

Staff-to-Student Relationships Policy

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Contents:

1.	Introduction	2
2.	Scope	3
3.	Glossary.....	3
4.	Responsibilities	5
	University Leadership Board.....	5
	Managers	5
	Employees.....	5
5.	Staff-to-student relationships.....	5
	Intimate relationships.....	5
	Pre-existing intimate relationships	6
	Personal relationships.....	6
6.	Declaration and management of staff-to-student relationships.....	6
7.	Consequences of Non-compliance	7
8.	Monitoring and review	8
9.	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion	8
10.	Related policies and standards/documentation	8
11.	Appendix A.....	9
12.	Document and version control information	10

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Through its Empowering University strategy, De Montfort University (DMU) is committed to supporting student and staff wellbeing by creating an environment which values difference and is supportive, honest and compassionate towards others, where everyone feels safe and able to be themselves. The university aims to deliver an engaging experience to its students and staff, to build their confidence and foster their sense of belonging and fulfilment in a nurturing and inclusive community.
- 1.2 DMU therefore values good relationships between staff and students, and recognises that these can be mutually rewarding and help to create a vibrant working and learning environment through which everyone can achieve their full potential.
- 1.3 However, it is also recognised that professional boundaries in relationships are of critical importance given the inherent power imbalance between a member of staff and a student. Staff must be alert to the fact that their professional role places them in a position of trust, and a personal or intimate relationship with a student (irrespective of the student's age, maturity and level of study) may be seen as an abuse of this position, exposing them to a conflict of interests, whether potential, actual, perceived or alleged. Staff are expected to display the highest standards of professionalism in their relationships with students in order to protect themselves from allegations or perceptions of wrongdoing and to protect students from the possibility of harm.
- 1.4 The Office for Students (OfS) requires universities to set clear behavioural standards for students, staff and visitors, as part of ensuring that the necessary infrastructure is in place to prevent and address sexual misconduct and harassment affecting students, in order to ensure compliance with its Condition of Registration E6¹ ('Condition E6'). Universities UK (UUK) has produced a series of recommendations to support universities in preventing and addressing staff-to-student sexual misconduct, noting the importance of acknowledging the unequal power relations between staff and students, and highlighting the legal and moral responsibility of universities to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all students and staff.
- 1.5 The purpose of this policy is therefore to assist staff in identifying when a conflict may exist or arise as a result of a relationship or connection with a student, to clarify the behaviours expected of staff in order to ensure conflicts of interest do not arise and to safeguard professional relationships and protect students and staff from inappropriate behaviour or conduct. It is intended to enable the correct procedures to be followed so that members of staff are not open to potential, perceived or actual impropriety, bias, abuse of authority, discrimination, bullying/harassment, conflicts of interest or favouritism.

¹ [Condition E6: Harassment and sexual misconduct - Office for Students](#)

2. Scope

- 2.1 This policy applies to all DMU staff. This means all university employees, regardless of seniority or contract type, including both academic and professional services staff, whether full time, part-time, fixed-term or permanent, salaried or hourly paid. It also applies to all honorary appointees (e.g. Emeritus Professors and visiting academics), agency staff (e.g. Unitemps), external consultants and members of the Board of Governors (including members of sub-committees of the Board).
- 2.2 The policy also applies to all staff working for or on behalf of Innovative Educational Partnerships Limited (IEPL), including all employees, consultants, contractors, interns, casual workers and agency workers.
- 2.3 This policy covers former relationships (whether personal or intimate as defined below) if there is still the potential for a conflict of interest to arise. The examples given in the [Glossary](#) are not exhaustive but serve to illustrate the sorts of situations that may occur. The guiding principle will be whether there is an imbalance of power/authority/influence and the potential for any harm, e.g. through a conflict of interest or breach of trust, to be perceived or to arise.

3. Glossary

The following terms used in the policy are defined as follows:

- 3.1 **Student** – any individual registered onto a course of study or apprenticeship at DMU, irrespective of their level of study, whether or not they are a mature student, and regardless of whether they are studying full time, part time or by distance learning. In respect of students who are aged under 18 and/or are vulnerable adults, see also the university's Policy for **Managing Students who are Aged Under 18 on Registration** and the [Safeguarding Policy, Procedure and Guidance](#).
- 3.2 NB. For the purposes of this policy, where staff are also enrolled as students at the university, they are defined by their staff status, unless their role as a staff member is clearly incidental, e.g. if they are working as a Student Ambassador or for a very small number of hours. Where students are employed part-time by the university during their studies, or as a placement student as part of their course of study, they are defined for the purposes of this policy by their principal status as a student and not as a member of staff.
- 3.3 **Personal relationships** – these include relatives, friends or any relationship (other than that created by the employer/employee relationship) where there is financial dependence. For example, this would include relatives by blood, marriage or adoption, cohabitees, business partners or associates, close friendships (as opposed to acquaintances), membership of

associations pledged to render mutual assistance, and any other relationship where an impartial observer might reasonably perceive and/or conclude that a conflict of interest may arise. For academic/lecturing staff, this could extend to situations where the student is known to the staff member through close contact established in a context unrelated to DMU, for example in a previous role or outside of work capacity, and where previous knowledge of the student might impact on their behaviour, or the student's, or that of anyone else in the learning situation.

- 3.4 Intimate relationships – these include all those relationships with sexual or romantic contact, either in person and/or online or via means of other electronic communication, and whether one-off or longer-term. These also include informal situations such as where the parties consider they are 'seeing each other' or 'going out together'. For the purposes of this policy, former intimate relationships which are no longer ongoing are included in this definition.
- 3.5 Conflict of interest - these arise where the commitments and obligations owed by a member of staff or student to the University, or to other bodies (for example a funding body), appear to be compromised or are likely to be compromised by either personal gain, gain to immediate family members or a person with whom there is an intimate relationship, or the commitments and obligations that person owes to another person or body.
- 3.6 Sexual misconduct – UUK define staff-to-student sexual misconduct as follows:
- All behaviour of a physically or emotionally intimate or sexual nature by a staff member that, reasonably considered, is inappropriate and/or unacceptable. This includes unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature that:*
- a. has the purpose, or may reasonably be considered to have the effect, of violating a student's dignity, or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for a student; or*
 - b. is an abuse of power over a student; or*
 - c. is more or less favourable treatment of a student because the student has rejected or submitted to such behaviour – through any medium, including online.*
- 3.7 It is important to note that even if the behaviour is not expressly unwanted or is consensual, this would still be regarded as sexual misconduct if points a. or b. above apply.
- 3.8 Within Condition E6, the OfS states that sexual misconduct is 'any unwanted or attempted unwanted conduct of a sexual nature and includes, but is not limited to, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape'.

4. Responsibilities

University Leadership Board

- 4.1 The University Leadership Board has overall responsibility for ensuring the effective operation of this policy, as part of ensuring its compliance with Condition E6.

Managers

- 4.2 PVC/Deans, directors and line managers have day-to-day responsibility for overseeing the implementation of this policy and ensuring that staff are regularly reminded of the standards of behaviour expected of them and of the need to declare any personal or pre-existing intimate relationships in accordance with section 6 below.

Employees

- 4.3 Employees must follow the approach laid out within this policy and work collaboratively to enhance student protection, following relevant processes and remaining vigilant. Employees must declare any personal or pre-existing relationships in accordance with section 6 below.

5. Staff-to-student relationships

Intimate relationships

- 5.1 Intimate relationships between members of staff and students can raise questions about abuse of power and influence, consent and trust/confidentiality. They can lead to perceived or actual conflicts of interest and allegations of misconduct or abuse, and can have a detrimental effect on the teaching, research and learning environment for other students and colleagues, as well as the boundaries between personal and professional life. These issues may occur at the outset, during, or on the termination of a relationship, or where a consensual relationship later becomes non-consensual. At the extreme, intimate relationships between staff and students can include or lead to the abuse of power and trust, controlling/coercive behaviour, harassment, sexual misconduct or exploitation.
- 5.2 In order to protect both members of staff and students from these risks, DMU prohibits members of staff from entering into any intimate relationship with a student, where the relationship was not pre-existing. “Pre-existing” in this context means where the relationship existed before the status of one or both of the parties became that of staff or student at DMU.

- 5.3 For the avoidance of doubt, such relationships are prohibited even where the staff member has no direct or indirect responsibility for, or involvement in, any aspect of that student's academic studies and/or pastoral welfare. Staff should exercise care and take all reasonable steps to ascertain whether someone is a student at DMU before starting a relationship, but if having done so, for example having met someone in a context where it was not reasonable to assume any connection to DMU, they should declare this so that proportionate action can be taken.

Pre-existing intimate relationships

- 5.4 It is recognised that there may be pre-existing intimate relationships between members of staff and students, e.g. where the partner of a DMU or IEPL employee enrolls as a student at the university. Such pre-existing relationships are not prohibited and should not normally preclude individuals from being able to work or study at DMU. However, they should be declared in accordance with [section 6](#) below.

Personal relationships

- 5.5 It is recognised that personal relationships may exist between staff and students, e.g. a close friend, or a child or other relative of a member of staff may be enrolled at DMU as a student. Such relationships are not prohibited and should not normally preclude individuals from being able to work or study at DMU. However, they should be declared in accordance with [section 6](#) below.
- 5.6 In the case of a friendship with a student, members of staff should be aware of how a close friendship between a staff member and a student may be perceived by others as a potential conflict of interest, particularly due to the power-imbalance that exists. Therefore, this is strongly discouraged. In all circumstances the expectations as set out at [Appendix A](#) must be adhered to.

6. Declaration and management of staff-to-student relationships

- 6.1 Where a personal or pre-existing intimate relationship exists or existed between a member of staff and a student, the need for openness and transparency is particularly important to protect both the staff member and the student from any inference of impropriety. The member of staff is responsible for declaring any such relationship without delay and dealing appropriately with any perceived, potential or actual conflict of interest. The member of staff should do so by declaring the relationship in confidence using the [Staff / Student Relationship Declaration form](#) which is available on the Intranet. The information shared will allow for an assessment to be undertaken of any perceived, potential or actual conflict of

interests, so that the conflict may be effectively understood and managed. Where a member of staff feels uncomfortable with this arrangement, they should seek advice from HR as soon as possible and, in any event, should not avoid their duty to disclose. All personal data collected will be processed in accordance with data protection law and as advised on the Declaration form. The university's Data Protection Officer is available if staff have any questions about the relevant data protection obligations.

- 6.2 Where any staff-to-student relationship as defined in this policy exists, the member of staff must not have direct or indirect professional, supervisory or pastoral responsibility for the student. This will include all elements of the student life cycle, right from application and enrolment through to issuing references. To avoid any allegations of unfair bias, the member of staff will not be permitted to take any decision concerning a student with whom they have any such relationship. Where it is a decision being made collectively, they will be required to withdraw from the decision-making process concerning that student.
- 6.3 The university acknowledges that there may be circumstances when a student chooses to engage in an activity delivered by the University that is facilitated by the member of staff with whom the student has a personal relationship. This is discouraged wherever possible, but where unavoidable such circumstances must be discussed with the individual's line manager to ascertain if appropriate alternative arrangements for marking, assessment or feedback may be made. These discussions should be recorded on the [Staff / Student Relationship Declaration Form](#).
- 6.4 The person to whom the disclosure is made is responsible for ensuring, where necessary and after discussion with the staff member concerned, that appropriate alternative arrangements are made with respect to any perceived, potential or actual conflict of interest. Steps will be taken to ensure that the member of staff is not in a position to make or potentially influence decisions affecting the student, or have responsibility for the student in any of the ways set out [6.2 above](#).
- 6.5 In all situations the expectation is that members of staff will act with integrity and professional boundaries will be respected and maintained. [Appendix 1](#) sets out the standards of behaviour expected in order to remain within these professional boundaries.

7. Consequences of Non-compliance

- 7.1 Failure to act in accordance with this policy or to comply with any arrangements put in place to manage a disclosed relationship or conflict of interests will be considered a serious matter, and shall be dealt with under the relevant [Disciplinary Procedure](#), which may result in disciplinary action up to and including dismissal without notice.
- 7.2 If a member of staff has any concerns about a potential breach of this policy or a perceived, potential or actual conflict of interest between another member of staff and a student, they

should report their concerns initially and without delay to their line manager or Dean or Director.

8. Monitoring and review

- 8.1 This policy will be reviewed and monitored and kept up to date by People Services in consultation with relevant stakeholders.

9. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- 9.1 This policy is underpinned by DMU's commitment to fostering a respectful, inclusive, and equitable environment where all individuals are valued, treated with dignity, and feel safe and supported to be able to study and work to their full potential. It aims to protect all parties from serious harm, as well as from accusations of unfairness, bias, exploitation or conflict of interest.
- 9.2 In particular the policy will help students study in an environment free from harassment, intimidation, abuses of power or sexual misconduct. Similarly, staff will be able to work within the appropriate boundaries to continue enabling the best outcomes for students whilst protecting themselves from accusations of misconduct, exploitation or conflicts of interest.

10. Related policies and standards/documentation

The following DMU policies are also relevant to staff conduct:

- 10.1 [Code of Conduct](#): sets out general expectations and standards of conduct for all DMU staff and members of the Board of Governors.
- 10.2 [Gifts and Hospitality Policy](#): sets out the conduct DMU expects from its employees when they provide, or are offered hospitality.
- 10.3 [Disciplinary Procedure](#): outlines the procedure for handling concerns about employee conduct.
- 10.4 [Grievance Procedure](#): outlines the procedure through which employees may raise work-related concerns.
- 10.5 [Raising serious concerns: Whistleblowing Policy](#): provides staff with a mechanism to raise serious concerns in confidence within DMU about certain matters that are unrelated to their own personal circumstances.
- 10.6 [Dignity at Work Policy](#): covers bullying and harassment in the workplace and in any work-related setting outside of the workplace, e.g. business trips and work-related social events.

11. Appendix A

DMU expects all staff to recognise that they are in a position of trust and therefore must maintain professional boundaries in order to provide students with a supportive and safe learning environment, and to avoid perceived, potential or actual conflicts of interest. Someone else might misinterpret their actions, no matter how well intentioned. Members of staff should always give due consideration as to what is an appropriate environment and what is appropriate conduct in relation to the activities they are undertaking. They should conduct themselves with common sense and act with professionalism and integrity.

For the avoidance of doubt, the university's overarching expectations in respect of staff interactions with students, irrespective of the student's age, maturity and level of study are as follows (this is not an exhaustive list but is intended to be illustrative of the conduct expected of all members of staff):

- Interactions with students must be professional and based on trust, confidence and equitable treatment.
- Staff should never engage in inappropriate or unprofessional conduct with students, or in conduct that is in any way sexualised, or which may be perceived as sexualised.
- Staff must not create or participate in an environment where the pursuit of an intimate relationship is normalised or acceptable.
- Meetings (including seminars, PhD supervisions etc.) should normally take place on campus and students should not be invited into staff members' homes. Some exceptions may be acceptable, for example where students are involved in a research group, and they are meeting in a group social context or on a field trip.
- Staff should not ask students or engage students to work privately for them or to work in their home in any capacity; for example, childminding/babysitting, dog walking etc.
- Staff are expected to communicate with students via university accounts linked to their role, for example through their university email address, telephone number, and Microsoft Teams. They should not share their personal contact details (i.e. personal mobile telephone number etc.) except in such circumstances where this is unavoidable, e.g. during field trips.
- Staff should not befriend/engage with students via personal social media accounts, e.g. Facebook, WhatsApp etc.
- Relationships which are coerced, coercive, exploitative or sexualised are always unacceptable and must not occur.

12. Document and version control information:

Version control information heading	Details
Policy number	PRU04
Owner	People Services
Author	People Services
Approved by	University Leadership Board
Date of approval of this version	15 July 2025
Next review date	July 2028
Version number	2
Applicable statutory, legal, or national best practice requirements	Office for Students Condition of Registration E6; Data Protection Act 2018
Equality impact assessment completion date	2023
Data protection impact assessment completion date	2023
Coverage	All staff