

HR Policy: Personal relationships at work

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1. Introduction and purpose

- 1.1 The University recognises that there may be instances of staff forming close personal relationships with other members of staff, potential members of staff, students or other people e.g. contractors, agency workers. This policy sets out UWE Bristol's expectations and requirements regarding close personal relationships. The policy outlines action to be taken by staff if a conflict of interest arises and guidance for managers on dealing with situations appropriately in the interests of protecting the parties concerned.
- 1.2 For the purpose of this policy, a close personal relationship may be based on family ties, romantic, sexual or involve a degree of intimacy beyond that normally present in the staff-student or staff-staff relationship (irrespective of the gender or gender identity of the people involved). A relationship could be one-off or long-term or take place online via electronic communication or social media. The policy also covers the situations of a potential employment/business opportunity with a partner, close family member, close friend or former professional colleague. For clarity, the term 'partner' is inclusive of same sex couples and those with non-binary gender identity.
- 1.3 A member of staff involved in any close personal relationship with another member of staff or student is open to perception or accusation of bias, favouritism, prejudice or potential breaches of confidentiality. Accusations can come from colleagues, students or, for example where the relationship has ended, the other party. For these reasons, the University feels it is both appropriate and important for the disclosure of such relationships where a conflict of interest arises.
- 1.4 Power dynamics are present in our social context: some groups (for example, men, white people, older people, straight or cis gender people) are often perceived to be more powerful than others (for example, women, BME people, younger people and LGBT people).
- 1.5 Romantic or sexual relationships between students and staff, and between staff of different grades have an inherent power dynamic. The student body and lower grade staff roles have more women, BME people, younger people and LGBT people than higher grade staff roles. The power dynamic in personal relationships may mirror and exacerbate the power dynamic seen in the broader social context. The power dynamic in family ties may be influenced by any protected characteristic. The University's response to close personal relationships with a conflict of interest should be mindful of these dynamics.
- 1.6 The University is determined to eradicate any harassment, bullying and victimisation and will maintain a zero tolerance approach to unacceptable behaviour at work. All staff members are expected to be respectful of professional boundaries and act in line with the acceptable behaviours of the University:
 - Treat all others with dignity and respect
 - Conduct themselves professionally
 - Not behave in a manner that could be offensive to others
 - Be proactive in developing and maintaining effective working relationships
 - Take appropriate action where there are difficulties in working relationships
- 1.7 The [Dignity at Work policy](#) outlines the procedure for action when behaviour falls short of these acceptable behaviours.

2. Staff-student relationships

- 2.1 The professional relationship of trust and confidence 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. Everyone who is employed in any capacity by the University is in a position of authority and should avoid initiating or developing a close personal relationship with a student. This authority may continue following the graduation of a student; for example if a mentoring relationship continues or the member of staff is acting as a referee for the student.
- 2.2 In the event that a close personal relationship already exists or develops it is always incumbent on the member of staff to ensure the relationship does not undermine the integrity of assessment or other significant processes of the University. The member of staff should declare the relationship to their line manager if a conflict of interest exists. The following non-exhaustive list describes situations that present a conflict of interest:
- Selection for entry to a UWE Bristol programme
 - Participation in admission decision
 - Teaching
 - Participation in assessment decision
 - Selection for a prize or scholarship
 - Project dissertation
 - Research supervision
 - Personal tutor
 - Participation in academic progression decision
 - Other non-academic responsibilities e.g. student accommodation, wellbeing services
 - Attendance at the same conference
 - Mentor
 - Pastoral role
 - Provision of any other support
- 2.3 If a close personal relationship exists in any of these situations, the member of staff must immediately inform their line manager. The line manager should promptly undertake the following actions:
- 1) Meet with the Head of department or Head of professional service to appraise the risks and identify possible options to avoid the conflict of interest; including the re-allocation of duties (including supervision) to another employee.
 - 2) Meet separately with the member of staff and student to discuss possible options.
 - 3) Make alternative arrangements for the re-allocation of duties to another employee.
 - 4) Determine whether additional and ongoing checks are needed.
 - 5) Record the outcome of the conversation to the member of staff [in writing](#) and send a copy to HR to be placed securely on the member of staff's personnel file, in line with data protection guidance. Should there be any changes in the future, the member of staff can request that the document be removed from their file and destroyed.
- 2.4 Managers will deal with the matter in a manner that aims to protect the dignity and privacy of both parties. Whilst every effort will be made to accommodate the needs

of both parties' staff should recognise that alternative arrangements cannot always be arrived at. Advice should be sought from Human Resources, if needed.

- 2.5 Members of staff who become aware of a close personal relationship between a colleague and a student that presents a conflict of interest and has not been declared should inform their manager or Human Resources. Separate discussions should be held with both parties to determine the relationship and assess whether a conflict exists. If it is established that a relationship and conflict of interest does exist, the actions outlined in section 2.3 should be followed.
- 2.6 Students are encouraged to report any inappropriate behaviour by a member of staff they witness or experience via the [University's Complaints Procedure](#). Situations that feel wrong, experiences or observations of things that don't feel right can be reported and/or emotional support obtained via the [#SpeakUp](#) guide. All such reports will be treated in confidence. Reporting is not with malicious intent; there will be no punishment or retaliation.
- 2.7 Staff are reminded that it is a criminal offence under the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 2000 to engage in any kind of sexual activity with a person under 18 where the adult is in a position of trust.

3. Staff-staff relationships

- 3.1 Where a close personal relationship already exists or develops with another member of staff and a conflict of interest arises, both parties should immediately declare the relationship to their line manager. The following situations or processes present a conflict of interest:
 - Involvement in a staff appointment process for the other party
 - A supervisory or line management relationship
 - Carrying out a Performance and Development Review (PDR) for the other party
 - Working in the same department
 - Working on the same project
 - Attending the same conference
 - Investigating a complaint
 - Involved in disciplinary or grievance procedure
 - Involvement in a staff promotion process for the other party
 - Determining access to resources for the other party
 - Supervising the same student in a co-supervision arrangement
- 3.2 Similarly, where there is potential employment/business opportunity with a partner, close family member, close friend or former professional colleague staff must declare the relationship to their manager should a potential conflict of interest arise e.g. involvement on an interview panel or procurement of their business.
- 3.3 The line manager(s) should be mindful of power dynamics in the relationship and in our social context in responding to conflicts of interest. The line manager(s) should promptly undertake the following actions:
 - 1) Appraise the risks and identify possible options to avoid the conflict of interest, including:
 - reallocation of duties/responsibilities
 - transfer of management
 - redeployment of one or both parties to a job in another area of the University

Advice should be sought from Human Resources if transfer of management or redeployment needed.

- 2) Meet separately with both parties to discuss possible options with a view to reaching a satisfactory agreement.
- 3) Make alternative arrangements for the agreed option.
- 4) Determine whether additional and ongoing checks are needed if one member of staff is in a relative position of power.
- 5) Record the outcome of the conversation to the members of staff [in writing](#) and send a copy to HR to be placed securely on the members of staff's personnel file, in line with data protection guidance. Should there be any changes in the future, the members of staff can request that the document be removed from their files and destroyed.

- 3.4 Attempts will be made to find a mutually agreeable solution that protects the interests of both parties and the University. In some situations, it may not be possible to reallocate duties or to redeploy a member of staff to another part of the University and the University would not expect to make special arrangements. For example, the specialist nature of the role performed or the absence of vacancies might prevent this. The University would explore all available options and fully consider which party could be more easily redeployed based on skills and experience. Staff should be aware if redeployment were not possible, ultimately and as a last resort, the University would have to consider the termination of one of the parties' employment.
- 3.5 If managers have reasonable grounds to believe that employees have formed a close personal relationship that presents a conflict of interest and has not been declared they should approach both parties separately to ask whether this is the case. Managers should refrain from making negative assumptions or accusations and should put the matter to the employee as a statement of fact followed by a general question in a friendly, empathetic way.
- 3.6 Staff who are concerned about declaring a close personal relationship or the proposal for dealing with the situation should contact Human Resources, their trades' union representative, a Dignity at Work Adviser or the Employee Assistance Programme.
- 3.7 Staff who feel negatively affected by a close personal relationship involving their colleagues should raise concerns with their manager, or if the issue concerns the line manager, the next line manager.

4. Failure to declare a relationship

- 4.1 This policy is written in the spirit of support and protection for individuals to attend for work and go about their business without fear of reprisal, hence the importance of declaring a relationship as soon as a potential conflict of interest arises. Failure to declare a relationship at an appropriate point, whether because of an error in judgement or because of a deliberate attempt to suppress the matter, could result in formal action under the University's Disciplinary Procedure.

5. Confidentiality

- 5.1 All records concerning close personal relationships will be kept strictly confidential in line with University data protection guidance.