms used in paragraph 2, and throughout this policy, are defined at paragraphs 15 to 19.
4. Staff who fail to comply with this policy, or with any arrangements put in place under it (including those made following a declaration of a relationship defined under paragraph 2(b)) may be disciplined.
5. This policy comes into force on 17 April 2023 (the 'policy commencement date').
6. With effect from the policy commencement date members of staff:
  - a. Are **prohibited** from having an intimate relationship with any student for whom they have any responsibility; and
  - b. Must **declare** to their Head of Department or Chair of the Faculty Board as soon as possible if a close personal relationship has developed, is developing or appears likely to develop between them and any student for whom they have any responsibility.
7. With effect from the policy commencement date members of staff must not take on or assume responsibility for a student:

- a. With whom they are in an existing intimate relationship or with whom they previously had such a relationship; or
  - b. With whom they are in an existing close personal relationship or with whom they previously had such a relationship without first declaring this to their Head of Department or Chair of the Faculty Board, to enable them to assess the risk of conflicts of interest and put appropriate protective measures in place if necessary.
8. Where, at the policy commencement date, a staff member:
  - a. Is already in a close personal or intimate relationship with a student for whom they have responsibility; or
  - b. Has previously been in a close personal or intimate relationship with a student for whom they have responsibility:

they should declare that relationship to the Head of Department/Chair of the Faculty Board within two months immediately following the policy commencement date, even if the responsibility for the student has ended.

9. If a member of staff is in an intimate or close personal relationship with a student for whom they do not currently have any form of responsibility, but where there is a reasonable risk that conflicts might arise in future (eg the student is in the same Department, even if currently working in a different research group or academic area) they should disclose the relationship to their Head of Department/Chair of the Faculty Board to assess the risk of any conflict of interest arising and put appropriate protective measures in place if necessary.
10. Paragraph 2, and the disclosure obligations in paragraphs 6 to 9, apply even if the staff member's responsibility for the student arose, arises or will arise solely in a college context (eg under a separate college contract of employment). While colleges set their own internal policies, where a college staff member is also a member of University staff the University may put protective measures in place, or may take disciplinary action under the staff member's contract with the University, even if responsibility for the student arises solely in a college context. Where a University staff member is also a college employee, associate, fellow, or member or has any appointment at a college, the University will share such information with the college about relationships covered by this policy as is appropriate and necessary and has an expectation the colleges will do likewise. This is to protect student welfare and ensure high standards of academic integrity and professional behaviour. Further guidance on sharing information can be found in Annex 4.
11. In the rare circumstances where this policy is breached unintentionally, for example where a staff member is unaware the other party is a student, and had no reasonable basis to suspect it, the staff member should inform the

Head of Department/Chair of the Faculty Board as soon as they become aware of the situation.

12. 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<sup>1</sup>, irrespective of whether the member of staff has any responsibility for the student or other person. 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 suffering from certain mental disabilities could fall within the scope of the Sexual Offences Act 2003. If any such cases arise the [University Safeguarding Officers](#) will consider whether to notify the police, in addition to taking disciplinary action.
13. Even in cases which are not covered by this policy, ie where a staff member does not have and is not likely to have responsibility for a student, staff are strongly encouraged to be cautious before embarking on an intimate or close personal relationship with any student. Such relationships can run into difficulties and give rise to formal complaints or concerns rooted in real or perceived inequalities of power, accusations of bias or exploitation and questions about the nature of consent. The risks of such complaints or concerns are likely to be heightened where there is a big age difference between the staff member and the student; the student is undertaking their first degree following leaving school; and/or the student is more vulnerable because of certain disabilities or health conditions.
14. Guidance on the following matters is given in Annexes:
  - a. Additional policies staff must also comply with – [Annex 1](#)
  - b. Responsibility for a student – [Annex 2](#)
  - c. Close personal relationships – [Annex 3](#)
  - d. Making reports, and responsibilities of Heads of Department / Chairs of Faculty Boards who receive reports - [Annex 4](#)
  - e. Principles for taking protective measures – [Annex 5](#)
  - f. Advice to students – [Annex 6](#)
  - g. Non-consensual behaviour – [Annex 7](#)
  - h. Admissions and recruitment – [Annex 8](#)
  - i. Further sources of advice – [Annex 9](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Defined at: <https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/safeguarding-at-risk-adults-and-children>

## Definitions

15. 'Staff' includes every individual working within the University under a formal contract of employment or as a casual paid worker or any individual to whom the University offers any of the privileges or facilities normally available to its employees (such as visiting academics). Where graduate students work for the University in a teaching, pastoral or supervisory capacity this policy applies to them in that capacity to the same extent as if they were employees of the University.
16. In this policy 'student' is to be understood widely. It means any individual currently studying for an undergraduate or postgraduate qualification, or on any course arranged by or through the University or any part of the collegiate University, including visiting and exchange students, applicants, and offer-holders. It includes those who have no contract with the University such as college-only visiting students, Common Award students, associate members of common rooms and students from other Higher Education providers who are completing placements at the University. It covers all students who are registered for a course even those whose 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). The wider definition of 'student' in this policy does not alter the narrower definition applicable throughout other University statutes and regulations including Statute II.
17. 'Intimate relationship' includes sexual or romantic relationships, marriage or life partnerships, regardless of gender, gender identity or sexual orientation, including a brief relationship and one-off occurrences, and whether they are conducted in person and/or online and/or via electronic or any other form of communication.
18. 'Close personal relationship' excludes intimate relationships but means a relationship where the nature, content, emotional 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. Guidance on recognising 'close personal relationships' that need to be declared under this policy is at Annex 3.
19. '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 college context. It 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, and making decisions over internships or work placements. Guidance on this issue is at Annex 2.



## Annex 1

### Additional policies staff must also comply with

In addition to complying with this policy staff must also comply with:

- 1) The [Conflict of Interest Policy](#);
- 2) Any applicable policies of a college of which the staff member is an employee, associate, fellow, or member or with which they have any appointment (see note below); and,
- 3) The University's [Harassment Policy](#).

Where a staff member's action places them in breach of this policy and in breach of any applicable college policy, that staff member may face disciplinary action by **both** the University **and** the applicable college.

## Annex 2

### Responsibility for a student

Close personal or intimate relationships between students and staff who have responsibility for them can cause significant problems because of the imbalance of power and authority in the relationship. These relationships can also disrupt the teaching and learning environment for other students and colleagues and lead to accusations of favouritism, exclusivity, bias or exploitation and may undermine trust in the academic process. Staff members who engage in such relationships can find themselves subject to formal complaints and scrutiny of their professional, academic and personal integrity. There may also be ethical issues over the question of consent where there is an imbalance of power in a relationship.

The University **prohibits** staff from entering into an intimate relationship (as defined at paragraph 17 of this policy), and **strongly discourages** any close personal relationship (as defined at paragraph 18 of this policy) with a student for whom they have any responsibility. "Responsibility for a student" is defined in paragraph 19 of this policy.

Situations where a staff member will have responsibility for a student will include, but not be limited to where:

- i) there is any direct supervisory or teaching relationship (for example between postgraduate students and their supervisor, or tutors and their tutees);
- ii) a member of staff has direct or indirect responsibility for that student's academic studies (for example, assessor of a student's work);
- iii) a member of staff has direct or indirect responsibility for that student's personal welfare (for example providing welfare services or acting as a mentor or college advisor);
- iv) a member of staff has a mentoring role or ongoing administrative responsibility for a student; or
- v) a member of staff is involved in the admission or selection of applicants or offer-holders.

### Guidance on the boundary between 'support roles' and 'responsibility'

The University recognises that in many departments postgraduate students may work closely in teams with other postgraduates (who are also employed as staff) or post-doctoral researchers where the relationship between them is one of 'support' not 'responsibility'. This policy is not intended to restrict these relationships. Some examples are:

- A more senior DPhil student or a post-doctoral researcher who is a member of staff, assists a more junior DPhil student (or Masters student) to understand a lab process or to safely use equipment or to conduct experiments without

having responsibility or influence over their teaching or the direction of their research

- DPhil students and post-doctoral researchers in the same research group who are pursuing research in related areas who liaise closely about progress and best practice and/or share accommodation and socialise together
- Friendship between DPhil students and post-doctoral researchers in the same department where the staff member has no responsibility for that student's welfare, teaching, progress, or supervision or for any administrative decisions that affect them.

Where a member of staff is operating purely in a 'support' function with no responsibility for a student, an intimate or close personal relationship might have nothing inappropriate about it (see paragraph 19 of this policy for what amounts to responsibility). But affected staff are strongly encouraged to notify such relationships to the Head of Department whenever there is a reasonable risk that conflicts of interest might arise in future so that any appropriate measures (eg to avoid the member of staff being given, or assuming, any future responsibility for the student) can be considered.

The University also recognises that roles change over time and members of staff must be alive to the risk that what may have originally started as a support function could evolve into the staff member acquiring some responsibility for the student.



## Annex 3

### Close personal relationships

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 due regard is given to potential conflicts, professional norms and boundaries and to how any such behaviour might be perceived.
2. In all personal and professional relationships with students all University staff must act in a way which safeguards student welfare. This includes being mindful of professional boundaries in order to uphold standards of academic integrity and avoid conflicts of interest. Close personal relationships between students and staff can cause significant issues because of conflicts of interest, imbalances of power and authority, perceived favouritism and undermining of trust and confidence in the academic process. Such relationships can run into difficulties causing negative consequences for student welfare and the staff member can be at risk of formal complaints or concerns.
3. While intimate relationships with students for whom staff have responsibility are **prohibited**, close personal relationships are **strongly discouraged and must be declared**.
4. 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 always transgress the boundaries of professional conduct and **must be declared**:
  - a. Any form of dependence, whether emotional, practical, financial or otherwise, and whether the student appears dependent on the member of staff or vice versa; or
  - b. Favouritism towards any student (which might include, for example, circumstances where a student is treated in a way that is exclusive or exceptional)
5. If in doubt 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.

## **Annex 4**

### **Making reports, and the responsibilities of Heads of Department/Chairs of Faculty Board who receive them**

This guidance supports Heads of Departments/Chairs of Faculty Board with notifications that they may receive through this policy. It does not cover all scenarios, and will in many cases need to be supplemented by HR advice.

#### **Notifications to Heads of Department/Chairs of Faculty Board<sup>2</sup>**

Heads of Department/Chairs of Faculty Board may receive notifications in relation to this policy from staff members, students or third parties. Notifications could be in compliance with a requirement of this policy, or in respect of an allegation the policy has been breached, or both.

Any member of staff or student who has questions about this policy and its application may also raise them with their Head of Department / Chair of the Faculty Board in the first instance.

#### **Initial action by a Head of Department/Chair of Faculty Board**

When a Head of Department/Chair of Faculty Board receives a notification they will:

- acknowledge the notification, preferably in writing, and signpost any forms of welfare support that may be helpful.
- so far as possible treat the notification in confidence (see additional guidance on confidentiality below).
- consider whether it is necessary to re-organise duties to minimise professional contact with the relevant student, taking into account the guidance on the principles to follow in making alternative arrangements at Annex 5.
- consider whether they should notify the college of the staff member and/or the student of the relationship and any protective measures instigated, in line with the guidance on confidentiality below.
- where necessary seek advice either from the Head of Administration and Finance (or equivalent) or departmental HR staff in the first instance, who may in turn seek advice on a confidential basis from the Divisional Office or from their HR Business Partner in University HR.

#### **Next steps**

After any appropriate protective measures have been put in place, the Head of Department should consider whether any further actions might be necessary, which may include (for example):

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<sup>2</sup> If a HoD/Chair of Faculty Board is conflicted, or perceived to be, reports may be made to the Head of Division

- ensuring that any individuals affected are aware of the University's support services.
- in cases where there is a failure to comply with the policy and arrangements put in place under the policy, taking appropriate action under the relevant [disciplinary procedures](#)
- ensuring good record-keeping, eg making sure that any relevant correspondence between the Head of Department/Chair of Faculty Board and a staff member is saved on the individual's personnel file
- learning lessons for the future eg were wider questions raised about appropriate boundaries in the Department and, if so, is there need for training?

### **Confidentiality**

- Concerns raised under this procedure should be treated in confidence as far as that is reasonably possible and consistent with upholding the welfare of students.
- As far as possible communications regarding changes to practical arrangements necessitated by this policy should be neutral, limited to essential facts, and avoid publicising the situation that gave rise to them.
- Heads of Department/Faculty Board Chairs should consider whether it is appropriate to notify a staff member's college of a relationship, any alternative arrangements / protective measures implemented, and /or, where there is an alleged breach of this policy, the fact that a staff member is under investigation and/or is subject to action under the disciplinary procedures. This is likely to involve considering the welfare of students (including whether there is a potential risk to the student and/or other students arising from the nature of the allegations against the staff member) and the need to ensure high standards of academic integrity and professional behaviour are maintained across the collegiate University, while taking due account of the data protection/privacy rights of the staff member.
- Heads of Department should also consider whether it is appropriate to notify the student's college. In most cases this should only be done with the student's consent, unless (a) there is a welfare concern or risk affecting other students at the college or (b) where the student is at risk of serious harm (as defined in the [Guidance on Confidentiality in Student Health and Welfare](#)).

## Annex 5

### Principles for taking protective measures

1. When a Head of Department (or equivalent post-holder) arranges any protective measures following a declaration of an intimate or close personal relationship under paragraphs 7-10 of this policy they should:
  - a. Ensure the student and staff member are both aware of the disclosure; and
  - b. Seek advice from Departmental HR staff or the Head of Administration and Finance (or equivalent) in the first instance, who may in turn seek advice on a confidential basis from the Divisional Office or from their HR Business Partner in University HR; and
  - c. Seek to protect the dignity and privacy of all parties, as far as reasonably possible; and
  - d. Ensure any measures protect the student's best interests (in welfare and academic terms) while avoiding a conflict of interest, or grounds of complaint, for the member of staff, as far as reasonably possible. This may include identifying alternative sources of pastoral support for a student or making alternative arrangements for their supervision and/or teaching.
2. Usually the protective measures will have the effect of avoiding conflicts of interest by ensuring the staff member ceases to have, or does not acquire, any responsibility for the student. In practice this may involve any of the following:
  - a. Consulting with both the member of staff and the student to identify any impact their relationship may have within the University;
  - b. Re-organising the staff member's duties to ensure they are not teaching, supervising, tutoring, mentoring, assessing, examining, providing welfare/pastoral support or participating in administration or management of any activities in which the student is involved;
  - c. Taking action to minimise the potential effect of the relationship on other staff or students;
  - d. The staff member withdrawing from writing references and recommendations, or being involved in any decision concerning admissions, academic awards/prizes, scholarships, or bursaries for the student in question.
3. **In no circumstances may a member of staff who has, or has had, an intimate relationship with a student for whom they have responsibility take on, or continue in, any supervisory or tutoring role for them, even if the relationship predated introduction of this policy and has been declared within 2 months of the policy commencement date.**
4. However, sometimes it is difficult to avoid a member of staff having or maintaining some responsibility for a student even though a close personal relationship has arisen and has been declared in accordance with this policy.

This may occur, for example, where a student is conducting research in a highly specialised area where no other supervisor is available. However, in such cases, the Head of Department (or equivalent postholder) must always consider appropriate protective measures, including whether a co-supervisor or external supervisor is appropriate to minimise the staff member's responsibility for that student.

## Annex 6

### Advice to students

Students should note the requirements of this policy for members of staff.

If an intimate or close personal relationship has developed contrary to this policy, even if it predates the policy commencement date, the student is encouraged to disclose it to their Head of Department or Chair of the Faculty Board and to a senior member of their college welfare team.

Students should also particularly note the guidance and support available in any cases of non-consensual behaviour at Annex 7, and the further sources of support explained at Annex 10.

Messages or other behaviours towards members of staff that could be interpreted as flirtatious or making advances towards an intimate relationship will usually (save in trivial cases<sup>3</sup>) need to be reported by the member of staff to the Head of Department/Chair of the Faculty Board and/or HR Team. This may result in protective measures to separate affected parties or minimise the possibility of conflicts of interest, complaints or questions over academic integrity or professional behaviour.

Students should note that any behaviour that constitutes harassment (towards a staff member or a fellow student) may be the subject of disciplinary action under [Statute XI \(University Discipline\)](#).

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<sup>3</sup> Non-exhaustive examples of trivial cases include a student who spontaneously hugs their supervisor upon being told they have received an academic prize or a student who submits written work to a supervisor by email/online with the message 'love xxx' or similar as they use such informality for most communications or used the sign-off message in error. Examples of cases which are not trivial and need to be declared include: a student who suggests a 'date' or one who sends a gift which suggests overtures towards an intimate relationship (eg a Valentine's card/present).

## Annex 7

### **Non-consensual behaviour**

If any student finds themselves in receipt of inappropriate behaviour in breach of this policy or involved in a relationship that they do not consider to be wholly 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 Department or the Chair of the Faculty Board (as explained at Annex 4). They are also encouraged to seek support from the [Sexual Harassment and Violence Support Service](#) or their college welfare team. This behaviour may be covered by the [University's policy on harassment](#). All students are also encouraged to access the [Consent Matters programme materials on the Welfare and Wellbeing section of the University website](#).

Members of staff who experience advances and other unwelcome behaviour from students should raise the issue with their Head of Department, the Chair of the Faculty Board, or their manager. They can also contact the [Harassment Advisor Network](#) or their local harassment advisor. Protective measures to separate affected parties or minimise the possibility of inappropriate behaviour or complaints may be necessary and, in serious cases, including where there has been a course of conduct over time, behaviour that constitutes harassment may justify disciplinary action against the student under [Statute XI \(University Discipline\)](#).

## **Annex 8**

### **Admissions and recruitment**

Staff should note that the definition of student in this policy (contrary to that in other University statutes and regulations including Statute II) applies to any applicant or offer-holder with whom they interact during the admissions process.

If an intimate or close personal relationship is pre-existing between any member of staff who has a role in selection of candidates or admission of students to the University and a candidate seeking admission, that member of staff must inform the Head of Department (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.

For further information on conflicts of interest in a student admissions context go to <https://compliance.admin.ac.uk/conflicts-of-interest> and the website links under the heading 'Admissions and Recruitment'.



## **Annex 9**

### **Further sources of advice**

Any member of staff or student who has questions about this policy and its application should discuss them with their Head of Department or Chair of the Faculty Board in the first instance.

Additional support for staff is available from the Head of Administration and Finance/Departmental Administrator or equivalent, or the HR Team in the department/faculty. Staff who are members of a trade union may also seek advice from them.

Additional support for students is available from the [Sexual Harassment and Violence Support Service](#) or their college welfare team.