# Personal Relationships Policy

# Staff

## Introduction

The University of Aberdeen recognises that close personal relationships will exist between members of its staff from time to time and respects the right of all its staff to a private life. This policy does not prohibit staff from having a personal relationship with a work colleague but applies where a personal relationship between staff has the potential to interfere with work and/or work relationships.

This policy provides guidance to ensure that professional boundaries are maintained and to reduce the opportunity for conflicts of interest to arise, real or perceived, which could disrupt the working environment. Any abuse of power, exploited consent, sexual misconduct, bias, favouritism, harassment, or victimisation in respect of personal relationships will not be tolerated within the University community.

This policy also supports an environment which facilitates and encourages the prompt reporting of inappropriate behaviour. The Dignity at Work and Study Policy underpins the content of this policy as does the Staff Code of Conduct.

## Scope

This policy is applicable to all staff and students within the University, regardless of whether those involved in a personal relationship work within the same team, department, office or geographical location. If staff are also undertaking a course of study at this University, they will be treated as a member of staff for the purposes of this policy. PGR students who are employed temporarily as staff, including demonstrators, are normally covered under this policy as staff for the duration of their employment. However, in the event that a PGR student is in a relationship with a member of staff, the PGR student will be classed as student for the purposes of this policy.

## Definitions

The personal relationships which are covered by this policy include but are not limited to:

**Family** – family relationships, including where people are or were married, in civil partnerships or living together.

**Social** – close family friends or close personal friendships which may involve frequent engagement in activities unrelated to the workplace or study.

**Financial/Business** – these include where one party is dependent upon another, e.g. landlord/tenant relationship.

**Intimate** – any one off or ongoing emotional, romantic or sexual relationship which goes beyond the bounds of a normal working or social relationship. For the avoidance of doubt relationships involving marriage, civil partnership or co-habitation would always be considered intimate for the purposes of this policy. This applies whether the relationship is conducted in person or remotely, for example via social media, e-mail or text messaging.

The following issues and definitions are relevant to the content of this policy:

**Abuse of power** – this is where someone, regardless of their protected characteristics, uses their position of power or authority in a manner which would be deemed unacceptable by any reasonable person looking at the facts. Power could be abused by someone who is in a more senior position, or where a significant age differential is a factor, or by someone who holds a position of trust. Abuse of power can take many forms and may include issues such as grooming, coercion, predatory behaviour or putting pressure onto someone to engage in conduct they do not feel comfortable with. An abuse of power can also result in less favourable treatment following the breakdown of a relationship.

**Consent** – having the capacity and freedom of informed choice to enable someone to agree to something willingly. True consent can be withdrawn at any time without the threat of anything negative happening.

**Exploited Consent** – consent which appears to be freely given but would not have been given if one party did not hold a particular position of trust, power or authority.

**Sexual Misconduct[[1]](#footnote-1)** - unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature that:

a) has the purpose, or may reasonably be considered to have the effect, of violating a person’s dignity, or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for a colleague; or

b) is an abuse of power over a colleague; or

c) is more or less favourable treatment of someone because they have rejected or submitted to such behaviour – through any medium, including online.

Even if the behaviour is not expressly unwanted, this would still be regarded as sexual misconduct if points b) or c) apply.

The definitions above are not intended to be exhaustive. If you are unsure if this policy applies to a personal relationship please seek guidance from HR.

## Policy

### 4.1 Vulnerable Status

4.1.1 Under the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009, staff must not engage in sexual activity with someone under 18 where they are in a ‘position of trust’ as defined by the legislation. This includes anyone who cares for, teaches, trains, supervises or is in sole charge of the young person in question.

4.1.2 Staff must also not enter into an intimate relationship with anyone known or suspected to be a vulnerable (protected) adult at risk. Adults at risk are defined within the Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007, as adults who meet all three of the following criteria:

- they are unable to safeguard their own well-being, property, rights or other interests

- they are at risk of harm; and

- because they are affected by disability, mental disorder, illness or physical or mental infirmity, are more vulnerable to be harmed than adults who are not.

4.1.3 Anyone suspecting a member of staff of acting inappropriately towards a member of staff under the age of 18, or a vulnerable adult at risk should contact the relevant Designated Safeguarding Contact. Further details regarding this matter can be found in the [University’s Safeguarding Policy](https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/documents/policy-zone-employment/SafeguardingPolicy.pdf).

### Relationships between Staff

* + 1. Relationships between staff members may have no impact on work or work relationships at all. However, in some cases, personal relationships between staff, or their breakdown, can negatively impact the morale or function of a department and/or lead to other issues and concerns including but not limited to:

1. real or perceived favouritism, bias, unfair treatment or impropriety;
2. real or perceived conflict of interest;
3. increased legal risk particularly relating to discrimination or harassment; and
4. negative impact on reputation or public perception of the University or its staff.
   * 1. Staff are therefore required to declare any relationship with another member of staff which could reasonably give rise to an issue or concern as outlined in 4.2.1 above.
     2. Relationships between staff members where one party supervises the other must in all cases be declared by the supervisor.
     3. Where staff are not required to make a declaration, in the event that an unforeseen conflict of interest arises e.g. in a recruitment process, their Line Manager needs to be made aware of the conflict as soon as possible.
     4. Staff must make a declaration required under this policy to their line manager at the very earliest opportunity and within 1 month of the commencement of any relationship. Alternatively, the member of staff may inform their HR Partner. Any information declared will be treated sensitively and, as far as possible, in confidence. However, arrangements put in place to avoid a conflict of interest may have to be brought to the attention of line management.
     5. Any member of staff declaring a relationship will have to complete a “Personal Relationships Declaration Form” (Appendix 1).
     6. The line manager may have to make alternative arrangements to avoid the concerns outlined in this policy which may include ensuring that staff are not involved in specific processes which involve the other member of staff concerned. These include but are not limited to:

* Recruitment and selection
* Appointments
* Job evaluation and grading
* Annual reviews
* Promotion/Regrading
* Training and Development
* Redundancy
* Grievance or Disciplinary
  + 1. When considering alternative arrangements, or adjustments, there should be no assumption that these will be applied to the more junior member of staff in the relationship, which could be indirectly discriminatory.

### Pre-existing Relationships

* + 1. In the event that someone in a personal relationship with a staff member joins the University as a member of staff, and it could reasonably give rise to an issue or concern as outlined in 4.2.1 above, the member of staff is responsible for declaring the relationship at the earliest opportunity, and in any case prior to the new member of staff commencing employment.
    2. Any staff member who has a personal relationship with another member of staff which could reasonably give rise to an issue or concern as outlined in 4.2.1 above must declare the relationship within 1 month of this policy being published.

### Professional Conduct

4.4.1 At all times, staff are expected to maintain boundaries between their professional and personal life. Where a personal relationship between staff exists, it is the responsibility of both parties to behave in a professional manner in respect of that relationship.

### Breach of Policy

* + 1. It is wholly and always unacceptable for staff to form, or attempt to form, a relationship based on an implicit or explicit promise of preferential treatment, or a threat of detrimental treatment. This behaviour may result in disciplinary action up to and including dismissal.
    2. If any member of staff 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 have been adversely affected by a misuse of power, authority or conflict of interest they are encouraged to contact their HR Partner or Line Manager. Alternatively, this can be reported via the [Online Reporting Tool](https://www.abdn.ac.uk/about/inclusive/support/support.php) on the university website.
    3. If any member of staff has concerns about a relationship which falls under the scope of this policy in respect of it being non-consensual, from the beginning or later on, e.g. the dynamic changes or one party maintains unnecessary or unwelcome contact after the relationship has ended, the individual is encouraged to discuss this with their HR Partner. Alternatively, this can be reported via the [Online Reporting Tool](https://www.abdn.ac.uk/about/inclusive/support/support.php) on the university website.
    4. Failure to declare relationships which fall under the scope of this policy, is likely to be treated as a disciplinary matter and may result in disciplinary action up to and including dismissal.

5.0Related Policies

The following policies are related to the topics covered by the Personal Relationship Policy:

Dignity at Work and Study Policy

Addressing GBV and Sexual Harassment Policy

Safeguarding Policy

Staff Code of Conduct

Staff Disciplinary Policy

Staff Grievance Policy

# Appendix 1 - Personal Relationships Declaration Form (Staff:Staff Relationships)

## SECTION A: TO BE COMPLETED BY STAFF

This form should be completed in accordance with the Personal Relationship Policy

Please complete this form and send it securely to your HR Partner/Head of School or Director. Both parties must complete their own form.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Your Details: |  |
| Name |  |
| Line Manager |  |
| Position, School and Dept |  |
|  |  |
| Other party’s details: |  |
| Name |  |
| Position, School and Dept |  |
|  |  |
| Nature of Relationship: *(Please state whether the relationship is of a close personal nature, for example a close friend or relative, or an intimate/potentially intimate relationship. If the relationship is of a close personal nature please confirm the type of relationship e.g. mother, cousin etc.* | |
|  | |
| If this is an intimate/romantic relationship, when did it start (approximate month/year) |  |
| **I understand the following:**  1. It may be necessary for permanent or temporary adjustments to be made to any supervisory arrangements or other conditions, to remove any real or perceived conflict of interest arising from the relationship.  2. This information will be stored securely and managed in compliance with data protection legislation.  3. I have read and understood the Personal Relationships Policy  Signed (electronic signature):  Print Name:  Date: | |

Staff should submit the completed form to your HR Business Partner who will discuss the form with your line manager and/or Head of School/Director and with you if necessary.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| SECTION B: To be completed by the HR Partner in conjunction with the Head of School or Line Manager and employee for staff declarations. | |
| **Has this relationship been declared within 1 months** | | Y/N | |
| If no, why not? | | | |
| **Is action or a conflict of interest management plan required?** | | Y/N | |
| **Reasons for recommended plan** | | | |
| **Details of action /plan** | | | |

Electronic Signature:

Print Name:

Job title:

Date:

HR Business Partner to upload this form securely to the employee’s personal file.

Head of School/Line Manager to store this form securely.

| Title | Personal Relationships Policy - Staff |
| --- | --- |
| Author / Creator | Human Resources |
| Owner | Director People |
| Date published / approved | Approved PNCC May 2024 |
| Version | 1 |
| Date for Next Review | December 2025 |
| Audience | All Staff |
| Related | Dignity at Work & Study Policy, Disciplinary Policy, Grievance Policy, Staff Code of Conduct, Addressing GBV and Sexual Harassment Policy, Safeguarding Policy. |
| Subject / Description | Details of University policy and procedure regarding staff relationships |
| Equality Impact Assessment | TBC |
| Section | Human Resources |
| Theme | Employment |
| Keywords | HR, Staff, Relationships, Conflict of Interest, Harassment, Dignity, Abuse of power, sexual misconduct |

1. Based on Changing the culture: tackling staff-to-student sexual misconduct. Universities UK, February 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)