

# SOAS Personal Relationships Policy

## 1 Scope and Purpose

This policy covers all staff of the School. It is intended to provide guidance in areas where personal relationships overlap with working relationships and to ensure that individual members of staff do not commit acts of impropriety, bias, abuse of authority or conflict of interest and do not lay themselves open to allegations that they have done so.

## 2 Introduction

2.1 The School values and relies upon the professional integrity of relationships between members of staff and in the staff/student relationship. SOAS also recognises the hierarchical nature of academic life, and the effect that abuses of power in unequal dynamics can have. In order that School business is conducted and perceived to be conducted in a professional and proper manner it is necessary to set some boundaries between professional and personal relationships, whether these are sexual/romantic (referred to in this policy as “intimate relationships”), familial or business/financial.

## 3. Relationships between staff and students

3.1 The School believes that the professional relationship between a student and a member of staff is vital to a student's academic development. This professional relationship is based on trust, confidence and dependency. In this context a professional relationship is defined as one where there is an assessing, supervising, tutoring, teaching or pastoral role or a role providing administrative or technical support. Students are entitled to equality of treatment and it is important that a personal relationship between a member of staff and a student is not perceived by others to prejudice that equality of treatment. In addition, students are entitled to learn in an environment free of unwanted or uncomfortable sexualised or romantic pressures.

3.2 Given the imbalance of power between staff and students, SOAS prohibits staff from entering into an intimate sexual or romantic relationship with a student for whom they have a responsibility for assessing, supervising, tutoring, teaching, for pastoral care or for whom they are required to provide administrative or technical support. Further, staff should not enter into a business, commercial or financial relationship with a student which could compromise, or could be perceived to compromise, the objectivity and professional standing of the teaching relationship. PhD researchers will be considered as students in relation to their supervisors and other staff responsible for their care as students, and as staff in relation to remunerated work for the university, including teaching.

3.3 SOAS strongly discourages intimate sexual or romantic relationships between staff and students who are not under the direct responsibility of a staff member. Staff

have an obligation to declare such a relationship to their line manager if it does arise, to enable the School to assess whether any potential or actual conflict of interest exists and to put in place a plan where such a conflict exists. Failure to report such a relationship may lead to disciplinary action. Should a personal relationship already exist when a student enrolls at SOAS, staff must inform their line manager, so that appropriate steps can be taken to ensure that they are not asked to undertake any duties that might create a conflict of interest.

3.4 Any relationship between a professional and a student under the age of 19 or a student who is a vulnerable adult will result in an immediate referral to the Local Authority Designate Officer (LADO).

3.5 SOAS expects that those who work for the University, those who tender services on behalf of the University and academic and other visitors to the campus will not abuse their position in any way, including by making sexual advances, pressurising students into sexual relationships, or through any form of sexual harassment or coercive/controlling behaviour. Any form of pressure on a student by a member of staff to have sex or enter into an intimate relationship or any other behaviour constituting sexual harassment is considered an offence that merits disciplinary action. If concerns arise that a relationship between a staff member and a student, or between staff members, might involve coercion, predatory behaviour or constitute an abuse of power, the head of the relevant unit will initiate an independent investigation in accordance with the School's disciplinary procedure.

3.6 Unacceptable behaviour towards students includes and is not limited to the following:

- making comments or gestures that can be experienced as sexual or harassing in nature. (i.e. commenting on their appearance or staring suggestively) physical
- touching that can be experienced as sexualised (i.e. putting an arm around someone, touching their arm or leg or other part of their body) or comments or questions of a sexual nature (whether verbally or electronically).
- paying undue special attention to a particular student, which may be seen as grooming
- inviting an individual student to your private home or room without others present, or visiting their home or room, including while at conferences, overseas trips, or on fieldwork or placements.
- punishing a student who has rejected advances or ended a relationship. This can include things like penalising grades, refusing support or placing additional barriers for the student.

3.7 In order to maintain appropriate relationships with students, and to help reduce the risk of sexual misconduct, abuse of power or conflict of interest, staff should:

- maintain an appropriate physical and emotional distance from students and perform their duties without favour or prejudice towards any individual student;
- avoid creating special friendships with students as this may be seen as grooming.
- use a SOAS email account for communications with students where possible.
- behave professionally in all communications, written and verbal, with students. Any email sent to a student or a colleague about a student may be disclosed to the student or their legal representative.

- observe these suggested modes of conduct when away from the School, including participating in fieldwork with a student, attending conferences and any other off-campus activities.

3.8 Where staff have a primary role of providing supervision, teaching, or pastoral care to students (including academic advisors), staff should:

- where possible, ensure that meetings and discussions occur on campus or other approved premises. Where not possible, ensure the meeting occurs in a public venue, such as a library or a café.
- refer students with support needs to a relevant support service and limit your role in providing personal support to a student where this is not part of your employment duties.
- refrain from contacting students outside of reasonable working hours;
- not seek personal information from a student except as relevant (e.g. medical information for special consideration or personal circumstances information as part of an academic progress process).

#### **4 Relationships between members of staff**

4.1 Although the existence of a personal relationship between members of staff does not necessarily constitute a bar to the employment or promotion of either party, staff should declare to their line manager, as appropriate, any personal relationships which may give rise to a real or perceived conflict of interest, trust or breach of confidentiality.

4.2 Where a personal relationship exists or develops between members of staff who are in a line management or supervisory relationship at work, they should not be involved in recruitment, selection, appraisal, promotion or in any other management activity or process involving the other party. Additionally, staff in a personal relationship should not work together in any circumstance whereby a conflict of interest, breach of confidentiality or unfair advantage may be perceived to be gained from the overlap of a personal and professional relationship. In any such circumstances, the relationship must be declared, in confidence, to the head of the department or unit in which they work. The manager to whom the information is disclosed will then review the reporting and management arrangements and put appropriate changes or checks and balances in place.

4.3 If it is considered unavoidable to inform other members of staff about the relationship in order to explain a change in management arrangements, this will be discussed with the individuals concerned before it is disclosed.

4.4 Staff-staff relationships can also give rise to situations where there is coercive or predatory behaviour on the part of one party, including abuse in the form of threats or actions that have a negative impact for not accepting initial advances. SOAS are committed to supporting all those who experience this sort of abuse.

4.5 If an intimate relationship arises between colleagues and there are concerns about any predatory or coercive element to such a relationship, staff members are encouraged to raise their concerns with their line manager or speak to a dignity advisor.

**Acknowledgements**

Building on the earlier SOAS Personal Relationships Code of Conduct of 2009, this policy draws substantively on the Sussex University and UCL Personal Relationships policies, and we would like to acknowledge and thank Sussex University and UCL.