# Medical Sciences Division

# Personnel Committee consultation on University Staff-Student Relationships policy

# Revised draft – for discussion

### ***Action for departments and course committees*:** To consider the revised draft University Staff-Student Relationships policy at Annexe A, consulting with student representatives as is deemed appropriate, and to provide comments to the Division **by the end of Friday 4th November (Week 4 of MT)** for consideration by the relevant MSD committees**.**

### **Background**

1. In Trinity term 2014 Personnel Committee approved the introduction of a Staff-Student Relationships Policy for University staff. Since the introduction of the policy, the issue has been re-considered by Personnel Committee three times – in 2018, 2020 and 2021. In 2021, Personnel Committee recommended that in the longer-term there should be consultation with stakeholders on the possibility of broader changes to the policy.
2. Since the start of this year, a working group from across the University has been discussing possible amendments to the policy. The working group has reflected on the changing environment, for example changes to College policies and those in other universities, and recent media attention on staff-student relationships in Oxford. Across the University, there is an increased awareness of the imbalances which can occur in staff-student relationships and that there is not always a shared understanding of what is acceptable behaviour. This is considered to create a potential significant reputational risk for the University.
3. In deciding to consult on a revised policy, Personnel Committee noted that MSD now prohibit ‘close, personal or intimate relationships’ between PGR students and their supervisors, and recommended that the other Divisions do likewise. This change in MSD policy was agreed by EPSC after consultation, and iterations with GSC, and has been incorporated in the divisional Code of Practice for Research Student Supervisors. DGSs and PGR supervisors will be familiar with this provision, which also covers relationships between co-supervisors. Those responsible for UG and PGT provision may find it helpful to reference this also in their discussions. The relevant section of the Code of Practice is on page 2, entitled ‘Conflicts of Interest’, and the extract is attached at Annexe D. For reference, the full text of the MSD Code of Practice for Research Student Supervisors may be downloaded here: <https://canvas.ox.ac.uk/courses/22105/files/3439292/download?download_frd=1>

### **Draft proposal**

1. The working group’s key recommendations are that the University:

(a) **prohibits** staff from entering into an intimate relationship with a student for whom they have any responsibility; and,

(b) **strongly discourages** any other (non-intimate) close personal relationship (between a staff member and student for whom they have any responsibility and requires such relationships to be declared.

1. Part (b) would require that members of staff notify their Head of Department or Chair of the Faculty Board as soon as possible if a non-intimate close personal relationship had developed, was developing or appeared likely to develop between them and the student. Following notification, the Head of Department / Chair of the Faculty Board would need to assess the risk of any conflict of interests arising and put appropriate protective measures in place if necessary.
2. The revised draft extends the scope of the current policy, both by explicitly prohibiting intimate relationships, and by strongly discouraging non-intimate personal relationships, which it extends to close friendships when a staff member has responsibility for a student, situations where a student becomes emotionally and/or practically dependent on a staff member for day to day support beyond the support provided as part of normal academic, welfare or other professional activities, or situations where a staff member becomes emotionally and/or practically dependent on a student for day to day support. This is further elaborated in Annex A to the draft policy document. It will be noted that the scope of the policy extends to all types of responsibility for a student, including advisory and mentorship roles (see clause 6 of the revised policy).
3. The revised staff-student relationships policy is attached at [Annexe A](#_Annexe_A). The previous policy is at [Annexe B](#_Current_staff-student_relationships) and the membership of the working group at [Annexe C.](#_Annexe_C)

### **Next steps**

1. University Personnel Committee is seeking feedback from divisions and departments to inform its consideration of the draft revised policy in Hilary Term 2023. Departments and course teams in MSD are invited to discuss the revised draft policy document at appropriate committees in the early part of Michaelmas Term and to submit comments to Jane Dale, Head of Education Policy and Planning ([jane.dale@medsci.ox.ac.uk](mailto:jane.dale@medsci.ox.ac.uk) ) by **no later than Friday 4th November 2022 (end of Week 4 of MT)**. You are encouraged to consult student representatives as deemed appropriate, and report any student observations as part of your return.
2. The draft revised policy will be considered by divisional USC, GSC and EPSC in the latter part of Michaelmas term, together with the feedback from departments and course teams. EPSC will agree a divisional response, which will be submitted to Personnel Committee by the end of Week 8 of MT.

**Further information**

1. Please direct any queries about this consultation in the first instance to Jane Dale, Head of Education Policy and Planning ([jane.dale@medsci.ox.ac.uk](mailto:jane.dale@medsci.ox.ac.uk) ).

# Annexe A

**Draft revised staff-student relationships policy**

[Staff-student relationships | HR Support (ox.ac.uk)](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-student-relationships)

**Summary**

The University of Oxford is committed to excellence in teaching, learning, research, and the exchange of ideas and to fostering an inclusive culture which promotes equality, values diversity and maintains a working, learning and social environment in which the rights and dignity of all members of the University community are respected. The University regards the professional relationship between members of staff and students as central to the student's educational development and wellbeing, and reminds staff of the importance of maintaining academic and professional integrity. These relationships, whether they be in a faculty or department or within a College, should not be allowed to develop beyond professional into a close personal or intimate relationship.

Close personal or intimate relationships between students and staff who have any form of responsibility for them can cause significant problems because of the imbalance of power and authority in the relationship, perceived favouritism or exploitation, and the undermining of trust in the academic process.

The University does not seek to discourage positive relationships between staff and students, including those which occur outside the formal learning environment of the University. Positive relationships between staff and students, for example in extra-curricular activities or social events, can bring benefits to all involved, provided appropriate professional boundaries are observed.

It is for these reasons that the University:

1. **prohibits** staff from entering into an intimate relationship with a student for whom they have any responsibility; and
2. **strongly discourages** any other (non-intimate) close personal relationship (as defined at paragraph 3 of this policy) between a staff member and student for whom they have any responsibility and requires such relationships to be declared.

‘Intimate relationship’ and ‘close personal relationship’ are defined below.

This policy also applies to applicants and offer-holders. Staff in breach of this policy may face disciplinary action.

**Staff–student relationships policy**

The policy relates to all members of staff who have any form of responsibility for a student.

[**Introduction**](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-student-relationships#collapse1582146)

1. This policy applies in respect of current and former close personal or intimate relationships, between members of staff and students where the staff member has any responsibility for the student.
2. ‘Intimate relationship’ includes marital, life partner, sexual, or romantic relationships or liaisons (regardless of gender, gender identity or sexual orientation), including a brief relationship / liaison and one-off occurrences, and whether they are conducted in person and/or online and/or via other electronic communication.
3. ‘Close personal relationship’ is a relationship which transgresses professional boundaries and may lead to real or perceived conflicts of interest or misuse of power and authority at work but excludes intimate relationships. Examples include close friendships when a staff member has responsibility for a student, situations where a student becomes emotionally and/or practically dependent on a staff member for day to day support beyond the support provided as part of normal academic, welfare or other professional activities, or situations where a staff member becomes emotionally and/or practically dependent on a student for day to day support. (Family relationships are covered under the [Conflict of Interests Policy](https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/integrity/conflict).) Further guidance in this area is at Annex A.
4. For the purposes of this policy, a 'member of staff' should be understood as including but not limited to any individual who is working within the University under a formal contract of employment or as a casual paid worker (including graduate students working as teaching assistants, tutors or demonstrators), and any other individual (such as visiting academics) to whom the University offers any of the privileges or facilities normally available to its employees.
5. In this policy, ‘a student’ should be understood widely and means any individual who is studying for an undergraduate or postgraduate qualification, or who is a student on any course arranged by or through the University or any part of the collegiate University, including visiting students, applicants and offer-holders. See Annex A for further information.
6. ‘Responsibility for a student’ is to be interpreted broadly to include any teaching, professional, pastoral or administrative responsibility, whether temporary or permanent, whether formally conferred on or voluntarily assumed by the staff member, and whether in a University or college context. This includes but is not limited to lecturing, teaching classes or seminars, supervising, mentoring, overseeing or advising on projects, work or laboratory experience, fieldwork, internships or vacation study placements, advising or supporting students, and the setting or marking of examinations or other assessments of any type.
7. ‘Professional relationships’ are any in which the staff member through their employment with the University has any educational, administrative, pastoral or supervisory involvement with a student. All members of staff are obliged to ensure that conflicts of interest do not arise, and that relationships with students for whom the staff member has any responsibility remain strictly professional.
8. The University **prohibits** staff from entering into an intimate relationship, and **strongly** **discourages** any other (non-intimate) close personal relationship (as defined at paragraph 3 of this policy) with a student for whom they have any responsibility including but not limited to where:
9. there is any direct supervisory or teaching relationship (for example between postgraduate students and their supervisor, or tutors and their tutees);
10. a member of staff has direct or indirect responsibility for, or involvement in, that student’s academic studies (for example, assessor of a student’s work);
11. a member of staff has direct or indirect responsibility for, or involvement in that student’s personal welfare;
12. a member of staff has a role which directly supports that student (for example, advising, mentoring or providing administrative support); or
13. a member of staff is involved in the admission, selection or support of applicants or offer-holders.
14. Close personal or intimate relationships between students and staff who have responsibility for them can cause significant problems because of the imbalance of power and authority in the relationship. These relationships can also disrupt the teaching and learning environment for other students and colleagues and lead to accusations of favouritism, exploitation or bias and undermine trust in the academic process. Staff members who engage in such relationships can find themselves subject to formal complaints and scrutiny of their professional, academic and personal integrity. There may also be ethical issues over the question of consent where there is an imbalance of power in a relationship.
15. In the rare circumstances that this policy is breached unknowingly and unintentionally, for example, where neither party was aware of each other’s position and had no reasonable basis to suspect it, the staff member should inform the Head of Department as soon as they become aware of the situation.

[**Responsibilities of staff**](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-student-relationships#collapse1582156)

*Relationships / situations commencing after the introduction of this policy*

1. Following the introduction of this policy on [xx month 2023] members of staff who have any form of responsibility for a student:
   1. are prohibited from having an intimate relationship with the student; and,
   2. must notify their Head of Department or Chair of the Faculty Board as soon as possible if a non-intimate close personal relationship has developed, is developing or appears likely to develop between them and the student.

In cases where a member of staff is in an intimate or non-intimate close personal relationship with a student for whom they do not currently have any form of responsibility, but where there is a reasonable risk that conflicts might arise in future, the member of staff must disclose the relationship to their Head of Department / Chair of the Faculty Board in order that the Head of Department / Chair of the Faculty Board can assess the risk of any conflict of interests arising and put appropriate protective measures in place if necessary. This may arise for example where the member of staff and the student are in the same Department though working in different research teams.

1. Following the introduction of this policy on [xx month 2023], members of staff must not take on or assume responsibility for a student:
   1. with whom they are in an existing intimate relationship or with whom they have had a former intimate relationship;
   2. with whom they are in an existing non-intimate close personal relationship or with whom they have previously had a non-intimate close personal relationship without first notifying their Head of Department or Chair of the Faculty Board.
2. The prohibition on intimate relationships and the obligation to disclose non-intimate close personal relationships as defined at paragraph 3 still applies even if the staff member's responsibility for the student arises solely in a College context (for example, under a separate employment contract with the College).
3. Where the Head of Department / Chair of the Faculty Board is notified of a non-intimate close personal relationship they should seek advice on practical arrangements from departmental HR staff in the first instance, who may in turn seek advice on a confidential basis from the Divisional Office or from their HR Business Partner in University HR. These practical arrangements are to be made, as far as possible, in a way which protects the student’s best interests (in both academic and welfare terms) while avoiding a conflict of interest, or grounds of complaint, for the member of staff.

*Disclosure of existing or former relationships with students pre-dating the introduction of this policy*

1. Where a staff member has already entered into a close personal or intimate relationship with a student for whom they have any responsibility before the introduction of this policy [xx month 2023], the staff member should bring this to the attention of their Head of Department / Chair of the Faculty Board within 2 months of the introduction of this policy at the latest even if the relationship is now over or if the staff member no longer has responsibility for that student. This disclosure is still required even if the staff member's responsibility for the student arises solely in a College context (for example, under a separate employment contract or other appointment with the College). In these cases the Head of Department should seek advice on practical arrangements from departmental HR staff in the first instance, who may in turn seek advice on a confidential basis from the Divisional Office or from their HR Business Partner in University HR. These practical arrangements are to be made, as far as possible, in a way which protects the student’s best interests (in both academic and welfare terms) while avoiding a conflict of interest, or grounds of complaint, for the member of staff.

*General*

1. If the staff member is unsure whether they have (or are going to take on / assume) any form of responsibility for a student in respect of whom they are or have been in a close personal or intimate relationship, they should declare the relationship to their Head of Department / Chair of the Faculty Board, in order that the Head of Department / Chair of the Faculty Board can assess the risk of unintended consequences arising.
2. Any disclosure made under this policy will, so far as possible and subject to the specific provisions of this policy, be treated in confidence, and every effort will be made to ensure that it does not disadvantage either party with regard to their professional advancement or academic progress.
3. If a third party is aware of an intimate relationship, or a non-intimate close personal relationship between a student and a staff member which causes them welfare, professional, or academic integrity concerns, then they should report these concerns to their Head of Department / Chair of the Faculty Board. Any concerns raised in this way will be treated in confidence.
4. Any member of staff who fails to comply with the terms of this policy may be subject to disciplinary action.
5. Staff are reminded that relationships involving students, applicants or offer-holders under the age of eighteen or who are vulnerable adults could fall within the scope of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 relating to persons in positions of trust having sexual relations with children under eighteen or vulnerable adults. Members of staff must never enter into a close personal or intimate relationship with a student or any other person who is under eighteen years of age or a vulnerable adult. This prohibition applies irrespective of whether the member of staff has any responsibility for the student or other person.
6. Even if a staff member does not have and is not likely to have any responsibility for a student, staff are urged to be cautious before embarking on a close personal or intimate relationship with a student. Such relationships can often run into difficulties and give rise to formal complaints rooted in real or perceived inequalities of power and questions about the nature of consent. The risks of such complaints are likely to be heightened where there is a big age difference between the staff member and the student; the student is undertaking their first degree following leaving school; and/or the student has a disability or mental or physical health vulnerabilities.
7. Staff should note that this policy applies to any applicant or offer-holder with whom they interact during the admissions process.
8. If an intimate or close personal relationship is pre-existing between a member of staff and a candidate for admission as a student, the member of staff must make the Head of Department (or equivalent) aware of it at the outset of the admissions exercise, so that steps can be taken to avoid any conflict of interest arising. The matter will, as far as possible, be handled in confidence to ensure that there is no detriment to the candidate. (For further information on conflicts of interest in a student admissions context go to <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/conflicts-of-interest> and the website links under the heading ‘Admissions and Recruitment’.)

*Other applicable policies (including Divisional policies and College policies)*

1. In addition to complying with this policy staff must also comply with:
2. The [Conflict of Interest Policy](https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/integrity/conflict/policy);
3. Any applicable Divisional policies which deal with relationships between students and staff;
4. Any applicable policies of a College of which they are an employee, associate, fellow, or member or with which they have any appointment[[1]](#footnote-1); and,
5. The University’s [Harassment Policy](https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/university-policy-on-harassment).

[**Head of department’s / Chair of the Faculty Board’s responsibilities**](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-student-relationships#collapse1582166)

1. If despite this policy a Head of Department becomes aware that an intimate relationship has developed during the course of employment or study between a member of staff and a student for whom they have any form of responsibility, this must be reported to departmental HR staff in the first instance so advice on appropriate action may be provided. Departmental HR staff may seek advice on a confidential basis from the Divisional Office or from their HR Business Partner in University HR. Appropriate action may involve notifying the College of the staff member and/or the student of the relationship.
2. If a Head of Department / Chair of the Faculty Board is notified (by the relevant staff member or by another person) of a non-intimate close personal relationship between a member of staff and a student for whom they have responsibility they should discuss with Department HR staff (and with University HR as necessary) what measures should be put in place to (a) protect the student’s best interests (including academic and welfare interests) and (b) protect the member of staff from conflicts of interest or similar potential complaints. In some cases this may involve appointing other staff to share or take over some or all of the role fulfilled by the staff member for that student. These measures may involve notifying the college of the staff member and/or the student of the relationship.

[**Guidance for students on relationships**](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-student-relationships#collapse1582766)

1. The University prohibits members of staff from entering into an intimate relationship with a student for whom they have any responsibility. The University also strongly discourages any other (non-intimate) close personal relationship between a member of staff and a student for whom they have any responsibility, and requires any such relationships to be declared by the staff member to the Head of Department / Chair of the Faculty Board, and disclosure may also be required to a senior member of their College). If such a relationship develops contrary to this policy, or pre-dates the introduction of the policy [xx month 2023], the student is encouraged to disclose it to their Head of Department / Chair of the Faculty Board and a senior member of their College welfare team in confidence.
2. Students should note the requirements of this policy for members of staff. Messages or other behaviours towards members of staff that could be interpreted as flirtatious or making advances towards an intimate relationship will usually (ie save in trivial cases) need to be reported by the member of staff to the Head of Department / Chair of the Faculty Board and/or HR Team. In some cases this may result in protective measures to separate affected parties or minimise the possibility of inappropriate behaviour or complaints. Students should also note that any behaviour that constitutes harassment (towards a staff member or a fellow student) may be the subject of disciplinary action under [Statute XI](https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/statute-xi-university-discipline-0) (University Discipline).

[**Non-consensual relationships or inappropriate behaviour**](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-student-relationships#collapse1582776)

1. If any student finds themselves in receipt of inappropriate behaviour in breach of this policy or involved in a relationship that they do not consider to be truly consensual, or if they consider that they have been adversely affected by a misuse of power, authority, or conflict of interest, they should seek support from the [Sexual Harassment and Violence Support Service](https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/welfare/supportservice) or their College welfare team. This behaviour may be covered by the [University’s policy on harassment](https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/harassment-policy).
2. Members of staff who experience advances and other unwelcome behaviour from students should raise the issue with their Head of Department, the Chair of the Faculty Board, or their manager. They can also contact the Harassment Advisory Service (see <https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/support>) or their local harassment advisor. Protective measures to separate affected parties or minimise the possibility of inappropriate behaviour or complaints may be necessary and, in serious cases, including where there has been a course of conduct over time, behaviour that constitutes harassment may justify disciplinary action against the student under [Statute XI](https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/statute-xi-university-discipline-0) (University Discipline).

[**Support and guidance**](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-student-relationships#collapse1582786)

1. Any member of staff or student who has questions about this policy and its application should discuss them with their Head of Department / Chair of the Faculty Board in the first instance.
2. Additional support for staff may be sought from the Head of Administration and Finance / Departmental Administrator or equivalent, or the HR team in the departments/faculty, or from an appropriate trade union.
3. Additional support for students may be sought from the [Sexual Harassment and Violence Support Service](https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/welfare/supportservice) or College welfare team.

# Annex A

## Further guidance regarding close personal relationships that fall within paragraph 3 of this policy

1. The University does not seek to discourage positive relationships between staff and students, and in many cases these may appropriately include jointly participating in informal, social or leisure activities. There are many such positive relationships – for example, socialising at or in the margins of a University event, attendance at clubs relating to outside interests or discussion groups outside of formal learning. However, at all times in their relationships with students, staff should conduct themselves professionally and in line with this policy.
2. Paragraph 5 of the main policy sets out the definition of ‘student’. For the avoidance of doubt, ‘student’ also includes students who have no contract with the University such as college-only visiting students, Common Award students or associate members of common rooms.
3. This annex provides further examples of close personal relationships caught by the definition at paragraph 3 of this policy.
4. A rule of thumb that could be used for testing whether a relationship is appropriate or not is as follows: would you be happy for other students and staff to know about the relationship that you are in (and the types of interaction you are having), and/or might other students or staff perceive that there could be a conflict of interest or that academic integrity might be compromised by the relationship? If in doubt, the best course is to disclose the relationship so that appropriate measures (to protect both the student and the member of staff) can be considered.
5. Examples of close personal relationships that fall within the definition at paragraph 3 include the following (though these are not intended to be exhaustive):

* *Financial dependence* – a student living in their supervisor’s house, and being dependent on them for financial support;
* *Emotional dependence* – examples include (a) spending significant amounts of time with a student after the break-down of a relationship with a third party, or following another traumatic event, relying on each other for emotional support; or (b) where the nature of a student’s disability or welfare/support needs cause a member of staff to conclude that they, and only they, can properly help the student, so that the staff member or student may receive insufficient support or become vulnerable (including vulnerable to complaints) if a breakdown or practical disruption to the relationship occurs; or,
* *Close friendships -* where a staff member has any responsibility for a student (as defined at paragraph 6 above) professional boundaries and academic integrity in supervision and decision making must be maintained. For example, if a supervisor has a number of students in their research group, and one of them they meet regularly for drinks or invite them home for dinner, but others in the same group are not invited to join such activities, then questions of favouritism or academic integrity may arise.

1. Though the University email system should, in most cases, be the proper channel for staff-student communications, the University does not forbid communication outside that system. Supervision or seminar groups sometimes have a common social media account for communications, and there may be good practical reasons why a staff member chooses to communicate using a private (non-University) email address. However, the University advises staff to be mindful of perceptions that communicating through social media or other private means may give rise to, and to remember that use of such channels will not prevent material becoming disclosable later if a complaint arises (eg under the Harassment Policy).

# Annexe B

# **Current staff-student relationships policy**

[Staff-student relationships | HR Support (ox.ac.uk)](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-student-relationships)

## Summary

The structure of the collegiate University is such that staff and students will often come into contact both in their faculty or department and within their college and this can lead to the development between them of a close personal or intimate relationship.

These relationships can develop, for instance, between students and staff involved in lecturing or conducting tutorials, supervising their research, administering awards, or providing personal and welfare support. Such relationships raise issues, relating to inequalities of power in a relationship, or perceived favouritism, or the undermining of trust in the academic process.

In the event of a close personal or intimate relationship developing with a student, for whom a staff member has any responsibility, the University requires that this is brought to the attention of the member of staff’s Head of Department in order that action can be taken to assess and manage any consequences.

## Staff–student relationships policy

The policy generally relates to members of academic and academic-related staff who have any responsibility for a student with whom they are having or have had a relationship.

### [Introduction](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-student-relationships#collapse1582146)

1. This policy covers current and former close personal or intimate relationships, however brief, between members of staff and students where the staff member has any responsibility for the student. These include, but are not limited to: marital, sexual, romantic, or emotional relationships whether they are conducted in person or online. (Family relationships are covered under the [Conflict of Interests Policy](https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/integrity/conflict).)

For the purposes of this policy, a 'member of staff' should be understood as including but not limited to any individual who is working within the University under a formal contract of employment or as a casual paid worker (including graduate students working as teaching assistants or demonstrators), and any other individual (such as visiting academics) to whom the University offers any of the privileges or facilities normally available to its employees.

A student should be understood as any individual who is studying for an undergraduate or postgraduate qualification, or who is a student on any course arranged by or through the University or any part of the collegiate University.

Responsibility for a student is to be interpreted broadly to include any teaching, professional, pastoral or administrative responsibility, whether temporary or permanent, and whether in a University or College context. This includes but is not limited to lecturing, supervising, mentoring, overseeing or advising on projects, work or laboratory experience, fieldwork, internships or vacation study placements, and the setting or marking of examinations or other assessments of any type.

1. The University regards the professional relationship between members of staff and students as central to the student's educational development and wellbeing. Professional relationships are any in which the staff member through his or her employment with the University has any educational, administrative, pastoral or supervisory involvement with a student. The University reminds staff of the importance of maintaining academic and professional integrity and of their responsibility for the welfare of students.
2. Implicit in the professional role of members of staff is an obligation to ensure that conflicts of interest do not arise, and that relationships with students for whom the staff member has any responsibility remain strictly professional, respecting the trust inherent in them.
3. While the University does not wish to regulate the private lives of its staff, it strongly advises staff not to enter into a close personal or intimate relationship with a student for whom they have any responsibility, and alerts them to the complications that may result.
4. To embark on a close personal or intimate relationship with a student often involves difficulties rooted in the inequalities of power as well as problems in maintaining the boundaries of professional and personal life.  Also, these relationships could disrupt the teaching and learning environment for other students and colleagues and might lead to accusations of favouritism or bias and undermine trust in the academic process.

### [Guidance for staff on relationships and the need for disclosure](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-student-relationships#collapse1582156)

1. The University requires that any close personal or intimate relationship with a student for whom a staff member has any responsibility is brought to the attention of the member of staff’s Head of Department as soon as such a relationship commences or as soon as the staff member perceives the commencement of such a relationship to be likely (whichever is earlier) in order that action can be taken to mitigate any unintended consequences. For the avoidance of doubt, this requirement arises even if the staff member's responsibility for the student arises solely in a College context (for example, under a separate employment contract with the College).                                                                                                        The member of staff should also disclose any former relationship with a current student for whom they are given or are to be given responsibility. If the staff member is unsure if they have any responsibility for the student, they should declare the relationship to their Head of Department, in order that they can assess the risk of unintended consequences arising. Any declaration of this kind will, so far as possible and subject to the specific provisions of this policy, be treated in confidence, and every effort will be made to ensure that it does not disadvantage either party with regard to their professional advancement or academic progress.
2. Disciplinary action may be taken against a member of staff who fails to declare a close personal or intimate relationship, or the likely commencement of such a relationship, as required by this policy as soon as is practically possible and in every case within one week of the relationship commencing or the assignment of responsibility for a student whom the staff member has a current or prior relationship.
3. Attention is drawn to the fact that relationships involving students under the age of eighteen or vulnerable adults could fall within the scope of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 relating to persons in positions of trust having sexual relations with children under eighteen or vulnerable adults. Members of staff must not enter into a close personal or intimate relationship with a student under eighteen years of age or a vulnerable adult for whom they have any responsibility under any circumstances.
4. If a close personal or intimate relationship is pre-existing between a member of staff and a candidate for admission as a student, the member of staff must make the Head of Department (or equivalent) aware of it at the outset of the admissions exercise, so that steps can be taken to avoid any conflict of interest arising. The matter will, as far as possible, be handled in confidence to ensure that there is no detriment to the candidate.

### [Head of department’s responsibilities](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-student-relationships#collapse1582166)

1. If such a relationship develops during the course of employment or study between a member of staff and a student for whom they have a professional responsibility, this must be disclosed by the member of staff to the Head of Department as early as possible so they can take steps to:

* consult with the member of staff and the student to identify any impact their relationship may have within the University
* facilitate the re-organisation of duties to minimise contact and ensure the member of staff is not tutoring, supervising, assessing, providing pastoral care, or professionally responsible for administering activities in which the student is involved
* ensure that appropriate action is taken to minimise the potential effect of the relationship on other staff and/or students

1. In the case of a student whose studies or research are in a very specialised area, such that no alternative tutor or supervisor is available, the Head of Department should consider whether it would be appropriate to engage a co-supervisor or external supervisor, in order to ensure that the member of staff does not have sole responsibility for supervising the student’s work or for taking decisions that affect the student.
2. The Head of Department will deal with the situation in a manner that protects the dignity and privacy of all parties, and those involved will be expected to comply with any reasonable decision or action. There will be no obligation on the parties involved to keep their relationship confidential.
3. Heads of Department should seek advice from departmental HR staff in the first instance, who may in turn seek advice on a confidential basis from the Divisional Office or from their HR Business Partner in University HR.

### [Guidance for students on relationships and the need for disclosure](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-student-relationships#collapse1582766)

1. The University advises students not to enter into any relationship with a member of University staff with any responsibility for them, as it may lead the staff member to compromise the integrity of their professional relationship. If such a relationship develops, and the student is not sure that a member of staff has disclosed their relationship, they are encouraged to independently advise their Head of Department or Chair of the Faculty Board in confidence.

### [Non-consensual relationships or inappropriate behaviour](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-student-relationships#collapse1582776)

1. If any student finds themselves in receipt of unwanted or inappropriate behaviour or involved in a relationship that they do not consider to be truly consensual, or if they consider that they have been adversely affected by a misuse of power, authority, or conflict of interest, they should refer to the [University’s policy on harassment](https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/harassment-policy).

Members of staff who experience unwanted advances and other unwelcome behaviour should raise the issue with their Head of Department, the Chair of the Faculty Board, or their manager.

### [Support and guidance](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-student-relationships#collapse1582786)

1. Any member of staff or student who has questions about this policy and its application should discuss them with their Head of Department or Chair of the Faculty Board in the first instance.

Additional support for staff may be sought from the Departmental Administrator or HR Officer, or from an appropriate trade union.

Additional support for students may be sought from the University’s Director of [Student Welfare and Support Services](https://academic.admin.ox.ac.uk/student-welfare)

### [Relationships in a college context](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-student-relationships#collapse1582796)

1. If a member of staff who has an appointment with a college in addition to their University appointment enters into a close personal or intimate relationship with a student for which they have any responsibility, then that member of staff may be bound by college policies in addition to this policy.

# Annexe C

## Membership of the Working Group

Ruth Kinahan, HR Policy Team Leader (Chair)

Gillian Hamnett, Director of Education Policy and Support

Adrienne Hopkins, Head of the Equality and Diversity Unit

Sophie Lopez Welsch, Student Welfare and Support Services

Stephen Schneider, Senior Education Solicitor, Legal Services

Sara Thompson, Employment Solicitor, Legal Services

Alison Sealey, Clerk to the Proctors

Claire Vallance, Senior Tutor at Hertford and Department of Chemistry

Bill Wood, Faculty of Theology and Religion and Fellow of Oriel; member of Personnel Committee

Oluwakemi 'Kemi' Agunbiade, Vice President for Women, Students Union

Kathryn Fairhurst Jones, HR Policy Team (support to Ruth)

Annexe D

Extract from the MSD Code of Practice for Research Student Supervisors

Conflicts of Interest

Supervisors are **prohibited** from forming close, personal or intimate relationships with their students (including, but not limited to, marital, sexual, romantic, or emotional relationships; see also [the University’s staff-student relationships policy](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-student-relationships)). If such a relationship develops then it is in the best interests of both the student and the supervisor and of their immediate colleagues for this to be reported to the DGS or Head of Department, and for alterative and independent supervisory arrangements to be made, without detriment to the student. This does not preclude the supervisor and student continuing to collaborate scientifically with one another, but the formal supervisory responsibility must cease. If it is found that a supervisor has not reported such a relationship then they will not be permitted to supervise any further students.

Where a close personal relationship exists or develops *between co-supervisors* of a student, an additional senior academic colleague should be identified to act as a source of independent advice and support for the student concerned. This should be an individual of sufficient seniority to resolve any issues effectively, normally either the relevant Head of Department or Head of Unit.

Supervisors must inform their DGS or Head of Department if they are reviewing an application for admissions or funding from a member of their immediate family (or a person with whom they have a close personal relationship).

[Updated October 2021]

1. Where a staff member’s action places them in breach of this policy and in breach of any applicable College policy, that staff member may face disciplinary action by both the University and the applicable College. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)