

UNIVERSITY STAFF AND STUDENTS PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS POLICY

November 2024

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<http://policies.docstore.port.ac.uk/policy-274.pdf>

Scope and purpose of the policy

The policy sets out the expectations and obligations of all staff (including but not limited to academic, research and professional services staff, postgraduate teaching assistants, and student mentors), visiting staff, emeritus staff and joint appointees, with respect to personal relationships between students and staff and between colleagues.

All University of Portsmouth staff are in a position of trust. It is important that they demonstrate exemplary behaviour at all times and always give due consideration as to what is an appropriate environment and what is appropriate conduct in relation to the activities they are undertaking.

The University recognises that socialising on a friendship basis between colleagues and staff and students is often a positive aspect of being an active member of the University community, however the nature of staff/student and staff/staff relationships imposes particular responsibilities and duties on staff. This policy is intended to ensure that appropriate safeguards and processes are in place to prevent abuses of power and sexual misconduct.

This policy aims to protect students and staff from allegations of actual or perceived conflicts of interest, and to limit circumstances where a position of power may be abused. In doing so, it seeks to ensure a positive and supportive working environment where all are treated fairly.

This policy prohibits intimate or close personal relationships between staff and students.

This policy prohibits intimate or close personal relationships between colleagues where there is a direct supervision.

Where an intimate or close personal relationship exists (at the time this policy is effective) between a staff member and student or between colleagues where the relationship may give rise to real or perceived conflict of interest or breach of trust or confidentiality, there must be a clear declaration of the relationship. The declaration of the relationship should be made following the process set out in the [University Declaration of Interests Policy](#).

The Policy will be regularly reviewed, and if necessary updated, to ensure it remains effective and aligned with requirements outlined by the Office for Students.

Summary

There is a potential for abuse or the perception of abuse in any intimate or close personal relationships between individuals in unequal positions where one individual is expected to deliver their teaching or supervisory responsibility for the other.

Due to the potential for conflict of interest, exploitation, favouritism or bias, such relationships may undermine the integrity of the supervision or evaluation provided, or may have adverse effects on the working or learning environment for those directly involved, as well as for the broader team and departmental culture.

Relationships in which one party is in a position to evaluate the work or influence the career of the other, may also provide grounds for complaint by third parties when that relationship gives undue access or advantage, restricts opportunities, or simply creates a perception of these problems.

To ensure all staff and students are able to work and study in a safe and supportive environment, the University prohibits close or intimate personal relationships between staff and students.

Where students also undertake work for the university, either voluntarily or have an employment contract, they will be defined as students.

Where staff become enrolled as students during their employment at the University they will be defined for the purposes of this policy as an employee.

When staff and students leave or graduate from the University the policy will no longer apply.

Definitions

Abuse of power – a situation where a relevant staff member exploits a position of power in relation to a student so as to apply pressure in a way which:

- May result in the student doing something, or refraining from doing something, that they may not have otherwise done; and
- that action or inaction could reasonably result in something that falls within the scope of an intimate personal relationship.

Adult at risk – someone over the age of 18 who receives or may need community care services by reasons of disability or illness and as a result of those needs is unable to protect themselves against harm or exploitation. This can relate to physical, mental or psychological wellbeing or the potential to be drawn into sexual or criminal exploitation and activity.

Close personal relationships – a relative or friend, or a relationship where there is a financial dependence.

Consent to an intimate relationship - agreeing by choice and having the freedom and capacity to make that choice. The person seeking consent should always take steps to ensure that consent is freely given, that is informed and recognises that it can be withdrawn at any time.

Freedom to consent – a person is free to make a choice if nothing negative would happen to them if they said no. For example, a person is not free to choose if:

- They are being threatened with violence (by the perpetrator and/or by someone else);
- They are being threatened with humiliation;
- They believe that the continuation or assessment of their studies, or progression or advancement of their career, will be at risk, if they refused;
- They are being blackmailed;
- There is significant power imbalance and the party without power feels pressurised to continue in the relationship against their will.

Capacity to consent – whether someone is not physically and/or mentally able to make a choice and understand the consequences of that choice. For example, a person does not have capacity to give consent if they are asleep or unconscious. A person's capacity to consent may be inhibited by the influence of drugs or alcohol or the presence of a cognitive or learning difficulty, or mental health condition.

Grooming – defined as a gradual process that someone in a position of power uses to manipulate someone to do things they may not be comfortable with and to make them less likely to reject or report abusive behaviour. Grooming will initially start as befriending someone and making them feel special and may result in sexual abuse and/or exploitation.

Intimate relationships – a consensual romantic or sexual relationship which goes beyond the bounds of a platonic or working relationship. It can be brief, and includes a one-off occurrence.

Position of trust – any staff member working closely with children, young people or adults at risk, is in a position of trust.

Relationships with students or staff under the age of 18 or who are an “adult at risk”

Members of staff must not be in, or enter into, an intimate or close personal relationship with a student or staff member under the age of 18, or an adult known or suspected to be at risk. This would not apply to students who are children of staff, or where the staff member has legal responsibility for the student. In these cases, staff must not be in a position of influence.

Staff must not engage in sexual behaviour with someone with whom they are in a position of trust. Whilst a young person can consent to sexual activity once they reach the age of 16, the Sexual Offences Act (2003) makes it a criminal offense for a person to engage in sexual activity of a person under the age of 18, where the adult is in a position of trust.

Anyone suspecting a member of staff of acting inappropriately towards a student or staff member under the age of 18 or an adult at risk should refer to the [University Safeguarding Policy](#) and contact the Principal Safeguarding Officer who may contact the local authority designated officer (LADO) and/or the police.

Relationships between staff and students

The University of Portsmouth prohibits intimate or close personal relationships between staff and students.

Where students also undertake work for the university, either voluntarily or have an employment contract, they will be defined as students.

Where staff become enrolled as students during their employment at the University they will be defined for the purposes of this policy as an employee.

Students on a placement in an external organisation, for example medical students and teaching students, must adhere to any policies on personal relationships within the external organisation.

In the absence of a policy the external organisation students must continue to follow this policy and should not enter into any intimate or close personal relationships with their placement supervisors, any staff or any individual within that organisation who are under the age of 18 or is regarded as an adult at risk.

In order to maintain appropriate relationships with students and to help reduce the risk of sexual misconduct, abuse of power or conflict of interest, staff should:

- Maintain an appropriate physical and emotional distance from students and perform their University duties in the best interests of the University without favour towards any individual student over another student;
- Avoid creating special friendships with students as this may be seen as grooming;
- Ensure that online meetings and communications, use a University email account, University mobile/laptop, University software and applications for all communications. Avoid personal and/or direct messaging through social media;
- Follow the same guidelines, where logistically possible, when participating in fieldwork with a student, attending conferences and any other University activities whilst aware from the usual workplace.

Where staff have a primary role of providing supervision, teaching or pastoral care to students (including personal tutors), staff should;

- Where possible, ensure that any in person meetings and discussions take place on campus or other University approved premises. Where this is not possible, ensure the meeting occurs in a public place or an approved organisation's premises, in the case of placement or exchange visits.
- Refer students with additional support needs to Student Support Services.
- Refrain from contacting students outside of reasonable working hours unless there is an urgent or emergency situation and contact needs to be made immediately.
- Not ask for personal information from a student except as relevant to a University process, for example medical information for special consideration or personal circumstances information as part of an academic process. In all cases GDPR must be followed.

Relationships between members of staff

Relationships between colleagues are permitted at the University, however in order to prevent potential abuse of power or perceived or real conflict of interest, colleagues must declare personal relationships in either of the following situations:

- Where a relationship begins that may give rise to a real or perceived conflict of interest, exploitation, favouritism or bias.
- Where a relationship already exists and a new situation arises that may give rise to a real or perceived conflict of interest, exploitation, favouritism or bias. For example, two staff members in a relationship who work in different departments who now work in the same department. Please refer to section 13 for the declaration process.

Where colleagues are in an intimate or close personal relationship, consideration will be given on how to prevent conflict of interest, breach of confidentiality or unfair advantage gained (or perceived to be gained) from the overlap of a personal and professional relationship. This may include finding alternative line management arrangements.

The line manager will only inform other relevant members of staff about the relationship if the individuals concerned agree. In order to maintain appropriate relationships with colleagues, and help reduce the risk of abuse of power or conflict of interest, staff should:

- Ensure that online meetings and communications, use a University email account, University mobile/laptop, University software and applications for all communications. Avoid personal and/or direct messaging through social media;
- Where possible, ensure that any in person meetings and discussions take place on campus or other University approved premises. Where this is not possible, ensure the meeting occurs in a public place or an approved organisation's premises.
- Establish boundaries between professional and non-professional communication with colleagues and following the same guidelines, where logistically possible, when you and the staff member are participating in fieldwork, conferences and other University activities away from your usual workplace.

Where an intimate or close personal relationship ends it is expected that all parties will continue to conduct themselves in a professional manner and avoid personal disputes which impact on the working environment or other colleagues and students. It may also be appropriate for some of the actions, put in place by the University during the relationship, to continue for a period of time following the end of the relationship. The staff members involved will be consulted and required to comply with reasonable actions.

Inappropriate conduct by students and staff members

Inappropriate conduct towards a student or staff member is not acceptable. The conduct may breach the relevant Code of Conduct Policy, and other relevant University guidance and procedures.

A student or staff member should seek advice immediately if they feel they have been subject to unprofessional or inappropriate conduct from a student or a colleague, by speaking to their Personal Tutor, Line Manager, Head of Department, Executive Dean or Human Resources to ensure appropriate support is provided.

Students who have experienced sexual misconduct are encouraged to contact the University's Student life team for support and guidance, and further information is available on the Guidance and Support section of MyPort.

Declaration of intimate or close personal relationship

All declarations to be made as soon as reasonably practicable and always within one month of the relationship starting. As the data contains sensitive personal data it will be stored securely in Corporate Governance in compliance with GDPR legislation.

Such declarations will be treated respectfully, sensitively and confidentially, and the wishes of both parties respected as far as is possible. Staff should submit the Declaration of Interests Form, via [Hornbill](#) and read the guidance under sections 12 - 18 in the [Declaration of Interests Policy](#).

Breach of policy

An intimate or close personal relationship between a staff member and student is in breach of this policy and will be investigated under the University Disciplinary Policy.

Whilst intimate or close personal relationships between a staff member and a student are prohibited, a student can report and seek support for harassment or sexual misconduct within a relationship with a member of staff should one occur. In this instance, a student would not be penalised by the university for participating in the relationship, and they would be protected from retaliation by the staff member if they reported harassment or sexual misconduct. This does not affect the further application of the Student Conduct Policy if appropriate.

Failure to disclose an intimate or close personal relationship with a colleague or where there is a real or perceived conflict of interest, breach of trust or confidentiality, may be investigated under the University Disciplinary Policy.

Related policies and procedures

[Declaration of Interests Policy](#)

[Safeguarding Policy](#)

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