

STAFF AND STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS POLICY



HARTPURY

Introduction

All employees of Hartpury are expected to maintain professional relationships with students. These are based on trust, dignity, fairness and mutual respect, and are essential for delivering a positive student experience. With this in mind, Hartpury states its position in regard to relationships between staff and students within an agreed '[Code of Professional Conduct](#)', which applies to all staff both on campus and at all off-site activities.

However, with the introduction of a new Office for Students (Ofs) Condition of Registration from September 2025 (*Condition E6: Harassment and Sexual Misconduct*), which requires providers to include clear policies and procedures on intimate personal relationships between relevant staff members and students, it is felt necessary to provide clearer and contextualised guidance especially given the dynamic working environment at Hartpury where staff and students often interact through a wide variety of academic and extra-curricular contexts.

Purpose

This policy serves to add to complement existing policies (namely 'Code of Professional Conduct 2023; and Sexual Misconduct Policy 2023) to provide all staff and students with a clear understanding as to what we mean by intimate personal relationships, what we view as appropriate/inappropriate actions, and the process of declaring or reporting a 'staff-student' relationship.

Definitions

For the purposes of this policy, we define:

'Hartpury' refers to the group structure and incorporates all aspects of the College, University, and all other legal entities.

'Staff' as those whose *primary* purpose at Hartpury is for employment.

'Student' as those whose *primary* purpose at Hartpury is to study.

For example, a HE student, who may also be an employee of Hartpury in a Student Ambassador role, is considered a "**Student**" first and foremost. Whereas a HE Academic member of staff, who may also be registered as a postgraduate student, is considered a "**Staff**" member first and foremost.

There may occasionally be nuances in the definitions of 'Student' and 'Staff' and so the case studies accompanying this policy (Annex A) should be used as a formal part of these definitions to provide greater clarity. If a student or staff member is unclear on their status and expected actions or declarations, they should contact the Chief People Officer in the first instance.

"Intimate Personal Relationships" are defined as sexual, romantic, or otherwise intimate relationships. These may take place in person, but equally may arise online or through remote or electronic communications. For the purposes of this definition, 'relationship' also includes instances of intimate physical contact.

"Power Imbalance" - There is a significant risk that any intimate personal relationship between an employee and a student at Hartpury will reflect the unequal institutional power between employees and students. Such relationships give rise to a risk that they are based on exploitation. This is especially the case where the employee is either in a teaching role or is in a role that has responsibility for students.

“Conflict of Interest” - An intimate personal relationship between any employee and a student Hartpury will give rise to situations where either there is a conflict of interest or there is a perception of such a conflict e.g., through a perception of favouritism.

Prohibited Relationships

Any intimate personal relationship between a staff member and any student under the age of 18 years is strictly prohibited. Colleges and Universities have an enhanced duty of care for students under 18 and, as such, no member of staff, regardless of their role, should enter a relationship with any student under the age of 18.

Any intimate personal relationship between any student aged ≥ 18 years and any staff member who has any responsibility for a student, which can include academic, professional services, administrative, or other support or leadership roles, in which the employee may be in a position to exercise a degree of influence over that student, is strictly prohibited. In addition, any intimate personal relationship between any student aged > 18 years who is deemed a vulnerable young adult (due to illness, disability, or emotional fragility) and a staff member is strictly prohibited. This is due to potential conflicts of interest, breaches of professional ethics, safeguarding issues, and the potential for exploitation due to the inherent power imbalance in these settings.

Intimate personal relationships between students aged ≥ 18 years and staff, who are not in a position to exercise any degree of influence over the student, are permitted but strongly discouraged.

Pre-Existing Relationships

Staff members who have a pre-existing intimate personal relationship with a student (prior to the start of employment or enrolment at Hartpury) are required to disclose this relationship to their line manager and Human Resources at the earliest opportunity. This disclosure allows for the identification of potential conflicts of interest and ensures appropriate mitigations can be put in place to prevent any undue influence or bias within their professional interactions.

Procedural Disclosures

The following procedures are in place for disclosures and potential conflicts of interest:

- 1) Disclosure of Existing Relationships: Staff must inform their line manager and Human Resources if they have an existing intimate personal relationship with a student. Mitigating measures will be put in place to minimise the risk of conflicts of interest.
- 2) Disclosure of New Relationships: Staff must inform their line manager and Human Resources if they develop a new intimate personal relationship with a student.
- 3) Transitions from Student to Staff: If a student transitions into a staff role whilst maintaining a relationship with a current student, they must disclose this transition. Role assignments will be carefully considered to prevent conflicts of interest.
- 4) Reporting Concerns:
 - a. Student – If you are a student who wishes to report your own relationship, or report a concern about an inappropriate relationship between another student and staff member, please use the Whisper tool. Reporting will be handled confidentially, and action will be taken as needed.

- b. Staff – If you are a staff member who wishes to report your own relationship, or report an inappropriate relationship between another staff member and a student, please contact HR.
- 5) Committee and Board Memberships – Staff are responsible for declaring any potential conflicts of interest prior to commencement of any Committee or Board where such conflicts may arise. This can be submitted in writing to the Chair, and treated with confidentiality, or reported verbally at the start of the meeting.

Other Personal Relationships

Students working in non-academic roles (e.g., hospitality, administration, ambassadorial etc.) are not required to disclose personal relationships with other students, provided there is no power imbalance, and the relationship does not interfere with professional conduct.

This policy does not extend to familial relationships or friendships. However, where power imbalances exist, or a potential conflict of interest arises (e.g., a family member applying to study or work at Hartpury), the relationship must be disclosed and assessed.

Responsibilities

Staff members are responsible for maintaining professional boundaries with students and adhering to the provisions of this policy. They must report any concerns or relationships that may fall under the scope of this policy.

Students should be aware of the expectations regarding their relationships with staff and report any concerns they may have about inappropriate conduct.

Human Resources (HR) are responsible for handling staff disclosures, informing Line Managers of any required actions, and addressing any violations of this policy.

Line Managers are responsible for ensuring that appropriate mitigations are put in place to minimise the risk of perceived or actual conflicts of interest, undue influence, power imbalances, or any actions that may compromise fairness or integrity.

Hartpury Leadership Team is responsible for overseeing the enforcement of this policy and ensuring staff training and awareness.

Related Policies and Hartpury Documents

This Policy should be read in conjunction with the following Hartpury documents and policies:

- Code of Professional Conduct (Staff)
- Child Protection & Safeguarding Policy & Procedures
- Disciplinary & Dismissal Policy & Procedures (Staff)
- Bullying & Harassment Policy
- Equality, Diversity & Inclusivity Policy
- Guidelines on Professional Boundaries (Staff)
- Sexual Misconduct Policy

Freedom of Speech

As part of this policy, Hartpury reaffirms its commitment to the principles of freedom of speech and academic freedom, in accordance with the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 and guidance from the Office for Students (OfS). Hartpury will take all reasonably practicable steps to secure the right to express lawful views and engage in open debate without fear of censorship or institutional discipline for staff, students, and visiting speakers. In addition, this policy prohibits the use of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) in any situation that would prevent staff from speaking out about misconduct, harassment, or other matters of public interest.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

As with all Hartpury policies and procedures, due care has been taken to ensure that this policy is appropriate to all students regardless of their age, disability, ethnicity, gender, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation, and transgender status. The policy will be applied fairly and consistently whilst upholding Hartpury's commitment to providing equality to all. Hartpury is committed towards promoting positive mental health and aims to create a culture of support where students can talk about mental health problems without the fear of stigma or discrimination.

APPROVAL & REVIEW CYCLE		
Policy Owner	Chief People Officer	June 2025
Approved By	Exec	TBC
Interim-Review	No	-
Next Review Date		June 2026

Annex A – Case Study Examples

Example 1 – HE Academic commences a new relationship with a HE Student

A HE Lecturer commences a new intimate personal relationship with a student who is enrolled on their module. This relationship is prohibited due to the clear power imbalance and potential for bias in academic decision-making. It undermines professional boundaries and risks compromising the integrity of assessment, student welfare, and the learning environment.

Example 2 – Professional Services colleague in a relationship with HE Student

A Professional Services staff member enters into a new intimate personal relationship with a student following a series of one-to-one support sessions. This relationship would be prohibited as, even though the employee does not have direct responsibility for teaching, or assessing the student, they may still be in a position to exercise a degree of influence due to the nature of their role.

Example 3 – Staff Member commences a new relationship with a HE Student

A staff member commences a new intimate personal relationship with a HE student where their role has no interaction with the student. Whilst this relationship is not prohibited as there is no clear power imbalance, it is strongly discouraged due to the potential risks associated with student welfare, and the learning environment.

Example 4 - Casual Sports Coach in a Relationship with a Student Athlete

A casual sports coach, who is also a full-time student, has entered into an intimate personal relationship with another student on the team they manage. Whilst this type of intimate personal relationship would generally be discouraged due to the potential for a conflict of interest, it would not be prohibited as both parties are full-time students at Hartpury. However, given in the coaching process and team selection, it is crucial for Hartpury to implement mechanisms to ensure fairness and transparency. In this scenario the coach should disclose the relationship, allowing Hartpury to review the situation and ensure appropriate safeguards are in place. These safeguards may include having another coach or supervisor involved in team selection and decision-making, ensuring that the coach's involvement with the player does not influence their professional duties. Additionally, clear communication with other members of the team regarding the steps taken to maintain fairness and impartiality should be established.

Example 5 – Doctoral Supervisor enters into a new relationship with a Postgraduate Research Student

A Doctoral Supervisor enters a new intimate personal relationship with their postgraduate research student. This relationship would be prohibited due to the clear power imbalance and potential for bias in academic decision-making, and risk to student welfare. This would also be the case for any staff member involved in any teaching, assessment, or examination/progression outcomes for the research student.

If the Doctoral Supervisor commenced an intimate personal relationship with a postgraduate research student outside of their direct supervision, teaching, or assessment, the relationship would not be prohibited. However, in order to maintain professional integrity and transparency, the relationship should be disclosed so that appropriate measures can be implemented to protect academic and workplace fairness, and to monitor student welfare.