# **RELATIONSHIPS POLICY**

## Introduction

At Marjon, we are committed to taking a people-focussed approach. Our Value of Humanity emphasises the importance our community places on human connections. Positive working relationships between staff- staff, staff-students and students-students are central to collaborative working, development, and welfare across both our student and staff body.

The purpose of this policy is to promote safe and positive interactions between staff-staff and staff-students by clarifying the University’s expectations regarding professional behaviour and respectful boundaries. This is a shared expectation within our University community.

Marjon employees and workers (together “staff”) are in a position of trust, and it is important that all staff demonstrate exemplary behaviour. Intimate personal relationships or Close personal relationships between students and staff who have responsibility for them can cause significant problems because of conflicts of interest, imbalance of power and authority, perceived favouritism, and undermining trust and confidence in the academic process.

This policy sets out the expectations and obligations of all Marjon staff (whether salaried, hourly paid, casual or consultants/contractors) with respect to personal relationships between staff-staff and staff-students. In doing so this protects staff and students from allegations of actual or perceived conflicts of interest, and to limit circumstances where a position of power may be abused. This commitment will enable students and staff to fulfil their personal potential and ensures a positive, inclusive, supportive and safe working environment.

## Definitions

* 1. **Abuse of power**
	Abuse of power is where someone exploits a position of power or authority. Abuse of power can take various forms and may include, but is not limited to, grooming, manipulation, coercion, or putting pressure on others to engage in conduct they do not feel comfortable with.
	2. **Adult at risk**
	As is set out in the University’s Safeguarding Policy, the University bases its definition of an “Adult at Risk” on that used within the Data Protection Act 2018 and defines an Adult at Risk as someone over 18 years of age who:
	3. has needs for care and support; and
	4. is experiencing, or is at risk of, neglect, or physical, mental, or emotional harm; and,
	5. as a result of those needs is unable to protect themselves against neglect or harm, or the risk of it.
	6. **Close personal relationships**
	A close personal relationship is a relative or close friend (as opposed to acquaintance), or a relationship where there is financial dependence. The defining line between “close friend” and “acquaintance” is a subjective one. As a result, we would encourage you to navigate this with your line manager and/or the People team. In doing so, you protect yourself from allegations of perceived favouritism or potentially misusing your position. To provide some guidance, a “close friend” is likely to involve a close bond, perhaps involving the sharing of more intimate personal information. Whereas an acquaintance is a more formal relationship, perhaps someone you do not interact with as regularly or share such personal information with.
	7. **Consent**
	Consent is agreeing by choice and having the Freedom and Capacity to make that choice. The person seeking consent should always take steps to ensure that consent is freely given, that it is informed and recognises that it can be withdrawn at any time.
	8. **Freedom to Consent**

A person is free to make a choice if nothing negative would happen to them if they said no. For example, a person is not free to choose if:

1. they are being threatened with violence (by the perpetrator and/or by someone else);
2. they are being threatened with humiliation;
3. they believe that the continuation or assessment of their studies, or progression or advancement of their career, will be at risk, if they refused;
4. they are being blackmailed; or
5. there is a significant power imbalance and the party without power feels pressured to continue in the relationship against their will.​​​​​​
	1. **Capacity to Consent:**

Capacity is about whether someone is physically and/or mentally able to make a choice and to understand the consequences of that choice. For example, a person does not have the capacity to give consent if they are asleep or unconscious.  A person’s capacity to consent may be inhibited by the influence of drugs or alcohol or the presence of a cognitive or learning difficulty, or mental health condition.

* 1. **Grooming**

Grooming can be defined as a gradual process that someone in a position of power uses to manipulate someone to do things they may not be comfortable with and to make them less likely to reject or report abusive behaviour. Grooming may initially start as befriending someone and making them feel special and may result in sexual abuse and/or exploitation.

* 1. **Intimate personal relationship**

An intimate personal relationship means a relationship that involves one or more of the following elements:

1. Physical intimacy including isolated or repeated sexual activity; or
2. Romantic or emotional intimacy.
	1. **Position of trust**

Any staff member working closely with children or Adults at risk, is in a position of trust.

## relationships with students or staff under the age of 18 or who are an adult at risk

* 1. Members of staff must not be in, or enter, a Close personal or Intimate personal relationship with a student or staff member who is under the age of 18, or an Adult at risk where they are in a Position of Trust
	2. Staff must not engage in sexual activity with anyone under the age of 18 or Adult at risk with whom they are in a Position of trust. Whilst a child can Consent to sexual activity once they reach the age of 16, the Sexual Offences Act (2003) makes it a criminal offence for a person to engage in sexual activity of any kind with a person under the age of 18, where the adult is in a Position of trust.
	3. Anyone suspecting a member of staff of acting inappropriately towards a student or staff member, who is under the age of 18 or an Adult at risk, should refer to the Safeguarding Policy and contact the Designated Safeguarding Officer, who may contact the local authority designated officer and/or the police.

## relationships between staff and students

* 1. Marjon **prohibits** Close personal and Intimate personal relationships between staff and students where the staff member has any responsibility in that student’s academic studies and/or personal welfare. This includes all apprentices, undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD students, whether they are taught or registered students.
	2. Responsibility includes:
1. direct management;
2. direct supervision;
3. assessing students’ work; or
4. welfare or pastoral roles.
	1. Contravention of sections 4.1 and 4.2 constitutes a serious breach of this Personal Relationships Policy within the meaning of gross misconduct under the University’s Disciplinary Policy and Procedure.
	2. A staff member should take all reasonable steps to prevent themselves being in a situation prohibited by sections 4.1 and 4.2. This includes:
5. informing their Line Manager at the earliest opportunity of an existing Close personal or Intimate personal relationship ahead of a new student commencing a course of study with the University, and completing the **Relationship Declaration of Interest form**; and
6. informing their Line Manager at the earliest opportunity of a developing relationship which has the potential in the future to contravene sections 4.1 or 4.2, and completing the **Relationship** **Declaration of Interest form.**
	1. Staff also have an obligation to declare an Intimate personal or Close personal relationship with any student, for whom they do not have direct supervision, (whether new or existing), to enable Marjon to assess whether any potential or actual conflict of interest exists by informing their Line Manager at the earliest opportunity and completing the **Relationship** **Declaration of Interest form**. This might apply in the situation where your role allows you access to students’ work, rather than direct involvement in their studies.
	2. We recognise that the circumstances with PhD students can be complicated, particularly when the student is also an existing member of staff. To support staff in this situation, staff will be asked to review the **Relationship Declaration of Interest form** in relation to the proposed student before commencing a supervisory role.
	3. Once declared, a conflict-of-interest management plan will be made. If the conflict-of-interest management plan cannot result in the mitigation of the conflict of interest to the reasonable satisfaction of the University, or the member of staff refuses to agree to the actions recommended by the plan, the University reserves the right to terminate the staff member’s employment/contract for services.
	4. In order to maintain appropriate relationships with students, and to help reduce the risk (real or perceived) of sexual misconduct, abuse of power or conflict of interest, staff should:
7. maintain an appropriate physical and emotional distance from students and perform their University duties in the best interests of the University without favour towards any individual student over another student;
8. avoid creating special friendships with students as this may be seen as grooming;
9. use a University email account, Teams, 3CX, University software and applications for communications with students where possible, avoiding personal messaging (such as through Messenger,X, Whatsapp or other social media channels);
10. set an example by writing and communicating with students in a professional and business style.  Any email sent to a student or to a colleague about a student may be disclosed to the student or their legal representative, under GDPR as part of a Subject Access Request;
11. staff should give careful consideration before giving their personal mobile phone number to a student. Sometimes it may be unavoidable, for example when they are arranging and taking part in conferences or organising field trips. Marjon communication channels such as Marjon email or Microsoft Teams could be used as an alternative, but may not always be practicable. Staff are encouraged to use the 3CX app;
12. adhere to the same guidelines, where logistically possible, when participating in fieldwork with a student, attending conferences and any other University activities whilst away from the usual workplace.
	1. Where staff have a primary role of providing supervision, teaching, or pastoral care to students (including PDTs), staff should:
13. where possible, ensure that meetings and discussions occur on campus. Where not possible, ensure the meeting occurs in a public venue, such as a library or a café.
14. refer students with support needs to a relevant University support service and limit your role in providing personal support to a student where this is not part of your employment duties; this is in line with University Student Wellbeing & Support policy and practice.
15. refrain from contacting students outside of reasonable working hours;
16. not seek personal information from a student except as relevant to a University process (e.g. medical information for special consideration, or personal circumstances information as part of an EC process).
	1. Guidance on unacceptable behaviour towards students:

Please note that the below is not an exhaustive list of examples:

1. physical touching, that could be construed as sexualised (e.g. touches of the shoulder or squeezes of the leg), or comments or questions of a sexual nature (whether verbally or electronically);
2. paying undue special attention to a particular student which may be seen as Grooming;
3. accepting gifts from a student, unless it is following final assessment completion and deemed to be a minor token of thanks in accordance with Marjon Financial Regulations;
4. inviting an individual student to your private home or room, or visiting their home or room, including while at conferences, overseas trips, or on placement;
5. asking a student to care for your child, or to house sit whilst on holidays, or perform any other personal services or work-related duties when not formally employed or engaged by Marjon to do so.

## relationships BETWEEN MEMBERS OF STAFF

* 1. Relationships between members of staff are not prohibited. However, to prevent potential abuse of power or perceived or real conflict of interest, staff must declare Close personal or Intimate personal relationships in either of the following situations:
1. Where a relationship begins that may give rise to a real or perceived conflict of interest, exploitation, favouritism or bias; or
2. Where a relationship already exists and a new situation arises that may give rise to a real or perceived conflict of interest, exploitation, favouritism or bias. For example, two staff members in a relationship who work in different departments who now work in the same department.
	1. Where staff are in an Intimate personal or Close personal relationship, consideration will be given on how to prevent conflict of interest, breach of confidentiality or unfair advantage gained (or perceived to be gained) from the overlap of a personal and professional relationship. This may include finding alternative line management arrangements.
	2. The line manager will only inform other relevant members of staff about the relationship (e.g. in order to explain a change in management arrangements), if the individuals concerned agree.
	3. Staff are reminded of possible power imbalances within Intimate personal and Close personal relationships. Relationships between employees in which one has direct or indirect authority over another are strongly discouraged.
	4. In order to maintain appropriate relationships with colleagues/peers, and help reduce the risk of abuse of power or conflict of interest, staff should:
3. maintain an appropriate physical and emotional distance from other staff while working;
4. perform your University duties in the best interests of the University without favour towards any individual staff member over another;
5. where possible staff should use their University email account, telephone (including Microsoft Teams) and internet access for work-related communications with staff and maintain professional communications;
6. be aware that any email sent to a staff member about a colleague may be disclosed to them or their representative under GDPR. All emails and work-related instant messages should be written in a professional manner;
7. establish boundaries between professional and non-professional communication with colleagues;
8. adhere to the same guidelines, where logistically possible, when you and the staff member are participating in fieldwork, conferences and other University activities away from your usual workplace;
9. where possible, ensure that meetings and discussions about University matters occur on campus or other appropriate premises.
10. refer colleagues with support needs to a relevant University support service, such as occupational health or our employee assistance programme and be mindful to limit your role in providing personal support to a staff member where this is not part of your employment duties.
	1. Where an intimate relationship ends, it is expected that all parties will continue to conduct themselves in a professional manner and avoid personal disputes which impact on the working environment or other colleagues and students. It may also be appropriate for some of the actions put in place by the University during the relationship, to continue for a period of time following the end of the relationship. The staff members involved will be consulted and required to comply with reasonable actions.

## INappropriate conduct BY STUDENTS & STAFF

* 1. Unprofessional or inappropriate conduct towards a student or staff member is not acceptable. This may breach the Harassment & Dignity at Work Policy, the Sexual Harassment & Misconduct Policy, the Disciplinary Policy & Procedure and other University policies and procedures.
	2. A student or staff member should seek advice immediately if they feel they have been subject to unprofessional or inappropriate conduct from a student or colleague, by speaking to their PDT or line manager, the Head of Department/Director, Dean/Academic Director, or their [People](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/human-resources/about-hr/contacting-hr/people-hr/hr-business-partnering-contact-details) Business Partner to ensure appropriate support is provided.

## declaration of intimate or close personal relationships

* 1. All declarations are to be made as soon as reasonably practicable.
	2. As the declaration contains sensitive personal data it will be stored securely and managed in compliance with GDPR. Such declarations will be treated respectfully, sensitively and confidentially, and the wishes of both parties respected as far as is possible. This includes same-sex relationships where the parties may not be “out” publicly.
	3. Staff who are unsure whether they have a Close personal or Intimate personal relationship with a student or staff member, should seek advice from their line manager or People Business Partner. Staff are particularly encouraged to seek advice if the other party expressly does not wish the relationship to be reported.
	4. Students who are unsure whether they have a Close personal or Intimate personal relationship with a staff member should seek advice from their PDT or the Student Support & Wellbeing Team.
	5. Staff and students must complete the **Relationship Declaration of Interest form**. This form should be completed even if the relationship was previously declared within the job/course application process.
	6. Once the form has been submitted, the Line Manager and People Business Partner will review the form and where necessary consult with the parties and Director/Dean on what actions, if any, are required to remove any potential conflict. The actions will be documented and stored securely on the staff member(s)’ personnel file.
	7. Both parties involved (be it student or staff member) will be informed of the actions taken.
	8. In placing measures to manage any conflict of interest the following factors may be considered:
1. any known vulnerability of the student or staff member;
2. the student’s or colleague’s personal circumstances at the time;
3. whether there is a supervision or teaching arrangement in place at the time, or likely to be in place during the duration of a student’s course of study;
4. the circumstances of the student when the Close or Intimate personal relationship commenced or was initiated;
5. any special family, kinship and elder relationships;
6. the nature of the two individuals’ contact in study, research or employment;
7. the potential for the staff member to influence the academic progress and outcomes or career progression of the student or colleague; and
8. the extent of the power imbalance between the two individuals.
	1. Any unresolved matters will be escalated to the Director/Dean or ELT lead.

## breach of policy

* 1. An Intimate personal relationship or Close personal relationship between a staff member and student in contravention of sections 4.1 and 4.2 is a breach of this policy and will be investigated under the University’s Investigation Procedure and Disciplinary Policy & Procedure.
	2. Failure to disclosure a Close personal or Intimate personal relationship with a student under section 4.5, or with a colleague under section 5.1 will be investigated under the University’s Investigation Procedure and Disciplinary Policy & Procedure.
	3. Any staff member who is in an Intimate personal relationship or Close personal relationship with a student under sections 4.1 and 4.2 on 1st August 2025, when this policy comes into effect, will not be in breach of these sections. However, they are required to immediately disclose it using the Declaration of Interest form so that a conflict-of-interest management plan can be put in place.

## Review of policy

* 1. This policy is not contractual and may be varied from time-to-time following consultation with Marjon’s recognised trade unions.

## RELATED POLICIES

* Disciplinary Policy & Procedure
* Marjon Financial Regulations
* Harassment & Dignity at Work Policy
* Investigation Procedure
* Safeguarding Policy
* Sexual Harassment & Misconduct Policy

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