

King's College London
Policy - Personal Relationships between Staff and Students

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| Subject: | Personal Relationships between Staff and Students |
| Approving Authority: | Senior Management Team (SMT) |
| Responsible Officer: | Vice President People & Talent/Chief People Officer |
| Responsible Office: | Human Resources |
| Related Procedures: | Grievance Procedure: Research, Teaching Only, and Professional Services staff Disciplinary Policy and Procedure: Research, Teaching-only and Professional Services staff Academic Staff Grievance Regulation Academic Staff Disciplinary Regulation |
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Personal Relationships between Staff and Students
Policy for King's College London

1. Introduction

- 1.1 King's College London (King's) is committed to safeguarding relationships within the University community.
- 1.2 Positive professional relationships between staff and students are central to the student educational experience and their welfare. This policy is designed to maintain the integrity and professionalism of relationships within the King's community, by setting clear guidelines regarding personal relationships between staff and students.
- 1.3 The policy recognises that intimate personal relationships between staff and students are likely to be problematic, given the inherent power imbalance in the relationship and the risks around positional power and conflicts of interest that such relationships can entail. Relationships between staff and students that are overly personal in nature, may lead to questions about the nature of consent and accusations of bias. This can negatively affect the welfare of the student and undermine trust in the academic process. The policy is designed to protect both students and staff and the wider University community from these risks.
- 1.4 Under the terms of the policy, it is prohibited for a 'Relevant Staff Member' to enter into an intimate relationship with a student. A 'Relevant Staff Member' in the policy is a member of staff who has any direct responsibilities in relation to a student, including teaching, assessment, supervision or provision of pastoral support. A 'Relevant Staff Member' can also include those who oversee those with such direct academic professional responsibilities (i.e. more senior managers), where their professional responsibilities for the student may be more indirect but are such that it would be inappropriate for there to be an intimate relationship.
- 1.5 Where the staff member is not a 'Relevant Staff Member', i.e. has no direct academic or professional responsibilities in relation to a student, including teaching, assessment, supervision or provision of pastoral support, intimate relationships whilst not prohibited, are strongly discouraged and it is mandatory to declare them, so that an assessment can be made of potential conflicts of interest.
- 1.6 'Relevant Staff Members' are also strongly discouraged from having other 'close personal relationships' with a student, where there is a risk that the nature of the relationship, whilst not intimate, could reasonably be viewed as going beyond the boundaries of professional conduct. These relationships would cover those where there is a business, commercial or financial relationship, or an emotional attachment/friendship or a familial relationship. The staff member must declare and register such relationships in order that potential conflicts of interest can be assessed, and if necessary, alternative arrangements can be put in place to protect both parties.
- 1.7 The policy strictly prohibits intimate relationships involving students (including applicants or offer-holders), under the age of eighteen, or where the student is an adult at risk suffering from certain mental disabilities. Staff are reminded that such relationships could fall within the scope of the Sexual Offences Act 2003.
- 1.8 The policy applies to all staff, including but not limited to academic staff, professional services staff, contract staff, agency staff, visitors and volunteers.
- 1.9 The policy applies to all students, across all campuses and all modes of study or work.

- 1.10 The only possible exceptions occur when an individual holds dual roles (e.g. as a postgraduate research student and a teacher) and the other individual is also a doctoral student.
- 1.11 Failure to comply with this policy is likely to be considered a staff disciplinary matter, up to and including, dismissal.
- 1.12 Breaches of this policy will be subject to the [Academic Staff Disciplinary Regulation](#) and / or the [Disciplinary Policy and Procedure: research, Teaching-only and Professional Services staff](#).

2. The key policy objectives include:

- 2.1 Promoting Professionalism: We aim to ensure that all members of the University community are confident that their interactions are conducted with integrity, founded on mutual trust and respect. Alongside ensuring that professional boundaries are maintained, conflicts of interest are managed appropriately, and the integrity of academic, research, and working environments is preserved.
- 2.2 Preventing Misuse of Power: Recognising and mitigating the risks of positional power dynamics, preventing any misuse that could lead to coercion or undue influence in personal relationships.
- 2.3 Protecting Individuals: Safeguarding the dignity and rights of all members of the King's community in accordance with the [King's Community Charter](#) and [Dignity at King's Prevention of Bullying and Harassment Policy](#), thereby ensuring a safe and respectful environment.
- 2.4 Respecting Privacy: Acknowledging that not all personal relationships are inherently problematic, provided they do not compromise professional conduct, involve abuses of power, or create conflicts of interest.
- 2.5 Differentiating Relationship Types: Establishing clear guidelines for managing various types of relationships, such as familial, historic, intimate, and consensual relationships between peers.
- 2.6 Managing Problematic Relationships: Recognising that certain types of relationships, particularly those involving significant power imbalances, require careful management to prevent issues related to inequality and coercion. The more axes of inequality there are within a relationship – age, professional status, class, gender etc – the more likely it is to be problematic.
- 2.7 Avoiding conflicts of interest: Avoiding situations in which there may be actual or perceived conflicts of interest, with respect to the individual's professional role and responsibilities (see definitions below).

3. Scope

- 3.1 This policy applies to all members of the University community, including staff, students, visitors and volunteers (see definitions below).

4. Definitions

- 4.1 STAFF MEMBER: Any individual employed by King's, which would include the following categories of staff, though the list is not exhaustive:

- Academic staff
 - Professional services staff
 - Adjunct non-faculty members who are hired on a contractual basis
 - Students (including postgraduate research students), who undertake administrative, teaching or supervisory responsibilities
 - Casual or agency workers and contractors
 - Honorary, visiting and emeritus staff
 - Volunteers
- 4.2 **RELEVANT STAFF MEMBER:** A member of staff who has direct academic or professional responsibilities in relation to a student, including teaching, assessment, supervision or provision of pastoral support, or a member of staff who oversees those with direct responsibilities (i.e. more senior managers), where their professional responsibilities for the student may be more indirect but are such that it would be inappropriate for there to be an intimate relationship.
- 4.3 **STUDENT:** Any individual studying on any course of study at the University, including but not limited to those who:
- Have accepted an offer to a place at the University
 - Have arrived on campus to start their programme and have not yet completed the formal registration process
 - Are on short courses
 - Are studying for an award of the University
 - Are spending any time on a work placement, time abroad or summer school
 - Are registered as visiting postgraduate researchers
- 4.4 **FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIP:** A relationship between individuals related by parental responsibility, family bonds, marriage, or civil partnership.
- 4.5 **INTIMATE PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP:** A romantic or sexual relationship which goes beyond the bounds of a platonic or working relationship. It could be brief and includes a one-off occurrence. It includes intimate relationships that could be conducted in person and or on-line and/or via another form of communication.
- 4.6 **CLOSE PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP:** A close personal relationship is defined (non-exhaustively) as a business, commercial or financial relationship, or a relationship which involves an emotional attachment, this can include close friendships.
- 4.7 **CONSENSUAL RELATIONSHIP:** A relationship which requires the consent of the people involved. A person consents if they agree by choice and has the freedom and capacity to make that choice. It is not consent when given under duress, or as a result of one person's positional power, or given by someone not capable giving it such as when intoxicated. Consent can be withdrawn at any time.
- 4.8 **PRE-EXISTING RELATIONSHIP:** A personal relationship (of any kind, including familial relationships) that was in place before the professional relationship began. In such cases, staff should seek guidance from their line manager, Head of Department, or local [Human Resources Business Partner](#) for further advice, in order to avoid actual or perceived conflicts of interest.
- 4.9 **HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP:** A relationship that has ended. Normally these do not need to be declared unless they ended within the last two years. They will not normally be investigated unless there are reasonable concerns that the past relationship continues to impact on current working relations or the student experience. In such cases, staff should seek

guidance from their line manager, Head of Department, or local [Human Resources Business Partner](#) for further advice.

- 4.10 **POSITIONAL POWER:** The authority or influence a staff member holds by virtue of their position within the University, particularly in relation to students or other staff members.
- 4.11 **ABUSE OF POWER:** Misuse of authority to influence staff and students. This may involve coercion to participate in activities or make decisions that violate University policies and regulations. This may also occur when a relevant staff member exploits their position of power by pressurising someone into actions, or inactions, they would not normally consider, potentially leading to an intimate personal relationship.
- 4.12 **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST:** Can arise when an individual influences, or appears to influence, University matters for actual, potential or perceived personal benefit. It also includes circumstances where a staff member acts, or is perceived to act, more or less favourably towards someone because of a current or past relationship. Such favouritism or negative bias could occur in contexts like assessment, teaching, access to educational or developmental opportunities, pastoral support, or funding. Such conflicts undermine trust in the academic process.

5. Students or Staff Under the Age of 18 or Adults at Risk

- 5.1 **PROHIBITION OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH MINORS:** Close personal or intimate relationships where the student is under the age of 18 are strictly prohibited. Under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, it is considered a criminal offence for any member of staff to engage in a sexual relationship with a student under the age of 18.
- 5.2 **ADULTS AT RISK:** Staff must not be in, or enter into a close personal or intimate relationship with any student or member of staff who is known or suspected to be an [adult at risk](#).
- 5.3 **ANYONE SUSPECTING INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR** by a staff member in relation to an adult at risk or a student under the age of 18 should refer to the [Safeguarding Policy](#) and contact the relevant [designated Safeguarding Officer](#).

Procedure – Personal Relationships between Students and Staff

6 Relationships between staff and students: general principles

- 6.1 **Professional Boundaries:** All staff must maintain appropriate professional boundaries in relationships with students, ensuring that student welfare and academic integrity are always upheld. Staff should:
 - Maintain an appropriate physical and emotional distance from students.
 - Avoid forming special friendships with students, as this may be seen as grooming or favouritism.
 - Use a university email account, telephone number, or software for communications with students and avoid personal messaging platforms such as WhatsApp or social media.
 - Avoid sharing personal contact details, including telephone numbers, email addresses or home addresses, unless unavoidable, such as when arranging and taking part in conferences or field trips. In such cases, the staff member should make it clear that they are sharing their personal details solely for that purpose.
 - Avoid putting students in an uncomfortable position by suggesting one-to-one meetings offsite in informal settings such as pubs and restaurants and instead hold meetings and discussions on campus, or other University-approved premises.

- Student drop-in or advice sessions should never take place in the home of either the student or staff member.
- Refer students with support needs to a relevant University service and limit personal support unless it is part of their formal role.
- Refrain from contacting students outside of reasonable working hours.
- Avoid seeking personal information from students unless it is absolutely necessary and relevant to a university process (e.g. medical information for mitigating circumstances, or personal circumstances information as part of an academic progress process, e.g. Support for Study).

6.2 **Postgraduate research students:** Postgraduate research students may hold multiple roles, for example as both student and staff member. Nonetheless, all parties should maintain appropriate professional boundaries, and the policy provisions regarding personal relationships and intimate personal relationships apply equally to postgraduate research students, though as per 1.10 there may be exceptions where the relationship would not necessarily be deemed problematic e.g. where a newly appointed staff member who had just finished their PhD, could reasonably continue to have a relationship with a PhD student who was just finishing their own thesis.

6.3. If a member of staff is on the receiving end of what they believe to be inappropriate behaviours from a student that would appear to transgress professional boundaries, they should seek advice at the first opportunity from their Senior HR Business Partner who will liaise with Student Education Services to agree how the situation should be handled.

7 Declaration of Relationships and actions

7.1. Failure on the part of a 'Relevant Staff Member' to declare an intimate or a close personal relationship with a student, will be considered a breach of the policy and will be subject to consideration under the [Academic Staff Disciplinary Regulation](#) and / or the [Disciplinary Policy and Procedure: Research, Teaching-only and Professional Services staff](#). The relationship must be reported by the staff member to the relevant senior leader in their area of the University. Where the member of staff is an academic in a Faculty, this will be the Head of Department; where the member of staff is a postgraduate research/doctoral student, it will be the Associate Dean for Doctoral Studies; and where the member of staff is in Professional Services, it will be the Professional Services Functional Director. Once declared, the relationship must be registered by the Head of Department/Associate Dean/ Professional Services Functional Director with their respective Senior Human Resources Business Partner, so that conflicts of interest can be assessed and alternative arrangements can be made to safeguard both parties.

7.2 It is also mandatory for intimate relationships, where the staff member is not a 'Relevant Staff Member', to be reported by the member of staff to the relevant senior leader in their area of the University. Where the member of staff is an academic in a Faculty, this will be the Head of Department; where the member of staff is a postgraduate research/doctoral student, it will be the Associate Dean for Doctoral Studies; and where the member of staff is in Professional Services, it will be the Professional Services Functional Director. Once declared, the relationship must be registered by the Head of Department /Associate Dean/ PS Functional Director with their respective Senior Human Resources Business Partner, so that conflicts of interest can be assessed and any alternative arrangements put in place.

7.3 Staff must declare any other close personal relationships with students, including familial relationships, where the relationship could lead to, or be perceived to involve, an imbalance of power or a conflict of interest. The relationship should be discussed by the member of staff with their Head of Department if in a faculty and in the case of postgraduate research/doctoral students with the Associate Dean for Doctoral Studies, and where the member of staff is in Professional Services, with their Professional Services

Functional Director. If the Head of Department, Associate Dean or the Professional Services Functional Director determines that there is a conflict of interests or a potential conflict of interests, this will be registered with the Senior HRBP for the Faculty, or the Professional Services directorate to which the staff member belongs, and appropriate measures will be considered to safeguard the student and member of staff.

- 7.4 Where, under the terms of the policy, a relationship has been declared and registered, the Head of Department/Associate Dean for Doctoral Studies/Professional Services Divisional Director, to whom this has been declared, should meet separately with the staff member and the student concerned to determine whether the relationship constitutes, or is likely to constitute, a breach of this policy and they must advise the student of how they can access support and guidance from Student Conduct & Appeals.
- 7.5 Where the relationship can be managed through changes to supervisory, teaching or marking and pastoral care arrangements, the Head of Department or the Associate Dean or the Professional Services Functional Director concerned, should work with colleagues to put those arrangements in place, and document them accordingly. A written record should be kept of all discussions with the individuals concerned and these notes should be shared with both parties to confirm accuracy and logged with the Senior HR Business Partner.
- 7.6 Failure to declare relationships in line with the provisions of the policy, may be regarded as evidence that the relationship is problematic and may result in disciplinary proceedings up to and including dismissal.
- 7.7 Ongoing obligations: Staff are expected to maintain the agreed safeguards and report any changes in their relationships that might affect their professional responsibilities.
- 7.8 If a member of staff believes that they may have breached the policy unintentionally e.g. because they were unaware that the other party is a student and had no reasonable basis to suspect it, the member of staff must on discovering this, immediately inform their Head of Department and in the case of postgraduate research/doctoral students, the Associate Dean for Doctoral Studies) or in Professional Services, their functional Director.
- 7.9 Confidentiality: All information and disclosures made under this policy will be treated as confidential and in accordance with the university's obligations under the General Data Protection Regulations.

8. Reporting Concerns – for students

- 8.1 Students who are concerned about a relationship they have with a member of staff, are urged to consult their personal tutor, Department Senior Tutor or Head of Department at the earliest opportunity. Doctoral students are advised to consult with their Associate Dean.
- 8.2 If a student is unsure whether a relationship is appropriate, or they feel uncomfortable with the attention from a member of staff, they are encouraged to act promptly, and report concerns or seek guidance from one of the following:
 - The [Report + Support](#) platform.
 - Their Head of Department
 - Student Conduct & Appeals at appeals@kcl.ac.uk if an undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught student.
 - Their Associate Dean if a Postgraduate Research student. Contact details can be found on the [faculty pages on Student Services Online](#).
 - [Faculty Wellbeing Advisors](#) (FWA) and based on their own preference, this could be their faculty-based FWA, or they can select a FWA to meet.
- 8.3 Students seeking impartial, confidential help with the University's regulations and procedures can contact KCLSU Advice Service via their online form: [Advice Online Form](#)

- 8.4 King's is committed to fostering a culture that is inclusive, respectful, and safe. The University provides a learning and working environment free from bullying, harassment, and discrimination. **Guidance on reporting allegations of harassment, bullying or discrimination for students is available on [Student Services Online](#) and the [Report + Support](#) platform.** The platform offers a straightforward way for students, staff, and visitors to formally report incidents of inappropriate behaviour. Reports can be made anonymously or with contact details. [Report + Support](#) also provides guidance on who students and staff can contact for advice and to discuss concerns before making formal reports.

9. If Students or Staff need further support

King's provides resources for both staff and students who have concerns about personal relationships that may affect their professional roles. Students are encouraged to seek advice from their personal tutor, Department Senior Tutor, or Head of Department. They may also contact [Student Conduct & Appeals](#) for support.

Where staff have concerns, they are encouraged to seek advice from their Senior HR Business Partner, their Head of Department or Associate Dean if in a Faculty, or their Functional Director if in Professional Services.