

Staff-student relationships

Information for staff and managers about the University's policy on close personal or intimate relationships between staff and students

Summary

The structure of the collegiate University is such that staff and students will often come into contact both in their faculty or department and within their college and this can lead to the development between them of a close personal or intimate relationship.

These relationships can develop, for instance, between students and staff involved in lecturing or conducting tutorials, supervising their research, administering awards, or providing personal and welfare support. Such relationships raise issues, relating to inequalities of power in a relationship, or perceived favouritism, or the undermining of trust in the academic process.

In the event of a close personal or intimate relationship developing with a student, for whom a staff member has any responsibility, the University requires that this is brought to the attention of the member of staff's Head of Department in order that action can be taken to assess and manage any consequences.

Staff–student relationships policy

The policy generally relates to members of academic and academic-related staff who have any responsibility for a student with whom they are having or have had a relationship.

Introduction

1. This policy covers current and former close personal or intimate relationships, however brief, between members of staff and students where the staff member has any responsibility for the student. These include, but are not limited to: marital, sexual, romantic, or emotional relationships whether they are conducted in person or online. (Family relationships are covered under the [Conflict of Interests Policy](#).)

For the purposes of this policy, a 'member of staff' should be understood as including but not limited to any individual who is working within the University under a formal contract of employment or as a casual paid worker (including graduate students working as teaching assistants or demonstrators), and any other individual (such as visiting academics) to whom the University offers any of the privileges or facilities normally available to its employees.

A student should be understood as any individual who is studying for an undergraduate or postgraduate qualification, or who is a student on any course arranged by or through the University or any part of the collegiate University.

Responsibility for a student is to be interpreted broadly to include any teaching, professional, pastoral or administrative responsibility, whether temporary or permanent, and whether in a University or College context. This includes but is not limited to lecturing, supervising, mentoring, overseeing or advising on projects, work or laboratory experience, fieldwork, internships or vacation study placements, and the setting or marking of examinations or other assessments of any type.

2. The University regards the professional relationship between members of staff and students as central to the student's educational development and wellbeing. Professional relationships are any in which the staff member through his or her employment with the University has any educational, administrative, pastoral or supervisory involvement with a student. The University reminds staff of the importance of maintaining academic and professional integrity and of their responsibility for the welfare of students.
3. Implicit in the professional role of members of staff is an obligation to ensure that conflicts of interest do not arise, and that relationships with students for whom the staff member has any responsibility remain strictly professional, respecting the trust inherent in them.
4. While the University does not wish to regulate the private lives of its staff, it strongly advises staff not to enter into a close personal or intimate relationship with a student for whom they have any responsibility, and alerts them to the complications that may result.
5. To embark on a close personal or intimate relationship with a student often involves difficulties rooted in the inequalities of power as well as problems in maintaining the boundaries of professional and personal life. Also, these relationships could disrupt the teaching and learning environment for other students and colleagues and might lead to accusations of favouritism or bias and undermine trust in the academic process.

Guidance for staff on relationships and the need for disclosure

6. The University requires that any close personal or intimate relationship with a student for whom a staff member has any responsibility is brought to the attention of the member of staff's Head of Department as soon as such a relationship commences or as soon as the staff member perceives the commencement of such a relationship to be likely (whichever is earlier) in order that action can be taken to mitigate any unintended consequences. For the avoidance of doubt, this requirement arises even if the staff member's responsibility for the student arises solely in a College context (for example, under a separate employment contract with the College).

The member of staff should also disclose any former relationship with a current student for whom they are given or are to be given responsibility. If the staff member is unsure if they have any responsibility for the student, they should declare the relationship to their Head of Department, in order that they can assess the risk of unintended consequences arising. Any declaration of this kind will, so far as possible and subject to the specific provisions of this policy, be treated in confidence, and every effort will be made to ensure that it does not disadvantage either party with regard to their professional advancement or academic progress.

7. Disciplinary action may be taken against a member of staff who fails to declare a close personal or intimate relationship, or the likely commencement of such a relationship, as required by this policy as soon as is practically possible and in every case within one week of the relationship commencing or the assignment of responsibility for a student whom the staff member has a current or prior relationship.
8. Attention is drawn to the fact that relationships involving students under the age of eighteen or vulnerable adults could fall within the scope of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 relating to persons in positions of trust having sexual relations with children under eighteen or vulnerable adults. Members of staff must not enter into a close personal or intimate relationship with a student under eighteen years of age or a vulnerable adult for whom they have any responsibility under any circumstances.
9. If a close personal or intimate relationship is pre-existing between a member of staff and a candidate for admission as a student, the member of staff must make the Head of Department (or equivalent) aware of it at the outset of the admissions exercise, so that steps can be taken to avoid any conflict of interest arising. The matter will, as far as possible, be handled in confidence to ensure that there is no detriment to the candidate.

Head of department's responsibilities

10. If such a relationship develops during the course of employment or study between a member of staff and a student for whom they have a professional responsibility, this must be disclosed by the member of staff to the Head of Department as early as possible so they can take steps to:
 - consult with the member of staff and the student to identify any impact their relationship may have within the University
 - facilitate the re-organisation of duties to minimise contact and ensure the member of staff is not tutoring, supervising, assessing, providing pastoral care, or professionally responsible for administering activities in which the student is involved
 - ensure that appropriate action is taken to minimise the potential effect of the relationship on other staff and/or students
11. In the case of a student whose studies or research are in a very specialised area, such that no alternative tutor or supervisor is available, the Head of Department 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.
12. The Head of Department will deal with the situation in a manner that protects the dignity and privacy of all parties, and those involved will be expected to comply with any reasonable decision or action. There will be no obligation on the parties involved to keep their relationship confidential.

13. Heads of Department should seek advice from 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.

Guidance for students on relationships and the need for disclosure

14. The University advises students not to enter into any relationship with a member of University staff with any responsibility for them, as it may lead the staff member to compromise the integrity of their professional relationship. If such a relationship develops, and the student is not sure that a member of staff has disclosed their relationship, they are encouraged to independently advise their Head of Department or Chair of the Faculty Board in confidence.

Non-consensual relationships or inappropriate behaviour

15. 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 harassment](#).

Members of staff who experience unwanted advances and other unwelcome behaviour should raise the issue with their Head of Department, the Chair of the Faculty Board, or their manager.

Support and guidance

16. 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 may be sought from the Departmental Administrator or HR Officer, or from an appropriate trade union.

Additional support for students may be sought from the University's Director of [Student Welfare and Support Services](#)

Relationships in a college context

17. If a member of staff who has an appointment with a college in addition to their University appointment enters into a close personal or intimate relationship with a student for which they have any responsibility, then that member of staff may be bound by college policies in addition to this policy.