University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Personal Relationships

Document name	Personal Relationships Policy
Subject	The University approach to personal relationships involving staff and between staff and students.
Approving authority	UEB (Tier 1), People and Culture Committee
Accountable person	Chief People Officer
Responsible Team	Human Resources
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1) Introductory Purpose & Background

At the University of Nottingham (**"**University**"**), it is recognised that personal relationships are a natural and important part of life and work. This policy is designed to support staff and students in navigating personal relationships within the workplace in a way that sustains a culture of mutual respect, trust, and professionalism. It provides a practical framework to help staff manage such relationships transparently and appropriately, clarifying expectations and signposting relevant procedures to foster a culture of accountability.

This policy aligns with the University's commitment to inclusivity, equality, and the safeguarding of all individuals within its community. It also reflects the University's legal and ethical responsibilities, including compliance with the Office for Students' E6 Condition on Harassment and Sexual Misconduct regarding intimate relationships between staff and students. Additionally, it supports the University's duty under the Worker Protection Act 2023 to safeguard employees from sexual harassment.

The purpose of this policy is to:

- Support positive, professional interactions among staff and between staff and students.
- Protect staff and students from real or perceived conflicts of interest.
- Prevent abuse of power and ensure that consent is freely given and respected.
- Clarify the expectations for staff conduct, including:
    - Avoiding any abuse of their position of power, trust or authority.
    - Maintaining professional boundaries, especially with those under their responsibility and trust.
    - Acting fairly, without bias, favouritism, harassment or victimisation.
- Promote a safe and respectful environment where concerns about inappropriate behaviour can be raised and addressed with confidence.
- Uphold the University's reputation as a safe, equitable, and welcoming place to work and study.

In professional and academic settings, the quality of relationships between staff members, as well as between staff and students, plays a critical role in shaping the University's culture and effectiveness. By offering clear guidance, this policy helps ensure that personal relationships enhance, rather than hinder, the professional standards and educational integrity the University strives to maintain.

This policy should be read alongside the Dignity at Nottingham Policy and the University values.

This policy is not contractual and may be subject to change. Major amendments will only be made following consultation with the University's recognised trade unions.

2) Scope

This policy applies to all staff and students at the University of Nottingham UK and addresses personal relationships, including intimate and close relationships (as defined in section 3) involving staff members, as well as relationships between staff members and students. The University of

Nottingham Ningbo China and the University of Nottingham Malaysia have their own respective policies.

For the purposes of this policy:

- "Staff" means University employees and individuals engaged as casual workers by the University.

- “Student” refers to an individual from the point at which they are registered for study with the University of Nottingham, including the University of Nottingham Online. It covers all students studying at, living on, on placement at or visiting the UK campuses. It includes students at all levels of study (e.g. undergraduate, postgraduate, or on apprenticeship programmes), whether they are studying full-time, part time or as a distance learner and if they are registered as a University of Nottingham student but studying elsewhere (e.g. Lincoln Medical School). It also covers the Students’ Union (SU) Sabbatical Officers during their period of office. It encompasses students who have interrupted their studies, or who have been temporarily suspended, or excluded, or have their thesis pending.

The principles outlined in section 4.3.1, including its sub-sections, regarding personal relationships between staff and students should be followed by third parties such as volunteers (including student volunteers), associates, secondees, placement providers, employees and students from University of Nottingham Ningbo China and University of Nottingham Malaysia who are working or studying at, or visiting, the UK campuses. This also applies to contractors and subcontractors. The individual or department engaging with external individuals or agencies is responsible for ensuring they are aware of this policy.

Students employed at the University alongside their studies are considered staff when performing their job duties. If they have direct responsibilities (as defined in section 3) for one or more students, they will be regarded as staff in relation to those students. Similarly, staff members who study at the University alongside their employment are considered students in their studies but remain staff in all other contexts.

While the University does not seek to regulate student relationships without staff involvement, coercive, harassing or predatory behaviour towards another student or staff member, may be subject to action under the Student Code of Conduct (non-academic).

3 Definitions

Abuse of power	Where someone exploits 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.
Close personal relationship	A relative or close friend, or a relationship where there is financial dependence.
Conflict of interest	A circumstance in which a reasonable person would consider that an individual’s ability to apply judgment or act in the course of their duties as a member of the University is, or could be, impaired or influenced by another interest that they hold.
Direct Responsibility	Staff have direct responsibility for a student when engaging in the following activities:

	• Recruitment and selection • Teaching (formal and informal) • Supervision (formal and informal) • Assessment • Welfare or pastoral support beyond signposting • Personal tutoring • Coaching and mentoring • Addressing student complaints or conduct issues • Considering extenuating circumstances • Issuing references • Awarding bursaries, grants and funding This list highlights key areas of responsibility but is not exhaustive. Staff should remain mindful of potential conflicts of interest in any relevant situation.
Excluded relationships	Any intimate personal relationship between a staff member and a student, where the staff member has direct responsibility for the student, that existed either before this policy was implemented and is still ongoing, or before the staff member assumed direct responsibility for that student. Individuals in such relationships are required to adhere to section 4.3.1.3.
Exploited consent	Consent which appears to have been freely given but would not have been given if one party did not hold a particular position of trust, power or authority.
Freedom to consent	For consent to be present, the individual must freely engage in the act. Consent is not present when an unwilling participant submits, as a result of the exploitation of power, coercion, or force, regardless of whether there is verbal or physical resistance. Coercion or force includes any physical or emotional harm or threat of physical or emotional harm which would reasonably place an individual in fear of immediate or future harm, with the result that the individual feels compelled to engage in a sexual act.
Grooming	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 may initially start as befriending someone and making them feel special and may result in exploitation and/or sexual abuse.
Intimate personal relationship	A consensual romantic or sexual relationship which goes beyond the bounds of a platonic or working relationship. An intimate personal relationship could be brief, including a one-off occurrence, but it is not limited to such instances.
Personal relationship	Is a broad term that refers to both close personal relationships and intimate personal relationships, as specified in this table.
Power	Refers to the ability or capacity to influence, control, or direct the behaviour of others, decisions, or events.
Power dynamic	Describes the way individuals or groups interact, where one side holds more power than the other, and this imbalance shapes relationships and communication. Power does not necessarily involve force or coercion but can resemble influence, authority, or control.
Power imbalances	Where one side holds more power in a relationship creating an unequal relationship where all things are not equal.
Professional relationship	A formal respectful relationship grounded in the University values of Inclusivity, Ambition, Openness, Fairness and Respect. It is characterised by mutual respect, integrity, and accountability, ensuring appropriate boundaries are maintained, and all interactions reflect high standards of competence, ethics, and responsibility.

Professionalism	Refers to the conduct, behaviour, and attitude of someone in a work or academic setting that reflects high standards of competence, ethics, and responsibility. It involves showing respect, integrity, accountability, and a commitment to maintaining appropriate boundaries and treating others with fairness and courtesy.
Sexual misconduct	Sexual misconduct includes any unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature to which a person has not consented, or the person engaging in the behaviour does not have a reasonable belief as to that other person's consent. Sexual misconduct can happen within any kind of relationship or between people who do not know each other. Sexual harassment is a form of sexual misconduct.

4) Policy

4.1 Principles

The University expects all staff to uphold the highest standards of integrity and professionalism in their relationships with colleagues and students. Personal relationships must not compromise the University's values or interfere with fair and ethical conduct.

Staff must avoid any real or perceived abuse of power, conflicts of interest, or breaches of professional boundaries. Relationships that are coercive, exploitative, or abusive are always unacceptable.

The University is committed to maintaining a safe and respectful working and learning environment, free from all forms of sexual misconduct, and is committed to taking steps to prevent sexual harassment, so that every member of the University community can study, live, and work with dignity.

4.2 Key roles, responsibilities and/or requirements

Role	Responsibilities
Staff	• Act with professionalism and integrity • Maintain and respect professional boundaries in all interactions • Identify and avoid situations that may create real or perceived conflicts of interest • Disclose personal relationships as outlined in this policy and associated procedure • **Must** not engage in intimate personal relationships with students for whom they hold direct responsibility • Consistently exercise judgment to determine whether their role entails direct responsibility for a student • Report any concerns about abuse of power or conflicts of interest arising from personal relationships at work in accordance with section 4.3.5 • Foster a professional working environment where the development of intimate personal relationships with students is deemed unacceptable. • Ensure that all interactions with students are professional and appropriate, avoiding any behaviour that is unprofessional, inappropriate or sexualised in nature • Proactively seek advice from HR or a line manager if they are unsure about any aspect of the policy or how it applies to specific situations. • Collaborate in maintaining an environment where accountability is valued, and professional standards are upheld

	• Respect the confidentiality of disclosures made by others and avoid gossip or speculation about personal relationships
Line managers/ Heads of School/Department	• Promote this policy, associated procedures, and relevant training • Foster a workplace culture where interactions between staff and staff and students are professional, respectful, and free from inappropriate conduct • Create an environment where staff feel comfortable disclosing personal relationships without fear of judgment or reprisal • Remind staff of the importance of identifying and disclosing conflicts of interest • Receive and confidentially document personal relationship disclosures and proactively mitigate risks in line with the associated procedure • Be alert to real or perceived conflicts of interest arising from personal relationships within the team • Address any observed, reported or suspected breaches of the policy promptly and appropriately, in consultation with HR when necessary • Ensure that concerns about unprofessional behaviour or policy violations are taken seriously and addressed in a timely manner
Human Resources	• Provide advice, guidance, and support in relation to this policy and associated procedures to managers, staff and, where appropriate, students
Trade Unions	• Provide advice, guidance, and support in relation to this policy and associated procedures to their member(s) • Contribute to the development of this policy through consultation and provide feedback on the application of the policy
UEB/People and Culture Committee	• Model the standards of professionalism and behaviour expected within the University, to include the need to avoid any form of favouritism or unethical behaviour related to personal relationships

4.3.1 Personal relationships between staff and students

Staff play a vital role in creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. In all interactions with students, it is essential to recognise the inherent power imbalance that exists due to the nature of staff and student roles regardless of a student's age or level of study. With this responsibility comes the expectation that staff **must** always act with professionalism, fairness and respect, ensuring that their influence is used to foster trust and safeguard student wellbeing.

4.3.1.1 Intimate personal relationships

Given the inherent differences in authority and responsibility, intimate personal relationships between staff and students can present significant challenges, particularly in areas such as freedom to consent, power imbalance, conflict of interest, equal treatment, trust and confidentiality. This power imbalance creates a risk of sexual misconduct in interactions between staff and students. These challenges can arise at any point in such a relationship, whether at its beginning, throughout its duration, or upon its conclusion.

To uphold professional relationships founded on trust, confidence and equitable treatment, the University **prohibits** intimate personal relationships between staff and students where the staff member has direct responsibility for that student (as defined in section 3). Beyond this, the University **strongly discourages** staff from engaging in an intimate personal relationship with any student, even where there is no direct responsibility, to avoid potential conflicts of interest or abuses of power.

In line with these principles, members of the Student Wellbeing Teams are in a uniquely sensitive position, as they have access to highly confidential student information. This access creates an inherent power imbalance, even if a staff member is not directly working with a particular student.

To safeguard professional boundaries and protect student welfare, the University strictly **prohibits** intimate personal relationships between any member of a Wellbeing Team and a student their team is supporting.

Where an intimate personal relationship predates either the implementation of this policy or the assumption of direct responsibility, staff and students **must** follow the disclosure and management procedures outlined in section 4.3.1.3.

In cases where students are employed as staff alongside their studies and have direct responsibilities over other students as defined in section 3, such as postgraduate teaching associates, they too are **prohibited** from engaging in intimate personal relationships with those students under their direct responsibility. The same concerns around power dynamics, influence, and consent apply.

Furthermore, it is essential that all staff understand their legal responsibilities. Under UK law, individuals in positions of trust are prohibited from engaging in sexual activity with a child in their care who is under 18, even if the child is over the age of consent (16 or older). Staff are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the University's Safeguarding Policy to ensure they understand and uphold their responsibilities in this regard.

4.3.1.2 Close personal relationships

The University recognises that close personal relationships, such as those with relatives may exist either when a staff member is appointed or when a student enrols. If a staff member becomes aware that they are expected to have direct responsibility for a student with whom they have a close personal relationship, they **must** disclose this in accordance with section 4.3.1.3. Students in such relationships should also make similar disclosures. These disclosures enable the University to implement alternative arrangements, ensuring that staff members with close personal relationships with a student do not hold direct responsibility for them.

4.3.1.3 Declaring an excluded intimate personal relationship or a close personal relationship between a staff member and a student

As outlined in section 4.3.1.1, staff members **must** not engage in intimate personal relationships with students over whom they have direct responsibility. Similarly, staff should not have direct responsibility for students with whom they have a close personal relationship.

However, it is recognised that relationships may have existed prior to this policy taking effect on 1 August 2025, or before the staff member was assigned with direct responsibilities for that student.

In such situations, the staff member **must** declare the relationship, and the student should do so, to enable assessment of any potential conflicts of interest. An intimate or close personal relationship between a staff member and a student with whom they have direct responsibilities which existed before this policy came into effect on 1 August **must** be declared no later than 30 September 2025.

Similarly, an intimate personal or close personal relationship that existed prior to a staff member being assigned direct responsibilities for that student **must** be disclosed at the earliest opportunity, either before the assignment begins or by the date the assignment commences.

Disclosures **must** be made in accordance with the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for Personal Relationship Disclosures. Please find the declaration form and the SOP.

Individuals making a disclosure will not be asked to provide details about the nature of their personal relationship. However, they will be required to identify the person they are in a

relationship with and outline any real or potential conflicts of interest to enable appropriate mitigation measures.

Staff or students who are unsure whether they have an intimate or close personal relationship with a student, should seek advice from their line manager (staff only), Head of School/Department or their HR Business Partner.

4.3.2 Personal relationships between staff members

The University values a respectful and inclusive culture where positive professional and personal relationships contribute to a supportive and collaborative working environment. It is recognised that, over time, friendships, family connections, and romantic relationships may exist or develop between colleagues.

These close or intimate personal relationships are not prohibited. However, to maintain a fair, respectful and transparent workplace, staff must remain mindful of situations where a personal relationship may give rise to real or perceived conflict of interest, power imbalance, or the appearance of favouritism. This consideration applies to both existing relationships and those that may form or end during employment.

It is also essential to note that, under UK law, individuals in positions of trust are prohibited from engaging in sexual activity with a child in their care who is under 18, even if the child is over the age of consent (16 or older). Staff are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the University's Safeguarding Policy to ensure they understand and uphold their responsibilities in this regard.

Being open about relevant personal relationships supports a culture of trust, protects all parties involved, and ensures that professional boundaries are upheld in a way that is fair to colleagues, students, and the wider University community.

The University's principles regarding staff-to-staff personal relationships are as follows:

- Staff **must not** solely line-manage or be solely line-managed by anyone with whom they have a personal relationship as defined in the policy.
- Staff members involved in a personal relationship **must not** be the sole individuals responsible for managing another staff member or overseeing/supervising a student.
- Staff **should not** participate in decision-making processes related to the staff member with whom they have a personal relationship. Examples of these processes can be found in Appendix 1. The list is not exhaustive, and staff **must** exercise care in the discharge of any decision making where a conflict of interest may arise.
- Staff **must not** engage in practices that could be seen as favouring someone with whom they have a personal relationship, such as recruitment, promotion, or committee decisions where that individual or their work is discussed.

In these situations, mitigation options **must** be considered. Please refer to the Standard Operating Procedure for Personal Relationship Disclosures.

4.3.2.1 Declaring a personal relationship involving staff members

Staff **must** disclose a personal relationship at the earliest opportunity where the relationship may create a real or perceived conflict of interest. This disclosure **must** be made in accordance with the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for Personal Relationship Disclosures. Please find the declaration form and the SOP.

In such situations, both staff members in the relationship **must** declare the relationship so that conflicts of interest can be assessed.

Where a staff member's personal relationship with another staff member creates a conflict of interest in a separate process unrelated to daily duties (such as during regrading or academic promotions), and this occurs as a one-time event, the declaration form requirement does not apply. However, staff members **must** proactively disclose any real or potential conflicts to the individuals overseeing the process to ensure transparency and proper management.

Staff making a disclosure will not be asked to provide details about the nature of their personal relationship. However, they will be required to identify the person they are in a relationship with and outline any real or potential conflicts of interest to enable appropriate mitigation measures.

Staff who are unsure whether there is a potential or actual conflict of interest should seek advice from their line manager, Head of School/Department or their HR Business Partner.

4.3.3 Professional and appropriate conduct

All staff are expected to act professionally and appropriately in all interactions with colleagues and students, in alignment with the University values. This includes treating others with respect and refraining from behaviours that could be perceived as bullying, harassment, favouritism or exploitation.

Personal relationships can compromise professionalism when clear boundaries are not maintained, particularly in situations where there is a power imbalance. These circumstances can lead to real or perceived conflicts of interest, coercion, or misconduct, ultimately undermining trust and the integrity of the working or learning environment.

To foster professional relationships built on trust, fairness and accountability, staff **must** adhere to the following requirements:

- Physical contact **must** be appropriate, non-intrusive, and clearly justifiable in an educational or professional context. It **must** always be consensual unless in an emergency situation where Security or First Aid-trained staff may need to intervene without consent.

- Behaviour that could reasonably be perceived as inappropriate **must** be avoided.

- Favouritism and grooming **must** be strictly avoided**.** Staff **must** not engage in any behaviour that may reasonably be seen as preferential treatment.

- Professional behaviour **must** be maintained in all activities, extending beyond formal settings to include extracurricular activities and informal social events involving staff and students.

Additional considerations when working with students:

- Staff **must** avoid meeting with students in either their own home or the student's home. If a home visit is essential for educational or pastoral reasons, a risk assessment must be completed in advance and approved by the Head of School or Department Director.

- Home visits are never permitted for students under 18 years of age, except in cases related to wellbeing, and **must** be authorised in advance by the University's Designated Safeguarding Lead.

These requirements are intended to support staff in carrying out their professional, pastoral, and

academic responsibilities within appropriate boundaries.

For additional guidance on interactions between staff and students, please refer to the guidance.

4.3.4 Confidentiality and Data Protection in Information Sharing

The University will handle any shared information with sensitivity and care, adhering to its responsibilities under data protection legislation and University Data Protection Policy. Access to the declaration will be strictly limited to those with a legitimate need to know for the purpose of assessing and managing the conflict of interest and determining mitigation measures.

4.3.5 Reporting personal relationship concerns

Unprofessional or inappropriate behaviour towards a student or staff member is not acceptable. This may breach the Dignity at Nottingham Policy, the Staff Disciplinary Procedures and other University policies and procedures.

If a student or staff member feels uncomfortable with their interactions with a staff member or has concerns about a relationship or the level of attention they are receiving, they are encouraged to speak with their Head of School/Department, line manager or HR. This includes cases where a student wishes to report and/or seek support for harassment or sexual misconduct involving a staff member, even if they are or have been in an intimate personal relationship that is not permitted under this policy. Students will not be subject to disciplinary action for being part of a non-permitted relationship, the responsibility for upholding the policy rests with staff. Where concerns are raised, the University will respond sensitively and fairly, offering appropriate support to all parties involved.

If a student or staff member believes there may be an abuse of power or a conflict of interest related to a personal relationship at work, this should be raised as soon as possible with their Head of School/Department, line manager or HR.

Alternatively, Report + Support is a platform available to all University of Nottingham students, staff, and anyone with concerns about a student or staff member. It allows individuals to report incidents of harassment, abuse, or assault, either with contact details or anonymously.

4.4 The consequences of non-compliance

If a staff member with direct responsibility for a student enters into an intimate personal relationship with that student, it constitutes a breach of this policy. Such a breach will be subject to investigation under the disciplinary procedure and may result in dismissal.

Failure to disclose a personal relationship between staff members or between staff and students, as required by this policy, or breaches of confidentiality may also be investigated under the disciplinary procedure.

4.5 How compliance with the policy will be measured

Compliance with this policy will be assessed through regular monitoring of personal relationship disclosures, gathering feedback via reporting mechanisms, and reviewing incidents related to undisclosed relationships. Training participation will also be used to gauge understanding and adherence. Staff surveys and manager feedback will help assess how well the policy is supporting a respectful and transparent workplace culture. Trends in disciplinary action related to non-compliance will be monitored to identify any reoccurring issues and inform policy improvements. All compliance measures will be conducted with sensitivity and confidentiality to maintain trust and encourage adherence.

4.6 Provisions for monitoring and reporting related to the policy

The policy will be monitored using the above outlined metrics and progress will be reported annually to the People and Culture Committee which will evaluate whether the policy is achieving its intended outcomes. Key indicators of effectiveness may include increased disclosures, fewer complaints related to abuse of power or conflicts of interest, and positive responses in staff and student surveys regarding respect, safety and fairness. This data will help ensure the policy remains relevant, consistent in its application, and aligned with organisational values.

5 Review

The policy will be reviewed as a minimum every two years, or before then as required in line with policy, legal or regulatory updates. Additionally, reviews may be conducted earlier if circumstances change, such as a significant increase in relevant student or staff complaints.

6 Related policies, procedures, standards and guidance

6.1 Associated Guidance

- Guidelines for Professional Conduct with Students
- Under 18 Guidance
- Home Visit Risk Assessment

6.2 Associated Procedures

- Standard Operating Procedure for Personal Relationship Disclosures
- Staff Disciplinary Procedures
- Conflict of Interest Procedure
- Student Code of Conduct (non-academic)

6.3 Associated Policies

- Dignity at Nottingham Policy
- Safeguarding Policy

Appendix 1- Decision Making Processes

Theme	Process
Career	Appraisal and Development Conversations (ADC)
	Academic Promotions
	Regrading
	Nottingham Reward Scheme
	Recruitment and Selection including awarding employment contracts
	Engagement of casual workers
Conduct	Disciplinary issues
	Complaints about or from individual
Conditions	Flexible Working
	Ending of Fixed-Term Contract
	Workforce Change- Redundancy and Redeployment
	Reasonable Adjustments process
Workload	Allocation of workload
	Granting annual leave
	Granting study leave
	Workload resources such as equipment, funding, technical support or space

Financial	Approval of any financial payment, for example timesheets, expenses claims
	Allocation of internal and external funding / grant application
	Request for pay increases
	Allocation of contracts