

Personal Relationships at Heriot-Watt Global Statement

A supportive environment across the Heriot-Watt community is a central focus at all our campuses. Universities thrive on interactions between people from diverse backgrounds, relying on the professional integrity of relationships between staff members and in the staff/student relationship. It's important that we underpin these personal relationships with professional integrity across the University community alongside protecting staff and students from inappropriate behaviours.

This Guidance for staff sets out a clear statement about personal relationships, to create an open, safe and transparent environment that protects all parties, rather than to place unreasonable limitations on relationships across the University community.

The University recognises that there may be a risk of conflict of interest in some personal relationships. The University therefore requires that staff members' personal relationships either with colleagues or students, though not the nature of the relationship, be declared via a [Conflict of Interest Disclosure form](#).

This new statement is underpinned by the [Conflict of Interest Policy](#) and clearly outlines the expectation for staff to declare personal relationships and to understand the restrictions on intimate relationships.

Examples of what constitutes personal relationships are provided in the FAQs section below.

All intimate/sexual relationships between staff and students are strictly prohibited at the Dubai and Malaysia Campuses.

Under UK legislation,, a person aged 18 or over commits an offence if they engage in sexual activity with someone under the age of 18 where the person is in a position of trust. This includes in respect of those who are receiving education at an institution.

Additionally, the University strongly discourages any intimate/sexual relationships between staff and students where there is a professional connection, including through teaching, acting as a PI or research student supervisor, acting as student adviser or counsellor.

This includes circumstances where students undertaking work as a casual worker interact with other students (e.g. engaged as a Demonstrator). If you are in doubt, please complete the conflict of interest disclosure form and it can be confirmed whether or not the connection is "professional".

The conflict of interest process is designed to protect all parties and supports the University, to take steps to mitigate any challenges that may arise in areas such as, for example, assessment, performance management or recruitment.

If you have any queries or issues and don't feel comfortable discussing this with your line manager you may contact your HR Consultant in the first instance.

FAQS

Q. What constitutes a personal relationship?

A. There are many types of personal connections covered by the term ‘personal relationships. The University is not interested in the type of relationship that you have but it may be appropriate to disclose that a relationship exists. This could be, though is not limited to, those outlined below.

- family relationships such as spousal, civil or other enduring partnership or a relative included extended family
- business/commercial/financial relationships
- sexual relationships
- close friendships

You may also have close relationships with neighbours, or it may be appropriate to disclose previous relationships where there is or may be a professional connection. If you are in doubt, please complete the form and the University can confirm whether or not the connection is “professional”.

Q. What is a conflict of Interest?

A. A conflict of interest can occur when professional fairness or integrity is undermined. This can be real, where an individual is in a position of influence, or perceived, where there are assumptions made about an individual’s position and potential to influence. The University is seeking to remove any conflict of interest and support people across the University community. The best way to achieve this is through declaring personal relationships.

Q. Why should I tell you about my personal relationships?

A. The University has strengthened the requirement to disclose personal relationships to ensure the University maintains a safe and supportive environment. The University is therefore in a better position to support members of the University community in maintaining personal and professional integrity and ensuring protections against any misuse of power in personal relationships.

Staff (and students) can maintain personal and professional integrity by removing conflicts of interest that may arise from a personal relationship. This maybe, for example, reviewing reporting structures to remove a potential or a perceived conflict of interest in the line management, reviewing assessment in teaching, or an individual’s role in recruitment.

Q. When should I declare a personal relationship?

A. It is advisable to disclose a personal relationship if you are likely to be in contact with an individual in a professional capacity. It may also be appropriate to disclose a developing relationship.

Where the relationship is a personal but not familial one, the member of staff should apply common sense and complete the [Conflict of Interest Disclosure Form](#) at the earliest point at which they feel the relationship is developing (on mutual grounds) beyond that which might be considered to be a “normal” staff/student relationship by someone outwith the university environment.

Within the interactions between staff and students there can a fine line between encouraging and applying good working and supportive relationships (for example, a certain amount of socialising as a group).

There can be potential for such situations to lead to inappropriate interpretation or importance being placed on the relationship. This can occur when friendly interaction becomes misinterpreted, or relationships develop into closer interactions, even when both parties are willing participants. It can lead to perceived or actual conflict of interest, which can have a detrimental effect on the teaching and learning environment for other students and colleagues, as well as on the individuals in the relationship.

If you are unsure about whether your friendship or relationship may constitute a Conflict of Interest, you should complete the Declaration Form.

Q. What is the Conflict of Interest Policy?

A. The [Conflict of Interest Policy](#) outlines how the University manages conflict of interest and is the policy used for declaring any conflict of interest including declaring personal relationships.

Q. What happens if I don't declare a personal relationship?

A. The purpose of declaring a personal relationship is to make sure everyone is protected at the earliest opportunity. If you do not declare a personal relationship or professional connection when you are required to do so, this will result in disciplinary action being taken which may lead to dismissal in line with the Heriot-Watt University Disciplinary Code, Disciplinary Policy and Procedure.

Q. What happens if my relationship breaks down?

A. It may not be necessary to change the status of your declared relationship. You can take your time to decide if there is a need to change the declaration. You may find you need additional support because the breakdown of a relationship can be difficult. You can find sources of wellbeing support on the HR Hub.

Q. Does it matter what campus I'm at?

A. The requirement to declare personal relationship is across all campuses.

Q. If I have already declared an existing relationship via the Conflict of Interest Policy, do I need to do so again?

A. It is worth repeating a declaration to ensure that the relevant records are up to date

Q. Can a student declare a personal relationship?

A. It is possible for students to declare personal relationships, although the responsibility to declare a relationship is placed on the staff member. Students should contact Student Wellbeing Services studentwellbeing@hw.ac.uk

If you are acting as student adviser or counsellor or you are undertaking any work as a casual worker with other students (such as Demonstrator) it may be appropriate to make a declaration as if you were a member of staff. If you are in doubt, please complete the form and it can be confirmed whether or not the connection is "professional".