

Personal Relationships & Professional Boundaries Policy



**Harper Adams
University**

July 2025

Contents

1. About this policy.....	2
2. Aims, Purpose & Scope of the Policy.....	3
3. Why this policy matters	4
4. Relationships Between Staff and Students	4
5. Types of Relationships: Quick Reference	5
6. Relationships Between Members of Staff.....	5
7. Managing Conflicts of Interest.....	6
8. Guidance for Managers	6
9. Equality, Fairness and Related Policies	6
10. Support and Resources.....	7
11. Contacts and Further Information	7
12. Policy Information	8
Appendix A: Personal Relationships Declaration Form	9
Appendix B: Frequently Asked Questions	11
Appendix C: Worked Examples	13

1. About this policy

Harper Adams University (HAU) is committed to providing a safe, respectful, and inclusive community for all our staff and students.

This policy sets out the University’s approach to personal relationships that may give rise to actual or perceived conflicts of interest, safeguarding concerns, or impacts on academic or professional integrity. In particular, the University does not permit any personal relationship between a staff member and a student for whom they hold academic, pastoral, or administrative responsibility (a **relevant relationship**). This restriction is in place to uphold safeguarding duties, promote fair decision-making, and maintain trust in the professional relationships we hold.

Other relationships, whether between colleagues or between staff and students not in a “relevant relationship” must be managed with care, transparency, and professionalism to prevent unintended impacts on individuals or the wider University community. A separate process for managing potential conflicts of interest is contained in the University’s [Financial Regulations](#). If you think this could apply to your situation (if for example, you are a member of staff with a personal relationship with another member of staff, student, or supplier), please refer to the Financial Regulations in conjunction with guidance in this policy.

This policy has been developed in line with legal and sector-wide safeguarding standards and replaces all previous guidance from July 2025 onward. It has been agreed following consultation with the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Working Group, the Respect Group, and the local branch of the University and Colleges Union (UCU). This policy does not form part of any contract of employment, and the University may update it at any time.

2. Aims, Purpose & Scope of the Policy

Aims

This policy aims to:

- Protect students and staff from exploitation, harassment, coercion, or perceived or actual abuse of power.
- Promote fairness and transparency in academic and employment-related decisions.
- Maintain a culture of trust, professionalism, and accountability.

Purpose

The policy provides guidance on personal relationships where a professional or academic connection also exists. It is designed to:

- Clarify expectations around relationships involving students or colleagues, with a particular focus on safeguarding, ethical conduct, and maintaining trust.
- Support a culture of transparency, integrity and fairness in working and learning environments.
- Ensure that any actual, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest are disclosed and appropriately managed.
- Promote inclusive and respectful practices while recognising that personal relationships may arise in diverse ways, including pre-existing relationships.

Scope

This policy applies to:

- All University employees.
- Contractors (including visiting lecturers and agency workers).
- Volunteers.
- Any individuals engaged in University activity.
- It also applies to students where their relationships with staff may fall within the definitions outlined in this policy.

Oversight for this policy lies with the University Board of Governors, with delegated responsibility for implementation and review assigned to the Director of HR and Organisational Development. Suggestions for improvement may be raised through HR, the Staff Consultative Group (SCG), or UCU representatives.

Definitions

- **Relevant Relationship:**
A personal relationship between a staff member and a student where the staff member has academic, administrative, or pastoral responsibility for that student. If you are unsure whether a situation falls under this policy, you are encouraged to seek confidential advice from your line manager or HR.
- **Personal Relationship:**
A connection between individuals that may include, but is not limited to:
 - Romantic or sexual relationships.
 - Close family relationships.
 - Financial associations.
 - Longstanding friendships or shared living arrangements.
- **Professional Boundaries:**
The limits to the relationship between someone in a professional role and the person in their care. These are the borders that mark the edges between a professional relationship and a personal relationship.

- **Timescales for Disclosure:**
 - Relevant relationships must be declared as soon as reasonably practicable once they arise or become known.
 - Other personal relationships (e.g. pre-existing family or personal relationships) should be disclosed at the earliest appropriate opportunity, such as at interview, appointment, or when the relationship becomes relevant to University activity.

3. Why this policy matters

Personal relationships can affect working or learning environments, particularly where:

- A power imbalance exists (e.g. between staff and students, or supervisors and team members).
- Team dynamics, morale, or perceptions of fairness may be impacted.
- There is a risk of bias, conflict of interest, or inappropriate influence.

By addressing these risks proactively, the University supports professional boundaries, academic integrity, and safeguarding for all members of our community.

4. Relationships Between Staff and Students

Safeguarding Note

It is a criminal offence under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 for a staff member to engage in a sexual relationship with a person under 18 in full-time education, even if consensual.

“Relevant relationships” (personal relationships between staff and students for whom they have a professional responsibility) are not permitted. “Professional responsibility” includes teaching, supervision, assessment, support, or administrative decision-making. Staff must not continue acting in any such professional context and inform HR immediately. Disclosures from students will also be acted upon in line with safeguarding protocols.

Breaches of this policy, including failure to disclose a pre-existing relationship or entering a prohibited relationship, may result in disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal.

For relationships with students where no direct responsibility exists, staff must:

- Recognise their ethical duty to maintain professional boundaries.
- Disclose the relationship to HR for transparency and risk assessment.

Students who feel a relationship is not fully consensual may raise a complaint through the Student Complaints Procedure. Staff may be subject to disciplinary action if misconduct is found.

Personal relationships with friends or relatives who become students may also create conflicts and should be disclosed for review.

Further information and examples of relationships are provided in **Appendices B & C** below.

5. Types of Relationships: Quick Reference

Please also refer to Appendix C for more details on worked examples.

Scenario	Permitted?	What you must do
You begin a romantic relationship with a student you supervise or teach	Not permitted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This is a “relevant relationship” and is prohibited. Staff must not enter into this type of relationship. If such a relationship arises, it must be disclosed immediately to allow reassignment of teaching/supervisory duties. Failure to disclose may result in disciplinary action.
You had a romantic relationship with a student before they became your student/supervisee	Not permitted (while supervision or teaching continues)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must disclose immediately to HR Alternative arrangements (e.g. different supervisor) must be made to eliminate the conflict of interest.
You are in (or start) a relationship with a student for whom you have no teaching or supervisory role	Permitted, with conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must disclose immediately to HR In most cases, no changes to your role will be needed. If your role changes (e.g. you later supervise the student), a reassessment is required.
You are in (or start), a relationship with a colleague and one of you manages, supervises, or appraises the other	Not permitted (unless the reporting structure changes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must disclose to HR A risk assessment will be conducted. Adjustments to line management or appraisal responsibilities may be necessary. Pre-existing relationships must be declared before recruitment or appointment.
You are in a relationship with a colleague, but neither of you manages or appraises the other	Permitted, with disclosure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You must inform your line manager who will consult HR if needed. No change to your role is likely, unless a conflict of interest arises.
You are unsure whether your situation requires disclosure	Depends – seek advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If in doubt, speak confidentially to HR or your line manager. Early discussion helps manage potential risks and maintain transparency.

6. Relationships Between Members of Staff

Where staff are in a personal or intimate relationship, they must act professionally and discreetly. If a supervisory or managerial relationship exists between individuals in a personal relationship, both must disclose this to HR. The HR department, in collaboration

with the relevant Heads of Department and Student Services (if applicable), will:

- Work with the individuals to avoid conflicts of interest.
- Explore redeployment or revised responsibilities.
- Put safeguards in place if role changes are not feasible.

Disclosure to Human Resources is not required where there is no reporting relationship between members of staff, but individuals should refer to the [Financial Regulations](#) to ensure that potential conflicts of interest are managed appropriately.

Failure to disclose a personal relationship where required may result in disciplinary action.

7. Managing Conflicts of Interest

Even where a relationship is not widely known or visible to others, members of staff are expected to actively manage potential or perceived conflicts of interest. This may include:

- Removing themselves from meetings, decision-making, or discussions where their judgment could be reasonably perceived as influenced by a personal or romantic relationship (including but not limited to discussions about performance, promotions, restructures, or disciplinary matters).
- Proactively disclosing relationships to their line manager or HR, in line with the [Financial Regulations](#), to enable appropriate safeguards, even if there is no direct reporting line or supervisory relationship.
- Recognising that transparency helps maintain trust among colleagues and protects both individuals and the University from reputational and/or ethical risk.

8. Guidance for Managers

Managers who become aware of a personal relationship involving a member of their team must:

- Treat the matter with sensitivity and confidentiality.
- Act only where there is a risk to fairness, wellbeing, or compliance.
- Avoid making assumptions about which party should be moved, for example, managers should not assume that the more junior individual is the one who will move.
- Escalate concerns to HR promptly.
- Keep a formal note of discussions and decisions.

Managers must also be alert to:

- The risk of harassment or coercion within a relationship.
- Legal and policy obligations relating to discrimination and confidentiality.
- Their duty to support staff and student wellbeing, including mental health.

The HR department will be able to support managers navigating these issues. The Student Services and Wellbeing teams are available to support students.

9. Equality, Fairness and Related Policies

The University does not tolerate harassment or discrimination of any kind. Staff must maintain professionalism and discretion, particularly at the start or end of a personal relationship.

Related policies include:

- Equal Opportunities Policy
- Grievance Procedure

- Respect Policy
- Fair Treatment Policy
- Student Complaints Procedure
- Staff Disciplinary Procedure
- Student Conduct & Disciplinary Policy
- Safeguarding Policy
- Data Protection Policy

No one will be treated unfairly for being in a personal relationship, but all staff have a responsibility to avoid conflicts of interest and maintain appropriate boundaries. Staff with concerns about their treatment should raise them with their manager or through the Grievance Procedure.

10. Support and Resources

Support/Resource	Details
Internal Resources	
University's Anonymous Reporting Service	Make an anonymous report
Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)	Access through the staff Wellbeing pages or by phone on: +44 0800 0305182
Student Assistance Programme (SAP)	Access online through HealthAssured or by phone on +44 0800 028 3766
The HR department (for staff)	Staff Wellbeing Pages
University Wellbeing Services (for students)	Student Wellbeing Pages
External Resources	
Refuge	National Domestic Abuse Helpline: +44 08002000 247 Line Online Chat is also available
Rape Crisis	Rape Crisis have a network of independent Rape Crisis centres that provide specialist support and services for victims and survivors of sexual violence. They have a National Rape Crisis Helpline: +44 0808 802 9999 and a live chat .
Respect: Men's Advice Line	Help for male victims of domestic abuse , phone +44 0808 801 0327
Women's Aid	Women's Aid is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. They provide local support services, training for organisations and information if you are worried about someone else . They also have a live chat facility.

11. Contacts and Further Information

- Policy Owner: HR Department
- Email: humanresources@harper-adams.ac.uk
- Additional Support:
 - EDI Group
 - SCG/UCU Representatives
 - Occupational Health
 - EAP / SAP

12. Policy Information

Information	Details
Policy Owner (s)	HR Department
Approval Body	Board of Governors
Approval Date	July 2021
Version Approval Date	July 2025
Equality Impact Assessment Approval Date	July 2025
Date of Next Review	Spring 2028
Contact for Queries	HR Department (humanresources@harperadams.ac.uk)
Accessibility	This document can be made available in alternative formats on request
Amendments	Spring/Summer 2025: Comprehensive review ahead of change in Conditions of Registration. Consensual Relationships Policy proposed to be replaced in its entirety by this “Personal Relationships & Professional Boundaries” Policy. Changes include emphasis on “relevant” relationships, clarity on permissions, and signposting for support for staff and students.

Appendix A: Personal Relationships Declaration Form

*This form must be completed in accordance with the **Personal Relationships & Professional Boundaries Policy**. Completed Forms will be processed in line with the University's Privacy Statement*

Section 1: Your Details

- Full Name _____
- Department _____
- Line Manager _____

Section 2: Relationship Details

- Full name of the other individual _____
- Their role at the University
 - Student ☐
 - Staff ☐
- Relationship Type:
 - This is a “relevant relationship” (you have or may have academic/pastoral/admin responsibilities for the student) ☐
 - This is a “personal relationship” (family, romantic, financial) but not a relevant relationship. ☐

Section 3: Confirmation

By signing below, you confirm that:

- You have read and understood the Personal Relationships & Professional Boundaries Policy.
- The information provided is accurate to the best of your knowledge.
- You understand that the University may need to implement temporary or permanent arrangements to manage actual or perceived conflicts of interest, power imbalances, or to address safeguarding concerns.

Signature or email confirmation

- Signed _____
- Date _____

An email confirmation is acceptable in lieu of a physical signature

Section 4: For Office Use Only

To be completed by HR (in collaboration with the relevant Head of Department, and Student Services if applicable)

- Name of Reviewer _____
- Job Title _____
- Are arrangements to manage actual or perceived conflicts of interest, power imbalances, or to address safeguarding concerns required:
 - Yes ☐
 - No ☐

*If yes, please complete Section 5

Section 5: Conflict of Interest Management Measures

Action	Person Responsible	Target Date

Next Steps:

- The responsible officer (HR in conjunction with the relevant Head of Department and Student Services as applicable) should arrange a review date and confirm implementation.
- Notify relevant individuals where appropriate, respecting individual rights to confidentiality and disclosing details only as widely as necessary for the purposes of managing conflicts of interest, power imbalances, or safeguarding concerns.
- Personal data will only be shared on a strictly need-to-know basis.

Appendix B: Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the University's position on relationships between staff and students?

The University does not permit intimate personal relationships between staff and students where the staff member has, or is likely to have, academic, administrative, or pastoral responsibility for the student. This includes any teaching, supervision, assessment, support, or decision-making capacity. Such relationships pose a serious risk of conflict of interest, undermine academic integrity, and raise significant safeguarding and ethical concerns.

In addition, any romantic or sexual relationship between a staff member and a student under the age of 18 is strictly prohibited by law.

2. What is a "relevant relationship"?

A relevant relationship is any personal, romantic, sexual, or close relationship between a staff member and a student where the staff member has actual or potential responsibility for that student in any capacity (academic, pastoral, administrative, supervisory, etc.)

3. Are staff ever allowed to be in a relationship with a student?

Only if the student is not, and will not be, subject to any form of academic administrative, or pastoral responsibility from the staff member. However, if a relationship exists or develops, the staff member must notify HR and take no part in decisions or support relating to the student. Where responsibilities cannot reasonably be reallocated, the relationship is not permitted.

4. What should I do if I already have a relationship with a student who I now have responsibilities for?

You must disclose it immediately using the Relationship Disclosure Form (Appendix A). The University will take steps to remove your involvement in the student's academic or administrative affairs. Failure to disclose such a relationship may result in disciplinary action.

5. I am a staff member and have a relationship with another member of staff. Do I need to declare it?

Yes – but only if your relationship could result in a conflict of interest, such as one of you line managing, appraising, promoting or making decisions about the other. In this situation, disclosure is required so that appropriate adjustments can be made.

6. I am a student, in a relationship with another student, do I need to declare it?

No. Student-student relationships do not fall within the scope of this policy, includes one party is also employed by the University (see next question).

7. I am a student but also a staff member – do I need to declare a relationship with another student?

It depends on your job. If your staff role involves responsibility over the student (e.g. as a TA, tutor, researcher, or mentor), then yes, the relationship must be declared and will be reviewed. If your staff role is operational and unrelated (e.g. in catering or facilities), disclosure is not normally required.

8. How do I declare a relationship?

Complete the Relationship Disclosure Form (Appendix A). Staff must submit the form to the Head of HR. Students who are unsure whether they should declare a relationship or not should speak to a member of Student Services who will be able to advise on the

situation.

9. Do I have to disclose the nature of the relationship?

No. You are only required to confirm that a relevant relationship exists, and with whom. You are not required to share personal details or the nature of the relationship.

10. What happens after I declare a relationship?

HR will review the disclosure and work with your Head of Department to assess and manage any risks. This might include reassigning teaching or supervisory responsibilities to protect both parties and maintain academic integrity.

11. What if the relationship ends, or the student/staff member leaves the University?

You should inform HR so that the record can be updated. The data will be retained in line with the University's Privacy Policy and deleted when no longer required.

12. Will others be told about my disclosure?

Only where necessary to manage the situation appropriately. Your line manager or Head of Department may need to be involved if changes to roles are required. All information will be treated confidentially.

13. What if someone else reports that I'm in a relationship?

You will be informed and given the opportunity to confirm or clarify. If the relationship is relevant and you have not declared it, this could lead to further action.

14. What if I am unsure whether a relationship needs to be declared or if it's "relevant"?

If in doubt, seek confidential advice from HR or your line manager. It's always better to ask than risk non-compliance. Students should speak with a member of Student Services for specific advice on their situation.

15. Can I declare a relationship without naming the other person?

No. The University must know who is involved to manage potential conflicts properly. However, the nature of the relationship does not need to be declared.

16. What about relationships with family members or close acquaintances?

These must also be declared if the staff member has any academic, administrative, or decision-making role related to the student. The relationship does not have to be romantic or sexual to create a conflict of interest or unequal power dynamic.

17. What will the University do if a situation arises that may need to be reported to the Police?

The University takes all concerns relating to safeguarding, abuse of power, or potential criminal conduct seriously. If, during the course of managing a disclosed relationship or following a report of misconduct, information comes to light that suggests a potential criminal offence may have occurred (e.g. coercion, harassment, or abuse), the university will assess the situation carefully and may decide to involve relevant external authorities.

18. I am worried that I'm in a coercive or abusive relationship and afraid to disclose it. What should I do?

Your safety and wellbeing are the top priority. Please speak confidentially with a member of HR or the University's Safeguarding team. Support will be offered sensitively and without judgement.

Appendix C: Worked Examples

Case Study 1: Prohibited “Relevant Relationship”

Scenario:

Professor Green begins a romantic relationship with a final-year undergraduate student who he supervises and assesses.

Policy Position:

This is not permitted. Professor Green should not enter or continue such a relationship. It represents a clear conflict of interest and safeguarding concern.

Why?

This is a “relevant relationship”. Professor Green has direct academic responsibility for the student.

Required Action:

Professor Green must disclose the situation to HR immediately. HR, in conjunction with the Head of Academic Department, would take appropriate steps including removing his responsibility for supervising or assessing the student. Disciplinary action may follow for breaching the policy.

Case Study 2: Permissible Relationship – with transparency

Scenario:

Dr Brown is a senior technician in the Engineering Team. She begins a relationship with a Postgraduate student in the Vet School. She has no academic or pastoral involvement in that student’s programme of study.

Policy Position:

Permitted, but must be declared.

Why?

While the relationship is not a “relevant relationship”, there is still potential for perceived conflict of interest or imbalance of power due to their roles in the University.

Required Action:

Dr Brown should declare the relationship to HR and her line manager so that it can be appropriately noted. No change in duties is expected, but transparency helps maintain trust and mitigate any future issues.

Case Study 3: Pre-Existing Relationship at the Point-Of-Hire (must be declared)

Scenario:

Scarlett applies for a Post-Doctoral Research Assistant role at the University. One of the interview panel members, Dr Grey, is Scarlett’s Uncle.

Policy Position:

Pre-existing personal relationships relevant to professional activity must be declared early – ideally before recruitment decisions are made.

Why?

There is a risk of perceived bias in the recruitment process.

Required Action:

This should have been disclosed at the point of application. Dr Grey should have not been involved in the interview or selection process. The failure to disclose could result in the process being reviewed, including declining Scarlett's application and potential disciplinary investigation for Dr Grey.

Case Study 4: Colleagues in a Relationship with a Line Management Link**Scenario:**

Ruby, a team leader in Catering, starts a relationship with Rose, a member of her team. They do not declare it to anyone.

Policy Position:

Permitted only if declared. Line management and appraisal relationships must be reviewed to ensure fairness and objectivity.

Why?

This presents a clear conflict of interest, especially in performance reviews, and management decisions such as the approval of annual leave.

Required Action:

Both Ruby and Rose should have disclosed the relationship to HR. The University would then explore adjustments, such as a change of reporting line. Failure to declare may lead to disciplinary action.

Case Study 5: Former Student, Now Staff – pre-existing relationship with current student.**Scenario:**

Bruno, a recent graduate, begins a role as a Technician in the same department where their partner is now a second-year Undergraduate. Their relationship began when they were both students.

Policy Position:

Permitted, but must be declared if there is any potential for professional overlap or influence (e.g. involvement in teaching, assessment, student-facing administration).

Why?

This is a pre-existing personal relationship which could now intersect with University activities, depending on Bruno's duties and proximity to teaching or student decision-making.

Required Action:

Bruno should disclose the relationship to HR or their line manager. If they have no contact in a professional capacity, no further action may be required, but transparency is essential. If there is any overlap, adjustments may be needed to ensure that Bruno is not involved in any teaching or assessment that could involve their partner.

Case Study 6: Online Only Relationship between Staff and Student

Scenario:

Dr White, a Visiting Lecturer teaching an online-only postgraduate module, begins a romantic relationship via social media with Amber, a distance learning student on that module. They have never met in person, but Dr White marks Amber's coursework.

Policy Position:

Not permitted while the academic relationship continues. Staff-student boundaries and safeguarding requirements apply equally in online settings.

Why?

This is a "relevant relationship" because Dr White has academic responsibility for the student, even though it's fully online and informal in tone.

Required Action:

Dr White must inform HR or the Head of Department. It is likely that Dr White would have to withdraw from teaching or assessing Amber's work, and a different lecturer should be assigned. Entering into or continuing the relationship while having academic responsibility would be a breach of the policy.

Case Study 7: Managing Perceived Conflicts of Interest

Scenario:

Olive works in HR and is part of a panel reviewing proposed changes to team structures across several departments. During a meeting, the panel begins discussing the potential impact of the changes on the Grounds team. Olive's partner works in the Grounds team, but their relationship is not widely known to others in the meeting.

Policy Position:

Permitted relationship – but a potential conflict must be actively managed.

Why?

Even though Olive does not manage or work directly with her partner, participating in a discussion that may affect their role creates a perceived conflict of interest. The fact that others in the meeting are unaware of the relationships increases the risk that decisions may be called into question later.

Required Action:

Olive should proactively disclose the relationship to her line manager or the chair of the meeting and should remove herself from any discussion or decisions relating to her partner's team. This ensures impartiality, protects organisational integrity, and avoids any appearance of bias.