



University of  
St Andrews

## Personal relationships at work

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## 1. Statement

- 1.1 All academic, research, and professional services staff, as well as postgraduate teaching assistants and student mentors, hold positions of trust within the University and are expected to uphold the highest standards of conduct. Even well-intentioned actions can be misinterpreted which could lead to a complaint and formal investigation so staff must exercise careful judgment regarding appropriate behaviour and environments in the context of their roles.
- 1.2 The University recognises that social interactions, between colleagues, and between staff and students, can be a positive and enriching part of university life. However, the power dynamics inherent in these relationships bring particular responsibilities and risks, including potential conflicts of interest, misuse of authority, or perceived bias.

## 2. Purpose

- 2.1 This policy aims to:
- 2.1.1 Define and manage conflicts of interest that arise from personal relationships in the workplace.
  - 2.1.2 Promote professional standards and safeguard integrity, particularly where power dynamics exist.
  - 2.1.3 Protect staff and students by preventing the misuse of authority, sexual misconduct, or perceived bias.
  - 2.1.4 Provide clear procedures for disclosure, mitigation, and resolution of conflicts linked to personal relationships. Refer to the [Declaration of conflicts of interest policy](#) for the definition of a conflict of interest.
- 2.2 In situations where personal and professional boundaries overlap, staff may be required to step back from certain duties or decisions to protect both their integrity and that of the institution. The University definition of a personal, professional and working relationship is confirmed in [Appendix A](#). Where disclosures regarding personal relationships are made, these will be handled sensitively and confidentially.

## 3. Scope / jurisdiction

- 3.1 This policy applies to all employees, including:
- 3.1.1 Affiliations (e.g. honorary/emeritus)

- 3.1.2 Students on work placements and those who have an employment contract at the University
- 3.1.3 Temporary workers (e.g., bank workers, agency workers, GTAs, other casual workers)
- 3.1.4 Third parties not directly employed by the University (e.g., external contractors, consultants, auditors, suppliers, visiting scholars, students)
- 3.2 Whilst it is understood that third parties are not explicitly covered by this policy as they are not employed by the University, we do still expect employees to report conflicts of interest with third parties.
- 3.3 Where an individual has a student role that includes some employee responsibilities (e.g. postgraduate research students who teach or have wardenial and pastoral care duties), then this policy shall apply.
- 3.4 This policy applies in the course of employment including, but not limited to business trips, external conferences or workshops, sporting events, commutes to and from work and work-related social events.
- 3.5 This policy applies equally to remote, hybrid, and virtual settings and online interactions including, but are not limited to email, messaging platforms, video calls, and other digital communications, where professional boundaries must be maintained to the same standard as in-person interactions.

## **4. Relationships between employees**

- 4.1 Personal relationships between employees will normally pose no conflict of interest unless there is a professional or working relationship between those individuals.
- 4.2 It is understood that employees may develop close, personal friendships with individuals in the University. If employees have a professional or working relationship with someone that they consider to be a close, personal friend, they must ensure that their friendship with the individual does not impact, or appear to impact, the ability to perform their role.
- 4.3 Where a personal relationship exists or develops between employees in a line management or supervisory relationship, the individuals involved must not participate in decisions that could give rise to an actual or perceived conflict of interest until such time that the conflict can be mitigated. This includes, but not limited to, involvement in:
  - 4.3.1 Recruitment and selection
  - 4.3.2 Allocation of research grants or funding

- 4.3.3 Performance development or appraisal
- 4.3.4 Investigative or disciplinary proceedings
- 4.3.5 Approval of expenses
- 4.3.6 Any other management or supervisory activity or decision-making process involving the other party.

4.4 **This list is not exhaustive and is intended to provide illustrative examples of activities where conflict of interest may arise.**

4.5 Employees **must** declare any personal relationship that poses an actual or potential conflict of interest as soon as it is known following the procedure confirmed in [section 8](#). Employees should also be mindful of their interactions at work and comply with the employee responsibilities outlined in [section 6](#).

## 5. Relationships between employees and students

5.1 While the University respects the personal lives and relationships of its employees, **it does not support and advises against** engaging in personal relationships, including forming close, personal friendships with any student regardless of whether there is any professional responsibility or not. Such relationships are **strongly discouraged** due to the inherent risks associated with the unequal power balance, which may have the effect of disrupting the teaching and learning environment, and impact on other students and employees. It also involves risks to the employees and students involved. It is, therefore, the University's obligation to balance the right to a private life with its responsibility to safeguard the welfare of both staff and students.

5.2 Where a personal relationship exists or develops between an employee and a student, the individuals involved must not participate in any academic or professional activities involving the student that could give rise to a real or perceived conflict of interest. This includes, but is not limited to, involvement in:

- 5.2.1 Teaching and assessing
- 5.2.2 Supervising
- 5.2.3 Tutoring
- 5.2.4 Coaching, mentoring or personal development
- 5.2.5 Invigilating
- 5.2.6 Management of personal data (i.e. MMS records)

- 5.2.7 Admission decisions
- 5.2.8 Pastoral care and/or wellbeing or mental health support
- 5.2.9 Any other academic or professional activity or decision-making process involving the other party.

5.3 **This list is not exhaustive and is intended to provide illustrative examples of activities where conflict of interest may arise.**

5.4 Employees **must** declare any personal relationship that poses an actual or potential conflict of interest as soon as it becomes known following the procedure confirmed in [section 8](#). Employees should also be mindful of their interactions at work and comply with the employee responsibilities outlined in [section 6](#) and [section 7](#).

## 6. Employee responsibilities

6.1 The University expects all employees to uphold the highest professional standards and maintain appropriate boundaries in their interactions with employees, students and other third parties. The University upholds a zero-tolerance approach to unwanted behaviours, which include, but not limited to, sexual misconduct, sexual harassment and abuse of power. Unwanted behaviours are outlined in the [Dignity and Respect at work policy](#).

6.2 As such, employees are expected to:

- 6.2.1 Disclose any personal relationships that may create an actual or perceived conflict of interest in accordance with the procedures outlined in [section 8](#) without unreasonable delay.
- 6.2.2 Be mindful of interactions that may blur professional boundaries and take reasonable steps to maintain a professional tone in all engagements.
- 6.2.3 Avoid decisions that could give rise to an actual or perceived conflict of interest regarding the other party as outlined in section [4.3](#) (employees) and [5.2](#) (students).
- 6.2.4 Conduct themselves responsibly and keep all workplace interactions professional and respectful.
- 6.2.5 Avoid public displays of affection or other behaviours that may make others uncomfortable or affect team dynamics.
- 6.2.6 Respect confidentiality and not share confidential or work-related information with the person that they are not entitled to access.

- 6.2.7 Ensure actions do not result in, or appear to result in, preferential or detrimental treatment of the individual or others. It is essential that all employees and students are treated consistently and fairly.
- 6.2.8 Cooperate fully with any mitigation plans made by the University to manage the conflict of interest as outlined in [section 8.2](#).
- 6.2.9 Be honest and transparent if questioned about the relationship during any HR (or other University) process.

## 7. Employee responsibilities when engaging with students

7.1 When engaging with students in any capacity, employees must recognise the inherent position of trust they hold. Employees should remain conscious of the power imbalance in student-staff relationships and ensure all interactions are professional, respectful, and non-intimidating. It is the employee's professional and ethical duty to act in the best interests of students. As such, in addition to [section 6](#), employees are required to:

- 7.1.1 **Maintain appropriate physical and emotional boundaries with students.** This includes:
  - a. Avoiding the formation of special or preferential friendships.
  - b. Refraining from engaging in one-on-one social contact with students outside of normal work hours. (Group activities involving both staff and students, such as research team outings are permitted where appropriate professional boundaries are maintained).
  - c. Avoiding physical gestures of comfort (e.g. hugging), even when a student appears upset or distressed.
  - d. Ensuring meetings or discussions take place on campus or in University-approved public spaces such as cafés or libraries.
  - e. Avoid using personal devices, including personal email addresses, contact numbers, instant messaging or social media channels for private or informal communication with students. (Professional use of platforms such as LinkedIn or Instagram for networking, programme promotion or employability initiatives is permitted, provided appropriate boundaries are maintained).
- 7.1.2 **Set clear expectations regarding confidentiality.** Employees should inform students that they cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality when personal information is disclosed. If a student

discloses information that raises concern, the employee should report the matter to [Student Services](#).

**7.1.3 Be particularly mindful of students who may be vulnerable or appear to require extra support.** Employees should not:

- a. Give or receive gifts or loans of money.
- b. Offer or accept accommodation to or from a student.
- c. Share living arrangements or rent property to or from a student where a professional relationship exists.
- d. If an employee believes a student needs support that falls outside their professional remit or would significantly alter the nature of the student-staff relationship, they should refer the student to [Student Services](#) for appropriate support.

**7.1.4** Understand that under the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009, it is a criminal offence for an adult in a position of trust (e.g. lecturer, mentor, supervisor, line manager) to engage in sexual activity with a person under the age of 18. The University deems any sexual contact by an employee with a student under the age of 18 as gross misconduct and will be subject to investigation which may lead to disciplinary action. Definitions of a position of trust are outline in [Appendix A](#).

**7.2** Research students will not be permitted to undertake study under the supervision of an employee with whom they have a personal relationship.

## **8. Procedures**

### **8.1 Declaring a personal relationship**

**8.1.1** Employees are required to disclose any existing or newly formed personal relationships involving a student, another employee or third party that may give rise to an actual or potential conflict of interest, misuse of power, or unfair bias.

**8.1.2** If an employee is, or due to be, in a professional or working relationship with an individual with whom they have a personal relationship (as defined in [Appendix A](#)), they must:

- a. Inform their line manager, Head of School/Unit (or appropriate other) as soon as the relationship becomes known. This information will be handled in the strictest confidence and shared only on a need-to-know basis.

- b. Follow the process outlined in the [Declaration of Conflicts of Interests policy](#), which includes completing a [Declaration of Interest form](#) and submitting it to their line manager, Head of School/Unit (or appropriate other), and [HRBP](#). A record of the declaration will be held on file, confidentially.
  - c. Refrain from engaging in any managerial, supervisory, academic or professional work-related tasks involving the individual until the person responsible for assessing the conflict of interest has reviewed the situation, consulted with the HRBP, and taken suitable action to manage the actual or potential conflict.
- 8.1.3 Prospective applicants and new joiners will be asked to declare any existing personal relationships with the University that could, or be perceived, to cause a conflict of interest.
- 8.1.4 If an individual becomes aware of a situation where a personal relationship may be overlapping with a professional or working relationship, they are encouraged to report this to their line manager or Head of School/Unit (or appropriate other). Allegations made in bad faith or considered vexatious will be investigated, and if found to be substantiated, may result in disciplinary action against the employee.
- 8.1.5 If an employee has a concern involving someone who is in a personal relationship with the person they would normally report the issue to (e.g., their line manager's spouse), they should raise the matter with an alternative appropriate contact such as an [HR Business Partner](#) or another line manager. The University does not expect employees to raise concerns directly with individuals involved in such relationships.
- 8.1.6 Where individuals are uncertain whether a personal interaction, such as an emerging friendship, a previous relationship, or informal online contact, may give rise to a conflict of interest, they are encouraged to seek guidance from their line manager, Head of School/Unit (or appropriate other), or [HR](#) and to err on the side of disclosure to ensure transparency and institutional integrity.
- 8.1.7 Following a declaration of a personal relationship, it will be assumed that the relationship will remain current unless otherwise indicated.

## 8.2 **Receiving a personal relationship disclosure**

- 8.2.1 The [Declaration of conflicts of interest policy](#) outlines the responsibilities of those receiving a conflict of interest disclosure. In summary, the designated individual, typically the line manager and Head of School/Unit, must consult with the [HRBP](#) (in personal

relationship matters) and assess the situation to determine whether an actual or perceived conflict of interest exists. If such a conflict is identified, the line manager and Head of School/Unit (or appropriate other) must:

- a. **Develop a mitigation plan** to ensure the employee does not directly manage or supervise the other individual, in line with S4.3 (for employees) and S5.2 (for students). Mitigation measures may include (but are not limited to):
  - I. Reassigning one or both parties to a different area of the University.
  - II. Arranging for the student or employee to report or to be supervised by someone unconnected to the relationship.
  - III. Adjusting duties to remove sole responsibility for the individual's work or study as outlined in [4.3](#) (employees) and [5.2](#) (students).
- b. **Communicate the mitigation plan clearly to the employee**, verbally and in writing and set periodic review dates.
- c. **Submit the mitigation plan** to the [HRBP](#) to ensure the plan is stored securely in the employee's electronic file.

8.2.2 All action will be undertaken in consultation with the individuals involved. However, if the situation raises legal concerns, or constitutes a potential disciplinary matter, the University reserves the right to take direct and immediate action.

8.2.3 Where a conflict of interest cannot be effectively mitigated despite all efforts, the University reserves the right to act which may include the termination of employment. Any such decision would be taken as a last resort in circumstances where no other course of action is reasonably open to the University and where the situation justifies such action.

## 9. Non-compliance

9.1 Where agreed mitigation measures are not adhered to, this may be addressed under the University's [Disciplinary procedure](#).

9.2 Failure to disclose a relevant personal relationship in accordance with the procedures outlined in the [Declarations of conflicts of interest policy](#) may be treated as a disciplinary matter and may constitute a breach of trust.

- 9.3 Any breach of the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009, as referenced in S7.1 (d) will result in the University reporting the matter to the Police.
- 9.4 Employees involved in a personal relationship with another employee or student must not share confidential work-related information with that individual. Any such breach may also be treated as a disciplinary matter.

## 10. Support

- 10.1 The University offers a confidential Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), which is available to all employees to support with personal problems that can affect work life, home life, and general wellbeing. The service also gives free access to a digital Health and Wellbeing App which gives support and guidance on a wide range of resources on physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, work and productivity, movement sleep, financial wellbeing, nutrition, hydration and energy. Contact details and how to register can be found on the [EAP website](#).
- 10.2 Employees have access to the [Staff Wellbeing webpage](#) which offers support on various matters.
- 10.3 For internal support, [contact HR](#) or where an employee is a member of a [Trade Union](#), they can reach out to their representative for support and guidance.

## 11. Version control

- 11.1 This policy is not contractual and may be amended by the University from time to time. This policy may be reviewed in the light of operational experience, sector developments and changing organisational needs. As and when a full review is undertaken, trade union and representative partners will be consulted in line with the [Policy Working Group Terms of Reference](#).
- 11.2 Any questions employees have about matters raised in this policy should be raised with their [HRBP](#). Any work-related issues should be addressed directly with their line manager or Head of School/Unit.
- 11.3 Any feedback on the policy content should be directed in the first instance to the [HR Policy Officer](#) or via the [HR Feedback Form](#).

<b>Version number</b>	<b>Purpose or changes</b>	<b>Document status</b>	<b>Author of changes, role and School or unit</b>	<b>Date</b>
1.0	Migration of policy to the Governance Zone.	Published	Lisa Stewart, HR	19/06/2019
1.1	Amendments to section 5.4	Published	Lisa Stewart HR	06/04/2020
1.2	Change to review date only.	Published	Lisa Stewart HR	19/04/2022
1.3	Amendment to the procedures section to include the line manager in the notification process.  New form to declare a personal relationship. New section (8): Concerns of inappropriate conduct/behaviour	Published	Lisa Stewart HR	27/06/2024
1.4	Amending the expiry date only to coincide with policy review consultation dates.	Published	Lisa Stewart HR	17/12/2024
1.5	Personal relationships policy has been reviewed and updated in consultation from Trade Unions representatives and relevant staff committees.	Published	Lisa Stewart HR	19/02/2026

## Appendix A: Definitions

<p><b>Personal relationship</b></p>	<p><b>A personal relationship includes, but is not limited to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Romantic, intimate, sexual and/or exclusive relationships</li> <li>• Family relationship including (but not limited to) children, spouse or civil partner, parents, and siblings.</li> <li>• Business, commercial or financial relationships</li> <li>• Relationships involving a strong emotional attachment</li> </ul> <p><b>A personal relationship is considered to exist if it:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Predated on or both parties joining the University</li> <li>• Arose during the course of study, employment, or a work assignment at the University, or</li> <li>• Was a previous relationship, whether brief or long-term</li> </ul> <p>This definition is not exhaustive. Any individual who believes they may be in a situation that could present an actual or potential conflict of interest should make a disclosure in accordance with the procedures outlined in the <a href="#">Declaration of conflicts of interest policy</a>.</p>
<p><b>Professional relationship</b></p>	<p>A professional relationship exists where one individual has a direct academic, managerial, or supervisory role in relation to another. This includes responsibilities such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessing, supervising, tutoring, recruitment and selection, teaching, or line managing.</li> <li>• Providing pastoral support, mentoring, coaching, or training.</li> </ul> <p>Examples include a line manager, lecturer, academic advisor, or any role involving decision-making authority over another individual.</p>
<p><b>Working relationship</b></p>	<p>A working relationship refers to situations where individuals in a personal relationship do not hold a formal professional role in relation to each other but may still be required to interact in a work context. This could give rise to actual or perceived conflicts of interest, misuse of power, or bias.</p>

	<p><b>Examples include:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer-to-peer relationships where collaboration on work-related matters is required.</li> <li>• Staff-student relationships where the employee has access to sensitive information, such as student expenses or bursary details.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Position of trust</b></p>	<p>A position of trust is established when an individual (typically a student) is receiving education at a further or higher education institution, and another individual (typically an employee) has a role that involves responsibility for them.</p> <p>Under Section 43(5) of the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009, a person is considered to be “looked after” when someone regularly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cares for</li> <li>• Teaches</li> <li>• Trains</li> <li>• Supervises</li> <li>• Is in sole charge of them</li> </ul>