

Staff and Student Relationships Policy

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1. Purpose

- 1.1 The aim of the University's Policy on Personal Relationships is to maintain professional standards of conduct and safeguard the interests of students and staff in the event of a relationship developing between a member of staff and a student or between colleagues, irrespective of the parties' sexual orientation or gender identity.
- 1.2 This policy is intended to ensure that appropriate safeguards and processes are in place to prevent potential abuses of power and/or sexual misconduct amongst St Mary's community members – particularly between staff and students.
- 1.3 This policy also seeks to protect staff and students from potential allegations of conflicts of interest (whether actual or perceived), and to limit circumstances in which positions of power may be abused. In doing so, it seeks to ensure a positive and supportive work environment where all are treated fairly.

2. Scope

- 2.1 This policy applies to all staff members, both full and part-time, employed on permanent and temporary contracts (including HPAs) and all students that are enrolled at the university. This policy also applies to students engaged in study at St Mary's third-party affiliates (e.g. SMULIC), short course students, and individuals who are engaged with the university on a volunteer basis, on work experience, and as agency workers.
- 2.2 For the purpose of this policy, individuals are considered as 'staff' or 'student' in line with their primary function at the university. Staff who are enrolled as part-time students are considered 'staff' and students who are employed as part-time staff are considered 'students.'

3. Definitions

- 3.1 An **abuse of power** is defined as:

An instance where an individual uses their position of power or authority in an unacceptable manner. Abuses of power can take many forms, including but not limited to:

- 3.1.1 Coercion
- 3.1.2 Manipulation
- 3.1.3 Pressuring others to engage in conduct they are not comfortable with
- 3.1.4 Grooming

- 3.2 **Grooming** is defined as:

An individual in a position of power slowly and gradually building trust over time for the purposes of manipulating another to do things they may not be comfortable with or make them less likely to reject abusive behaviours. For example, early stages of grooming may involve a supervisor singling out a supervisee to make them feel special and may result in sexual abuse and/or exploitation.

- 3.3 An **intimate relationship** is defined as:

A consensual romantic or sexual relationship between two individuals that goes beyond a professional or working relationship. An intimate relationship can last any amount of time.

3.4 A **vulnerable adult** is defined as:

a person aged 18 or over, “who is or may be in need of community care services by reason of mental or other disability, age or illness; and who is or may be unable to take care of themselves, or unable to protect themselves against significant harm or exploitation” (source: Department of Health Publication “No Secrets” 2000)

3.5 **Freedom to consent** is defined as:

A person who is able to make a choice without fear of negative consequences if they said no. A person is not free to consent if they are:

- 3.5.1 Being threatened with violence (by any party)
- 3.5.2 Being threatened with humiliation or social repercussions
- 3.5.3 Led to believe that the success of their work or studies would be threatened if they refused
- 3.5.4 Being blackmailed
- 3.5.5 Experiencing a power imbalance between themselves and the other party that leads to feeling pressure to continue the relationship against their will

3.6 **Capacity to consent** is defined as:

A person’s capacity to consent refers to their ability to consent (whether physical or mental ability) and their ability to understand the consequences of their choices. For example, someone who is asleep does not have the capacity to consent. A person’s capacity to consent may also be compromised by the influence of alcohol or drugs or the presence of a cognitive or learning difficulty, or mental health condition.

4. Policy

4.1 When an intimate relationship occurs between individuals in inherently unequal positions of power (for example, where one is expected to teach or supervise the other), there is a potential for abuse or perceptions of abuse. At St Mary’s, such positions include, but are not limited to:

- a. A lecturer/supervisor and their student
- b. A manager and any member of staff they manage or have authority over
- c. Mentor and mentee
- d. Advisor and advisee
- e. Resident mentor and resident
- f. Principal investigator and postdoctoral scholar or research assistant in their research group

- 4.2 In these relationships, the potential for conflict of interest, exploitation, favouritism, or bias may undermine the integrity of the supervision or teaching/evaluation provided, and may have an adverse impact on the working or learning environment for those involved or for those on the broader team/course/department.
- 4.3 Intimate relationships in which one party is in a position to evaluate or influence the career of another may also provide grounds for third party complaints citing unfair access or advantages provided from one party to the other – whether actual or perceived.
- 4.4 This policy prohibits intimate relationships (as defined in 3.3);
- 4.4.1 This policy prohibits intimate relationships with staff or students who are under 18 or are considered a vulnerable adult (as defined in 3.4).
- 4.4.2 This policy prohibits intimate relationships (as defined in 3.3) between staff and students or between colleagues who have a direct supervisory (i.e. line manager or position of authority) relationship or have a working/teaching relationship where there is an inherent power imbalance (as defined in 3.1).
- 4.5 If an individual suspects a prohibited relationship between staff or staff and students (as defined in 4.4.2), they are encouraged to raise it with the staff member's line manager or student's personal tutor, and the suspected relationship may be considered under the Disciplinary Policy and/or the Student Disciplinary Procedure.
- 4.6 If an individual suspects a prohibited relationship between staff or staff and students (as defined in 4.4.1), they are encouraged to report the suspected relationship to their designated safeguarding officer (DSO) as in line with the Safeguarding Policy.
- 4.7 Where a member of staff or student is unclear whether their relationship is prohibited or they are in an intimate relationship as outlined in this policy, they are encouraged to consult with one of the following options:
- 4.7.1 For staff: seek confidential advice via the [Employee Assistance Programme \(EAP\)](#); seek advice from their line manager; contact their HR Business Partner for an informal conversation to work through their situation; reach out to their [Designated Safeguarding Officer \(DSO\) or Lead Safeguarding Officer \(LSO\)](#) for guidance.
- 4.7.2 For students: seek advice from [Student Services](#) or their Personal Tutor
- 4.8 In order to reduce abuse of power or conflict of interest and maintain appropriate professional relationships between staff and/or staff and students, staff members are encouraged to:
- 4.8.1 Maintain an appropriate physical and emotional distance from other staff/students while working/teaching;
- 4.8.2 Perform their University duties in the best interests of the University without favour towards any individual student or staff member over another;
- 4.8.3 Avoid paying undue special attention to a particular student or member of staff which may be seen as grooming
- 4.8.4 Staff should use their University email account, telephone (including Microsoft Teams/Zoom) and internet access for work-related communications with staff/students and maintain professional communications. All emails and

work-related instant messages should be written in a professional manner; for further guidance, please refer to the Conduct section of our Social Media policy.

- 4.8.5 Establish boundaries between professional and non-professional communication with colleagues;
- 4.8.6 Adhere to the same guidelines, where logistically possible, when a staff member or student are participating in fieldwork, conferences and other University activities away from their usual workplace/classroom;
- 4.8.7 Where possible, ensure that meetings and discussions about University matters occur on campus or other appropriate premises (including Zoom or Microsoft Teams).
- 4.8.8 Don't hesitate to refer colleagues and/or students with support needs to a relevant University support service, such as our Employee Assistance Programme or Student Services.

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