

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

POLICY ON CONFLICT OF INTEREST: STAFF AND STUDENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

The University of Aberdeen does not seek unduly to interfere in relationships between consenting adults. However the University has a duty of care to both students and staff. It is acknowledged that socialising on a friendship basis is an important aspect of University life for staff and students. It is however very important that staff act professionally at all times, acknowledging the policies and integrity of the University. Where the relationships develop into a more personal intimate nature, conflict of interest situations may arise and when that happens, it is the duty of the University to ensure safeguards are in place. This is in the best interests of staff and students.

The aim of this policy is to safeguard staff members' work relationships and to secure the interests of students within the University. Emphasis is placed on the ethical responsibility of staff not to abuse power and trust in staff/student relationships, which protects both staff and students and enhances the overall quality of the teaching learning process.

2 POLICY

The maintenance of the highest professional and ethical standards is essential to the pursuit of good practice in university teaching and learning. In this context, it is important that staff avoid situations where a close personal relationship with a student could influence academic or professional judgements and decisions. Staff should be aware that such relationships can give rise to a conflict of interest which may cause an imbalance of power between the member of staff and the student which can later give rise to accusations of harassment or allegations of improper behaviour.

For the protection of students, staff and the University and to promote the University's commitment to quality in its teaching and learning environment the boundaries and moral obligations of the professional role of staff must be fully recognised and respected. The University expects that all staff will maintain these boundaries and respect these obligations.

3 RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STAFF AND STUDENTS

3.1 Staff should recognise their professional and ethical responsibility to protect the interests of students, to avoid conflicts of interest, to respect the trust involved in the staff/student relationship and to accept the constraints and obligations which are part of that responsibility.

3.2 To maintain the relationship with students based on trust, confidence and equal treatment, staff and students are strongly advised not to enter into an intimate relationship with a student for whom they have a responsibility in the areas of teaching, research, assessment, selection or pastoral care. Such relationships can lead to conflicts of interest which can have a detrimental effect on the teaching and learning environment for other students and colleagues.

3.3 Should a personal relationship already be in existence or should such a relationship develop while the student is registered with the University it is the responsibility of the member of staff to inform their Head of School/Manager. He/she will not be required to give details other than the student's name and the nature of the association, for example family member, partner. If the member of staff would prefer not to go directly to the Head of School he/she should contact Human Resources.

3.4 The consequences of failure to disclose a relationship, which involves a conflict of interest, may be a breach of this policy which may lead to disciplinary action.

3.5 A member of staff shall not take part in the following matters in relation to a student who is currently or has recently been involved in a close personal relationship with that member of staff:

- Selection for entry to the University
- Selection for any undergraduate or postgraduate course offered by the University
- Assessment procedures
- Classification for honours
- Selection for any scholarship or prize
- Honours or postgraduate supervision

Wherever possible when such a relationship has been brought to the attention of the Head of School the member of staff should be removed from taking part in the matters listed above, with alternative arrangements being made.

3.6 It is not always feasible to avoid the involvement of the staff member and the student, for example, the staff member may be named as the grant holder on a Research grant which the student is working on. In such cases the Head of School should consult with the Head of College as to what arrangements should be put in place to protect the student, the member of staff and the other students who may be indirectly affected.

3.7 Students who may feel under pressure from a member of staff for whatever reason have the right of complaint under the Student Complaints Procedure.

3.8 If a member of staff feels threatened or harassed by a student he/she should immediately bring this to the attention of the Head of School. There is a policy on harassment, which is available from Human Resources.

4 PROCEDURES

4.1 Staff members likely to be placed in the position where they will be required to work closely with a student with whom they have a family or close personal relationship have a duty to declare their interest to their Head of School prior to any task being undertaken. Alternatively the member of staff may prefer to inform the Director of Human Resources. Such information will be treated in the utmost confidence. The Head of School/Department will make alternative arrangements to avoid any conflict of interest.

4.2 For postgraduate students, the Head of School will appoint a replacement supervisor or a co-supervisor to be the primary supervisor.

4.3 Academic judgements or decisions made with respect to the student may be re-examined, without prejudice, if the intentions and requirements of this policy have not been adhered to.

4.4 Students who are or have been involved in a close personal relationship with a member of staff can inform the Head of School as to any possible conflict of interest.

4.5 The University has a Harassment Policy and a Grievance Procedure for staff which may be relevant in some cases.

4.6 Further advice on Staff/Student Relationships can be obtained from Human Resources, Student Support and UCU.