

## PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS POLICY

### 1. OVERVIEW AND PURPOSE

- 1.1 The University recognises that socialising between members of its community is often a positive aspect of being an active member of the University. However, the University also recognises that there is the potential for abuse of power or conflicts of interests to occur when an intimate or close personal relationship between staff and students or between members of staff exists.
- 1.2 This policy seeks to ensure that appropriate safeguards and processes are in place to protect students and staff from actual or perceived conflicts of interest, and to seek to eliminate circumstances where a position of power or trust may be abused, setting out the University's expectations and requirements regarding specific types of relationships between members of the University community. It also aims to support transparency and provide a clear framework for managing consensual relationships where they occur at the University.
- 1.3 This policy is designed to protect students and staff involved in relationships with other members of the University community from inappropriate behaviour including (but not limited to) violence, sexual misconduct, abuse of power or trust, controlling/coercive and predatory behaviour, and sexual exploitation.
- 1.4 This policy also supports the University's obligations to take proactive action to protect staff under the Worker Protection Act 2023 and to protect students as required by the Office for Students' Condition of Registration (E6), and helps to maintain a positive and supportive working environment in which everyone is treated fairly and in accordance with our Dignity, Respect and Inclusion Policy.

### 2. SCOPE & DEFINITIONS

- 2.1 This policy applies to members of the University community, defined for the purpose of this policy as staff, students, those with honorary or visiting attachments, and members of University Council; for avoidance of doubt, this includes:
  - Academic, Research, Technical, and Professional Services staff, whether permanent, fixed-term, temporary, or casual, and whether in a direct line management position or not – including members of the University's Executive; contract, seconded, and agency staff; volunteers, those employed as apprentices, and interns;
  - Students, i.e. any individual enrolled full-time or part-time on a course of study at the University, including summer schools, short courses, and whilst on placements (n.b. Doctoral Tutors may be considered as staff or students for the purposes of this policy, dependent on the nature of their role and any relevant relationship<sup>1</sup>);

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Doctoral Tutors are members of staff when teaching at Sussex and are PGR students when not. However, PGRs who previously had a teaching contract or might have a teaching contract in the future should follow the

- Others associated with (i.e. performing services for or on behalf of) the University (for example, agents and consultants) and those in partner organisations as part of the wider University community, including those who provide services to the University.

2.2 Please see below for definitions of key words and terms used in this policy:

- 2.2.1 **Abuse of power** occurs where someone uses their position of power or authority in an unacceptable manner. Abuse of power can take various forms and may include, but is not limited to, grooming, manipulation, coercion, putting pressure on others to engage in conduct they do not feel comfortable with.
- 2.2.2 **Close personal relationships** include relatives or close friends (those where there is a significant, non-professional bond, likely to include an emotional connection, frequent interaction, and mutual reliance) or a relationship where there is financial dependence.
- 2.2.3 **Conflict of interest (actual or perceived)** occurs when an employee's personal interests or relationships could compromise (or could be perceived to compromise) their professional judgment or actions, potentially leading to biased decisions or unfair practices.
- 2.2.4 **Direct Responsibility** includes direct or indirect management (such as 'dotted line' reporting relationships, and responsibility for certain aspects of someone's work, such as in project settings), direct or indirect (such as second supervisor, assessor or advisor) academic or clinical supervision, assessing students' work, welfare or pastoral roles or any other professional role or other responsibility which involves a position of trust and/or unequal power.
- 2.2.6 **Intimate relationships** are romantic or sexual relationships which go beyond the bounds of a platonic or working relationship. An intimate relationship could be brief, and could be a one-off occurrence. It can be in person, on or off campus, and/or online or via means of other electronic communication. It includes interactions which arise through meeting via work and those which might arise in other contexts, such as via an app where the participants later become aware they are both members of the Sussex community.
- 2.2.7 **Position of trust:** A position of trust exists when one person holds responsibility, authority, or influence over another within the university setting. Any staff member working closely (including teaching) with children, young people, or with adults at risk of harm, is in a position of trust.

---

same rules as staff in terms of relationships with students or with other Doctoral Tutors. A relationship between two Doctoral Tutors and should be considered a staff-staff relationship, but any other type of relationship between Doctoral Tutors and non teaching students (including PGR students) should be considered staff-student. Supervisors and PGRs, regardless of teaching contract, should be considered a staff-student relationship. Although PGRs are academic researchers in training and should be treated collegially by staff, the power relationship between staff and PGRs should not go unacknowledged. Any relationships declared between staff members and PGRs should be handled with care to acknowledge the power relationship, even in cases where no direct line management or working relationship exists.

### **3. RESPONSIBILITIES**

#### **3.1 University Council**

3.1.1 The University Council is accountable for ensuring compliance with the relevant legislation and regulatory obligations and for the approval of this Policy.

#### **3.2 All members of the University Community (see section 2.1)**

3.2.1 All members of the University community have a responsibility to:

- Read this policy and adhere to it and all relevant procedures and guidance flowing from it, as outlined in this document and as relevant to their roles, including the provisions to declare or report relationships that fall within the scope of this policy; and
- Complete all mandatory in-person and online training associated with this policy and associated procedures and guidance, as required.

#### **3.3 All of those in a position of power and/or trust with staff and/or students**

3.3.1 Staff who are professionally involved in staff and student support, development and supervision (which includes managers, academics and advisers) and all those in a position of power and/or trust with staff and/or students have specific responsibilities for the implementation of this policy to:

- Take the lead in promoting and role modelling expected behaviours to support a culture of dignity, respect, inclusion, free speech and academic freedom, as permitted within the law;
- Implement all relevant guidance and practice to support the requirements of this policy; and
- Take timely, relevant action in accordance with this policy, including declaring, reporting or seeking advice as set out in the policy (which could include reporting to police, local authority, or other relevant body).

#### **3.4 The Vice-Chancellor**

3.4.1 The Vice-Chancellor is responsible for overseeing and ensuring compliance with this policy.

### **4. POLICY**

#### **4.1 General Principles**

4.1.1 In the University environment, there is the potential for abuse of power or conflicts of interests to occur when any intimate or close personal relationship between staff and students or between members of staff exists. This may be particularly so where one individual is expected to discharge their responsibilities, including teaching, supervisory or other professional roles, in relation to the other.

- 4.1.2 As such, these relationships may undermine the integrity of the discharge of those responsibilities, may have adverse effects on the working and learning environment for those directly involved, as well as for others in the University, and for the broader institutional culture.
- 4.1.3 Such relationships could compromise the trust and confidence that underpins the learning experience and may negatively impact the student's educational development and pastoral care and may in some circumstances constitute an actual or perceived abuse of power and/or trust.
- 4.1.4 Close relationships in which one party is in a position to evaluate the work or influence the career or other employment related benefits of the other (or where there is not a management connection but the nature of the roles undertaken result in close working relationships), 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.
- 4.1.5 Those in positions of power and/or trust in respect of interactions with students and staff must demonstrate appropriate behaviour and give due consideration as to what is appropriate conduct in relation to the activities being undertaken.

#### **4.2 Relationships with students or staff under the age of 18**

- 4.2.1 The Sexual Offences Act (2003) makes it a criminal offence for a person to engage in sexual activity of any kind with a person under the age of 18, where the adult is in a position of trust.
- 4.2.2 This policy prohibits any and all intimate relationships with staff or students who are under the age of 18 where the adult is in a position of trust. The onus is on the staff member to comply with this.
- 4.2.3 Anyone suspecting a member of staff in a position of trust of acting inappropriately towards a student or staff member under the age of 18 should report the relationship<sup>2</sup> and should refer to the University's Safeguarding Policy pages.

#### **4.3 Relationships between staff and students (18 years and over)**

- 4.3.1 The trust that exists between a student and a member of staff is a central and essential part of a student's educational development and pastoral care. Those who work for the University must not abuse their position in any way, including (but not limited to): making any form of sexual advance towards students, pressuring students into intimate relationships, engaging in any form of sexual harassment, coercive, controlling or predatory behaviour or any other abuse of power (e.g. promising or alluding to rewards or preferential treatment in return for favours, including those of a sexual kind and/or suggesting or threatening withdrawal of teaching and/or other forms of academic or other support if demands and/or sexual access are not granted by the student).

---

<sup>2</sup> This can be reported via the Procedure for Declaring Personal Relationships.

- 4.3.2 Such behaviour constitutes serious or gross misconduct and will be subject to disciplinary proceedings, the consequence of which can include summary dismissal from the University (i.e. dismissal without notice).
- 4.3.3 A staff member must cease any continued direct supervision or any other responsibility (e.g. for the student's academic studies or personal welfare) where they are in a position of power and/or trust if they are in an intimate relationship with a student or should such a relationship develop.
- 4.3.4 Where any intimate relationship<sup>3</sup> exists or develops between a staff member and student, this must be declared<sup>4</sup> by the staff member immediately so that suitable measures can be taken to ensure that the student is moved from direct supervision or responsibility, where either exists, whether or not the relationship is continuing. The student is also strongly encouraged to report the relationship.<sup>5</sup>
- 4.3.5 Failure to declare a relationship with a student is likely to result in disciplinary action.
- 4.3.6 If a member of staff becomes aware of an intimate relationship between another member of staff and a student, they are expected to report the relationship accordingly.<sup>6</sup>
- 4.3.7 Any member of staff who witnessed or experiences any inappropriate behaviour that falls within the scope of this policy must also report the matter.<sup>7</sup> In addition, they may alert their Executive Dean, Head of School or other relevant senior manager. All reports will be treated in confidence and the staff member's anonymity will be protected wherever possible.
- 4.3.8 If a student experiences or witnesses inappropriate behaviour (as outlined in this policy), they are strongly encouraged to report it.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, they may alert their Academic Adviser, Director of Student Experience, Head of Department or Associate Dean (Education and Students). All such reports will be treated in confidence, and the student's anonymity will be protected wherever possible.
- 4.3.9 Any student who exerts sexual pressure over a member of staff, or who behaves in a coercive or predatory manner towards a member of staff, will be subject to the University's student disciplinary procedure, the consequences of which can include expulsion from the University.
- 4.3.10 University students on a placement or internship in an external organisation (e.g. Medicine, Psychology, Teaching, and Social Work students, or any other student) are expected to adhere to any policies on personal relationships within the external organisation.

---

<sup>3</sup> See 2.2.6 for definition

<sup>4</sup> Declaration should be made via the Procedure for Declaring Personal Relationships.

<sup>5</sup> This can be reported via the Procedure for Declaring Personal Relationships.

<sup>6</sup> This can be reported via the Procedure for Declaring Personal Relationships.

<sup>7</sup> This can be reported via the Procedure for Declaring Personal Relationships.

<sup>8</sup> This can be reported via the Procedure for Declaring Personal Relationships.

- 4.3.11 Where a close personal (but not intimate) relationship exists between a staff member and student, the University's Declaration of Interest process should be followed.

#### **4.4 Staff-staff Relationships**

- 4.4.1 Where an intimate relationship exists between members of staff and there is a direct or indirect supervision arrangement between those members of staff, or one of the members of staff is in a position of power and/or trust in relation to the other, there must be a clear and timely declaration of the relationship, in accordance with the arrangements set out in the Procedure for Declaring Personal Relationships and measures should be put in place to ensure there is no abuse of power, and to prevent any real or perceived conflict of interest, breach of confidentiality or unfair advantage. This may include finding alternative line management arrangements.
- 4.4.2 The relevant members of staff's managers are responsible for considering, implementing, and keeping under review any measures to ensure the requirements of the policy are met, whilst giving consideration to the dignity and privacy of all parties (e.g. sharing personal information only to the extent that it is required for any alternate arrangements to be put in place). The relevant members of staff will be expected to comply with any reasonable decision or action.
- 4.4.3 When such an intimate relationship ends, it is expected that all parties will continue to conduct themselves in a professional manner in the University and avoid personal disputes which impact on the working environment, or other colleagues and students. It may also be appropriate for some of the measures 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 expected to comply with reasonable actions.
- 4.4.4 If any intimate relationships between members of staff give rise to any cause for concern about any predatory or controlling or coercive behaviour, including pressurising others into intimate relationships, or engaging in any form of sexual harassment, this should be reported accordingly.<sup>9</sup> Such behaviour constitutes serious or gross misconduct and will be subject to disciplinary proceedings, the consequence of which can include summary dismissal from the University (i.e. dismissal without notice). The relevant senior manager will liaise with HR to determine the steps that should be taken.
- 4.4.5 Where a close personal (but not intimate) relationship exists between members of staff, the University's Declaration of Interest process should be followed.

#### **4.5 Student-student Relationships**

- 4.5.1 Relationships between students are primarily governed by the University's Dignity, Respect & Inclusion Policy and the Student Code of Conduct. The University strongly encourages the reporting<sup>10</sup> of any associated concerns (e.g. the presence of coercive

---

<sup>9</sup> This can be reported via the Procedure for Declaring Personal Relationships.

<sup>10</sup> Reports can be made via Student Discipline or Report + Support

or abusive behaviour, intimidation, sexual misconduct, etc.). The University will treat such reports with the utmost seriousness. A failure to comply with the Dignity, Respect & Inclusion Policy and the Student Code of Conduct may constitute a breach of Regulation 2 (Student Discipline).

#### **4.6 Breach of policy**

- 4.6.1 An intimate relationship between a staff member and a student or colleague who is under the age of 18, where the adult is in a position of trust, is a breach of this policy and will be investigated under the staff disciplinary procedure.
- 4.6.2 Failure to disclose an intimate relationship with a student or a colleague as required by the policy may be investigated under the staff disciplinary procedure.
- 4.6.3 Inappropriate behaviour, as set out in sections 4.3.9 and 4.4.5, may be investigated under the relevant staff or student disciplinary procedure.

### **5. LEGISLATION AND GOOD PRACTICE**

#### **5.1 Worker Protection Act 2023**

The Worker Protection Act introduced a new legal duty for employers to take proactive measures to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace. This includes harassment from colleagues and third parties like customers, including students.

#### **5.2 Office for Students Condition of Registration (E6).**

The E6 condition regulates how higher education institutions in England prevent and address harassment and sexual misconduct. It aims to create safer environments for students by establishing clear requirements for handling these issues. It addresses the need for institutions to take significant and credible steps to protect students from behaviour that may amount to harassment and/or sexual misconduct.

#### **5.3 Sexual Offences Act 2003.**

The Sexual Offences Act provides the legal framework surrounding sexual offences. It provides definitions and aims to strengthen the protection of individuals from sexual offenders.

## Review / Contacts / References

Policy title:	Personal Relationships Policy
Date approved:	18 July 2025
Approving body:	Council
Last review date:	April 2021
Revision history:	May 2025
Next review date:	01 August 2028
Related internal policies, procedures, guidance:	<p>Procedure for Declaring Intimate Relationships</p> <p><a href="#">Registration and declaration of interests</a></p> <p><a href="#">Safeguarding</a></p> <p><a href="#">Dignity, Respect and Inclusion Policy</a></p> <p><a href="#">Student Code of Conduct</a></p> <p><a href="#">Regulation 2 (Student Discipline)</a></p> <p><b>Staff Disciplinary Procedure</b></p> <p><b>Guidance on setting and maintaining professional boundaries (to be developed)</b></p>
Division:	Human Resources
Policy Owner:	Executive Director of HR
Point of Contact:	Head of Employee Policy & Relations