

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AT WORK POLICY

Brief Description (max 50 words)	Personal relationships at work policy for UoS employees
Target Audience	All University of Suffolk (UoS) employees.
Version Number	3.0
Document Reference	POD024
Policy Dept	People & Organisational Development
Equality Impact Assessment Personal Relationships at Work Policy EIA.pdf	This document has been assessed for equality impact on the protected groups, as set out in the Equality Act 2010. This Policy is applicable as per the scope of the policy irrespective of age, disability, sex, gender reassignment, pregnancy, maternity, race (which includes colour, nationality and ethnic or national origins), sexual orientation, religion or belief, marriage, or civil partnership.

Amendment History

Version	Date	Reviewer Name(s)	Summary of changes
2.0	November 2024	POD Team	Updated template
3.0	August 2025	Jo Campbell	Policy updated to include requirement to complete declaration on any personal relationship at work and outlines the related process.

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Issued: August 2025

Review due: July 2029

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Introduction

This Policy sets out University of Suffolk's position concerning close personal relationships at work. The purpose of the Policy is to avoid giving an unfair advantage/disadvantage (actual, potential or perceived) to students, staff and other people arising from close personal relationships.

This policy does not form part of your contract of employment, and we reserve the right to amend or withdraw it at any time.

Scope

This policy applies to:

- all staff whatever their job type or level within the University.
- Job applicants

There is a separate policy concerning bullying, harassment and sexual harassment which may be relevant for some people in the context of close relationships. Details can be found on Hub.

Definition

For the purposes of this policy, close personal relationships may be defined as those which are personal, romantic or sexual. Personal relationships within the University setting are relevant and require disclosure as they have the potential to impact or influence (or lead to a perception of impact and influence) due to them being with another staff member, a student, a professional contact, a supplier (or prospective supplier) or a job applicant.

Personal relationship: is a relative (i.e. spouse, partner, sibling, parent, step-parent or step sibling or wider family member) or close family friend, i.e. someone living in the same household, or a relationship where there is financial dependence.

Intimate relationships: An intimate relationship is a consensual romantic or sexual relationship which goes beyond the bounds of a platonic or working relationship. An intimate relationship could be brief and includes a one-off occurrence.

Influencing factors in personal relationships

The following should always be considered when a disclosure of a personal relationship is made, or a personal relationship is suspected:

Consent to an intimate relationship: Consent is agreeing by choice and having the freedom and capacity to make that choice. The person seeking consent should always take steps to ensure that consent is freely given, that it is informed and recognises that it can be withdrawn at any time.

Capacity to consent: Capacity is about whether someone is physically and/or mentally able to make a choice and to understand the consequences of that choice. For example, a person does not have the capacity to give consent if they are asleep or unconscious. A person's capacity to consent may be inhibited by the influence of drugs or alcohol or the presence of a cognitive or learning difficulty, or mental health condition.

Grooming: Grooming can be defined as 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 will initially start as befriending someone and making them feel special and may result in sexual abuse and/or exploitation.

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Relationships between staff and students

Staff have a professional and ethical responsibility to protect the interests of students.

The relationship between staff and students is not generally an equal one. Staff embarking on a romantic/sexual relationship with a student may consider this to be consensual and equal. However, such relationships carry considerable risk. The student may become isolated from their peers and may become extremely distressed if the relationship ends, adversely affecting their mental and physical health. The member of staff may find themselves the subject of a complaint of harassment if the student decides the relationship is not truly consensual or if the relationship breaks down. Such relationships can also impact adversely on other students and staff, since they can create tension, rumours and secrecy, and perceptions of preferential or different treatment. Problems of this kind may result in complaints from third parties which may lead to formal investigations.

Most students are over 18 years old and regarded as adults in law. In the case of students under the age of 18, or students who are vulnerable adults, the inequality in relationships between staff and students is even greater.

Having taken these factors into account, the following statements set out the University of Suffolk's position concerning relationships between staff and students:

- i. Close relationships of a personal / romantic / sexual nature between staff and students are strongly discouraged.
- ii. Close relationships of a romantic/sexual nature between staff and students under the age of 18 years, or students who are vulnerable adults, are forbidden and will usually lead to disciplinary action being taken against the member of staff, possibly leading to dismissal. In this context, vulnerable adults include those with learning disabilities and / or those with mental health problems affecting their ability to make sound judgements.
- iii. Staff engaged in a close personal relationship with a student whom they teach or assess must notify their line manager immediately so that arrangements for demonstrably impartial assessment can be made. Any declarations made will be treated sensitively and in confidence, wherever possible. Any member of staff failing to follow this requirement is likely to become the subject of disciplinary proceedings.
- iv. Any member of staff engaged in a close personal relationship with a student must alert their manager of this situation. The line manager will work with that member of staff to ensure no inappropriate professional contact with or influence on the student's activities occurs or could reasonably be perceived.
- v. University email account, University telephone, University software and applications and internet access should be used for communications with students where possible, and staff should not use personal messaging or mobile phone for communications with students through any social media platforms.

Relationships between members of staff, professional contacts, job applicant, contractors or suppliers

It is not uncommon for close relationships to develop between people who work together. These close relationships may be romantic / sexual or familial.

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Relationships between staff / professional contacts / job applicants / contractors or suppliers may become a problem as there may be the potential for a conflict or a perceived conflict of interest. Additionally, there may be a situation where influence may be exerted (i.e. one individual may be a direct line manager to the other, e.g. Dean / Director or Head of Service who may be able to influence proceedings or outcomes involving a partner, friend or family member) or where the relationship affects conduct or behaviours at work including perceptions of these by others. In order to avoid such difficulties, University of Suffolk has adopted the following guidelines:

- i. Where a close personal relationship exists or develops between a line manager and a member of their staff, the members of staff must declare their relationship to the next tier of management at the earliest opportunity. It may be necessary, in these circumstances, to review the relevant reporting structure where this is feasible. Any declarations made will be treated sensitively and in reasonable confidence, wherever possible.
- ii. Where a close personal relationship exists or develops between any two members of staff, there is a requirement to declare that the relationship exists. This occurs as part of the recruitment process (application form) for new recruits, and via the relevant process determined by this policy for existing staff. Those in or with a personal relationship at work must recognise that the relationship gives rise to a real or perceived conflict of interest at work. Any potential conflict must therefore be assessed objectively by the employer and not the individual within the relationship. Declarations should be made to the next tier of management at the earliest opportunity. In some circumstances, it may be necessary to make special arrangements to safeguard integrity and reduce conflicts of interest. Where such a relationship exists within a team, relevant members of the team / University may also be made aware as appropriate, including where new staff join the team/University as necessary.
- iii. Where a close personal relationship exists or develops between two members of the same team, and there is evidence that the relationship is interfering with the work of that team (and reasonable attempts have been made to resolve any conflict or address the interference with the smooth running of the team), it may be necessary to explore the possibility of one party being moved to another area of work. In such a situation, if it is not possible to transfer at least one of the employees (for example if no suitable vacancies exist, or if an employee refuses to transfer), the University reserves the right to dismiss one or both employees (with notice in accordance with the employee's contract or pay in lieu of notice). Dismissal would, however, be undertaken as a last resort in circumstances where no other course of action was reasonably open to the University.
- iv. If a member of staff has or develops a close personal relationship with an applicant for employment, a close professional contact, a contractor or a supplier, they must declare an interest and they would normally be asked not to be involved with the appointment process or any tender or supplier engagement processes. Additionally, if there is an on-going working relationship resulting from the appointment, it may be necessary to make alternative supervisory / management or other conditions to remove any real or perceived conflicts of interest arising from the relationship. In some circumstances, an existing personal relationship may be deemed a valid reason for non-appointment to a role (i.e. where the appointment would mean that a family member or partner would be line managing the other, and where it would not be reasonable to introduce a different reporting structure to that team).

(NB: A professional contact is anyone with whom the University regularly works or where there is potential personal conflict, i.e. University Board member, Student Union employee, partner employer, contractor or service provider).

Confidentiality

Information about close personal relationships will be treated in confidence, wherever possible. However, it may be necessary and appropriate for this disclosure to be shared, on a need-to-know basis, with other staff

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who may otherwise be unclear as to how to proceed, this will be discussed with the individual. Anyone in a position of trust who breaches confidentiality may be subject to action under the relevant policy (probation, disciplinary).

Financial procedures

University of Suffolk's policy with regard to possible conflicts of interests in financial and/or contractual matters is set out in the Financial Regulations.

Declaration of personal relationships

As set out above any personal relationship with a student, staff member or professional contact must be declared to the line manager and confirmed via the 'Declaration of Personal Relationships form' (Microsoft Form). The status of the relationship must be kept up to date using the same form / notification process (i.e. indicating when a relationship commences, ceases or one party leaves the University),

A central register will be securely stored and maintained within the People and OD Directorate (POD) and managed in compliance with data protection legislation and the POD data retention schedule. The information will only be shared with those necessary and where any adjustments to any supervisory/management arrangements or other conditions need to be made in order to remove any real or perceived conflict of interest arising from the relationship.

The POD team will monitor and review the declaration of personal relationships register with annual reminders sent out.

However, any changes in the personal relationship status must be notified as soon as possible and no later than 4 weeks of the change of circumstances. Relationships that should have been declared at application to work for the University or during employment, but which were not, may be considered a conduct matter and dealt with under the relevant policy (Probation, Disciplinary). Failure to make a disclosure as outlined in this policy may ultimately result in dismissal.

Associated Policies

Bullying, Harassment and Sexual Harassment

Domestic Abuse Policy

Disciplinary Policy

Probation Policy

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