

# **Staff-Student Relationships Policy**

**Table of Contents**

1.	<i>Introduction</i> .....	3
2.	<i>Scope of Policy</i> .....	3
3.	<i>Definitions</i> .....	4
4.	<i>Staff and Student Relationships</i> .....	5
5.	<i>Disclosure of Relationships</i> .....	5
6.	<i>Non-Consensual Behaviour</i> .....	6
7.	<i>Raising a concern</i> .....	6
8.	<i>Procedure for dealing with a disclosure or concern about a staff personal relationship</i> .....	7
8.1	Review of the Information.....	7
8.2	Outcome .....	7
9.	<i>Advice to Students</i> .....	8
10.	<i>Support and Guidance</i> .....	8
11.	<i>Confidentiality, recording data and retention</i> .....	8
12.	<i>False disclosure</i> .....	9
13.	<i>Review of the Policy</i> .....	9
14.	<i>Related Internal Policies and External Reference Points</i> .....	9

## 1. Introduction

William College is committed to maintaining a respectful, professional, and inclusive environment where both student and staff feel safe, supported and valued. The College believes the professional relationship between a student and a member of staff is a central part of the student's educational experience at the College. To ensure that all individuals can work, learn, and interact in a safe and equitable environment, this policy provides clear guidelines regarding personal relationships between staff and students.

We acknowledge that close relationships among staff may sometimes create actual or perceived challenges to these principles, potentially affecting both the College and the individuals involved. We are equally dedicated to acting with integrity, ensuring that all decisions remain impartial and free from conflicts of interest. This policy aims to safeguard all parties by preventing real or perceived conflicts of interest and limit any opportunity for the abuse of position.

In the College settings, professional relationship between staff members or between staff and students can contribute positively to the work and study experience. A professional relationship refers to any interaction between a staff member and a student that involves assessing, supervising, tutoring, mentoring, or teaching; providing pastoral support; collaborating on a project; or fulfilling an administrative or technical support role. However, these relationships come with responsibilities, particularly where there is potential for an imbalance or abuse of power. This policy aims to protect the integrity of the academic and social environment at William College.

This policy outlines:

- What is meant by 'staff personal relationships'
- The actions staff should take if they are in or developing a personal relationship within the scope of this policy
- How concerns about staff personal relationships can be raised
- The procedure to be followed when a concern is raised
- The support and protection available to staff and others when raising a concern

By adhering to this policy, we can ensure that personal relationships do not interfere with the academic, professional, or social integrity of the College, ensuring that staff and students are treated with dignity, fairness, and respect.

## 2. Scope of Policy

This policy applies to all College staff, including employees, workers, Governors and Directors. It may also extend to external consultants and contractors undertaking business or services with or for the College. For the purposes of this policy, any reference to "staff" should be interpreted accordingly. The policy also applies to all students, regardless of their year of study or academic programme.

This policy outlines the College's position on relationships between members of staff and students at William College. The difference in 'power' between a lecturer and a student, or a supervisor and a student, or staff providing administrative services to students makes these relationships potentially vulnerable to exploitation. They also generate real or perceived inequalities, not only affecting the persons concerned, but also impacting other members of the College, whether students or staff.

These power imbalances can arise in various situations, such as interactions with students during teaching, supervision, assessment, and grading. They can also occur in staff-related matters, including hiring, management, promotions, and resource allocation. Additionally, they may affect decisions about staff development, access to confidential information, and the distribution of financial and other resources to staff, students, or external parties. The College aims to uphold fairness and integrity in all such interactions.

Maintaining a staff-student relationship based on mutual trust, confidence, and respect is essential. Ensuring that students receive equal treatment is crucial, and close relationships must not compromise this fairness in practice or perception. This policy applies to both current and past personal relationships.

### 3. Definitions

- **Personal relationship** excludes intimate relationships, but means a relationship where the nature, content, involvement and/or frequency of interactions and/or communications between a staff member and a student extends beyond the boundaries of professional conduct or may be reasonably perceived as doing so. Such relationships may involve excessive familiarity, favouritism, preferential treatment, financial dependencies or social interactions that could undermine fairness, academic integrity, or institutional credibility. It is important to note that a personal relationship between staff and students may have real or perceived conflicts of interest, particularly where power imbalances exist. Examples include:
  - Close family relationships.
  - Social or extracurricular relationships, particularly where one party is in a position to influence academic or work-related outcomes for the other. This includes close friendships and frequent non-work-related interactions.
  - Business or commercial relationships between staff and students.
  - Financial relationships, including those where one party is indebted to or financially dependent on the other.
  
- **Intimate relationship** is a consensual relationship characterised by emotional, physical, and/or sexual intimacy, which may be conducted in person and/or online and/or via electronic or any other form of communication. This includes but is not limited to, dating, romantic involvement, or sexual relationships, long or short-term relationships, one-off occurrences, marriage or life partnerships, regardless of gender, gender identity or sexual orientation.
  
- **Conflict of Interest:** A conflict of interest exists when the duties owed by an individual to the College conflict with, or may possibly conflict with a personal, financial or other interest or duty that the individual holds and/or by the interests of someone who has a close personal connection to the individual. The existence of a conflict of interest does not therefore depend on whether the individual is actually influenced in their duties or decisions.  
 It may arise where an individual might be seen to be influencing College matters for actual, potential or perceived personal benefit. Such a conflict may arise in a situation when a member of the College community is in a position to influence, directly or indirectly, College business, research or other decisions in ways that could lead to gain for them, their family or others. Such considerations apply to a wide range of activities in which conflicts may arise, including, but not restricted to, student admissions, student assessment, disciplinary proceedings, appeals, staff recruitment, staff promotion and remuneration, procurement and assessing proposed relationships between the College and outside parties.
  
- **Abuse of power** is where a position of power or authority is used in an unacceptable manner. This can take various forms and may include, but is not limited to, grooming, manipulation, coercion and pressurising others to engage in conduct they do not feel comfortable with. Abuse of power may also occur in the context of a close personal or intimate relationship.

For the purpose of this policy, **abuse of power** means a situation where a relevant staff member exploits a position of power in relation to a student so as to apply pressure in a way which:

- may result in the student doing something, or refraining from doing something, that they may not have otherwise done; and
  - that action or inaction could reasonably result in something that falls within the scope of an intimate personal relationship.
- **Coercion or Force:** includes any physical or emotional harm or threat of physical or emotional harm which would reasonably place an individual in fear of immediate or future harm, with the result that the individual is compelled to engage in an act.
  
  - An **adult with care and support needs** or **adult at risk** – to whom safeguarding duties apply – is a person aged 18 or over who has needs for care and support (whether or not the local authority is meeting any of those needs); is experiencing, or is at risk of, abuse or neglect; and as a result of those needs is unable to protect himself or herself against the abuse or neglect or the risk of it.

- **Member of staff** includes any person working within the College under a formal contract of employment or as a casual worker or any person to whom the College offers any of the privileges or facilities normally available to its employees (such as visiting academics) or any individual working within the College under a contract for services and/or in a self-employed capacity.
- **Relevant staff** member means a member of staff who has direct or indirect academic responsibilities, or other direct professional responsibilities, in relation to that student.
- **Responsibility for a student** is defined widely and includes any teaching, professional, pastoral or administrative responsibility or authority over a student, whether temporary or permanent, whether formally conferred on or voluntarily assumed by the staff member and whether the responsibility arises in the College context. This includes but is not limited to lecturing, teaching classes or seminars, overseeing projects, supervising, and setting and/or marking of examinations or other assessments of any type. It also includes acting as a mentor or college advisor.
- **Consent:** permission for something to happen or agreement to do something with a full understanding of the facts and without coercion. Consent is not consent if it is given under pressure, (perceived or real) threat, or given when someone is not really capable of giving it—e.g. if they are intoxicated, asleep and/or not capable of giving consent. Consent can be withdrawn at any time. coerced consent: consent that is secured only due to the occupancy of respective positions within an unequal relationship e.g. supervisor and student. Coerced consent includes experiencing pressure (perceived or real) to give consent in order to improve marks, improve promotion, or where a person believes they would not receive due professional attention.
- **Disclosure:** refers to the obligation of staff members at William College to formally inform their Line Manager or Head of Department about any personal, familial, or intimate relationship with a student when such a relationship may create a conflict of interest or the perception of favouritism.
- **Reporting:** refers to the process of formally raising concerns about a staff member's personal relationship with a student when there is a reasonable belief that a conflict of interest exists or could arise.

## 4. Staff and Student Relationships

William College believes that the professional relationship between a student and a staff member is a fundamental part of the student's educational experience. To uphold professional standards and protect all parties, William College prohibits staff from pursuing or engaging in intimate relationships with students, particularly where professional duties may be influenced, or the student's academic or social opportunities could be affected. Such relationships create risks of power imbalances, conflicts of interest, academic disruption, and unprofessional conduct.

If a pre-existing relationship exists, such as with a family member, staff must maintain transparency by following the disclosure process. It is their responsibility to declare such relationships, and failure to do so will be treated as a disciplinary matter.

Maintaining professional boundaries is essential to fostering trust and confidence between staff and students. Staff must not abuse their position by making sexual advances, pressuring students into relationships, engaging in harassment, coercion, or predatory behaviour, or offering academic rewards in exchange for sexual favours. Such misconduct constitutes a serious breach of professional integrity and will be subject to disciplinary proceedings, up to and including dismissal from the College.

## 5. Disclosure of Relationships

While William College deems it unprofessional for staff members to initiate or pursue personal relationships with students, particularly when the potential problems such relationships may cause are not considered. However, the College acknowledges that such relationships may still develop.

If a staff member has a professional role with a student with whom they have a personal or familial relationship, they must inform their Line Manager or Head of Department, in writing, at the earliest opportunity. This is to ensure that any teaching, tutoring, assessment, administrative, or other related duties can be adjusted and monitored as necessary.

The disclosure should include a clear description of the nature of the relationship and any potential or actual conflicts of interest. The Line Manager, supported by the HR Manager, will assess the situation and, in consultation with the parties involved, determine what actions are required. This may include the staff member recusing themselves from specific tasks or re-assigning their duties to prevent any conflict of interest or perceived favouritism.

If a staff member is in an intimate or close personal relationship with a student for whom they currently have no academic or professional responsibilities but may have in the future (e.g., if they work at the same institution), the relationship must be disclosed to the relevant Head of Department or Line Manager. This allows the College to assess the potential for conflicts of interest and implement appropriate measures.

If it is found that this Policy has been unintentionally breached, for instance, if the staff member was unaware that the other party was a student, the staff member should inform their Head of Department as soon as they become aware of the situation. If staff are unsure whether a relationship needs to be disclosed under this policy, they should disclose it.

Failure to disclose a personal relationship in a timely manner may result in disciplinary action. If a relationship was previously disclosed but no action was required, the matter should be re-disclosed if circumstances change, and the relationship may now create, or be perceived to create concerns under this Policy.

The College will take reasonable steps to treat all disclosures confidentially and sensitively, ensuring that, where possible, the disclosure does not negatively impact the professional advancement or academic progress of any party. If you are uncertain about whether a relationship falls under this policy, please seek advice from the HR Manager.

## **6. Non-Consensual Behaviour**

If a student experiences inappropriate behaviour that breaches this Policy, is involved in a relationship they do not consider consensual or believes they have been adversely affected by a misuse of power, authority, or conflict of interest, they should report the issue to the Wellbeing team, their Head of Department, or through the Student Complaints procedure. Support and advice are available from the Wellbeing team.

If a staff member experiences inappropriate behaviour from a student or has a complaint against them, they should contact their Line Manager. Staff can also seek support and advice from the HR team.

In such situations, measures may be implemented to separate the affected parties or minimise the possibility of further inappropriate behaviour or complaints. In more serious cases, such as a pattern of misconduct over time, action may be taken under the formal Student Disciplinary Policy or Harassment and Sexual Misconduct Policy.

## **7. Raising a concern**

Concerns regarding a staff personal relationship may be raised by staff members, students, or third parties under this policy, particularly if there is a reasonable belief that a conflict of interest exists or could arise. Concerns should be directed to the relevant member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT); or where the concern relates to a member of the SLT, to the Provost or equivalent or Director of Operations at the earliest opportunity.

In exceptional cases, where it is not feasible to raise the concern with the aforementioned individuals, or if the concern involves the Provost, Director of Operations, or a Non-Executive Governor, it can be raised with a Non-Executive Director. When raising a concern, individuals are encouraged to provide as much

detail as possible, preferably in writing. Concerns may be reported anonymously through the College's confidential reporting system.

While proof of the concern is not required, the individual should, at a minimum, provide:

- details of the nature of the concern
- reasons why the individual believes this concern to be valid, and
- the background / history to the concern to the extent known.

The College will decide, at its discretion, whether or not to disclose any actions taken in response to the concern, keeping in mind its obligations regarding confidentiality and its Data Protection Policy.

## **8. Procedure for dealing with a disclosure or concern about a staff personal relationship**

On receipt of a disclosure or a concern, the following procedure will normally apply and should usually be completed within four weeks of disclosure.

### **8.1 Review of the Information**

The recipient(s) of the disclosure or concern will review the information provided, consulting with the HR Manager as necessary. Following discussions with the staff member involved, and, where applicable, the other party in the relationship or alleged relationship, the recipient will evaluate whether a conflict of interest, breach of academic or professional integrity, violation of trust or confidentiality, or undue influence on any matters related to the College's operations has occurred or is likely to occur.

### **8.2 Outcome**

#### **8.2.1 Considered but no action required**

The staff personal relationship does not present a conflict of interest, violate academic or professional integrity, breach trust or confidentiality, or exert undue influence on the College affairs. The outcome of this assessment will be documented in the relevant staff HR file. If, in the future, the staff member reasonably believes that the personal relationship may now create or be perceived to create any concerns addressed by this policy, a new disclosure must be made.

#### **8.2.1 Action required to minimise risk**

The staff personal relationship does not currently present any conflict of interest, breach of academic or professional integrity, breach of trust or confidentiality, or undue influence on the College's affairs. However, steps should be taken to mitigate any potential risks or perceptions of such issues. These actions may include reassigning the staff member's responsibilities in relation to the student's work, such as marking and assessment, or engaging an alternative marker or supervisor if necessary. Additionally, the staff member should not be the sole decision-maker on matters affecting the student, and their duties may be reorganized to minimize contact with the other individual involved. Other possible actions include removing the staff member's responsibility in areas such as recruitment, management, resource allocation, and career progression, and ensuring that they do not make unilateral decisions regarding the individual. In exceptional cases, the staff member may be moved to a different reporting line or department.

The recipient of the disclosure will ensure that relevant personnel are informed of the actions taken to minimise risks while maintaining confidentiality regarding the nature of the personal relationship. All details, including the fact that the staff member is in a relationship falling within the scope of this policy, will be recorded and shared with the HR Manager for inclusion in the staff member's confidential HR file. If the relationship ends and may raise future concerns, any mitigations put in place will also be documented. Failure to comply with the actions required under this policy may result in disciplinary measures.

### **8.2.1 Action required as a result of a breach of William College policies**

When applicable, a disclosure or concern raised under this policy may be addressed under another College policy, particularly if there are concerns that a staff personal relationship violates the expected standards for staff conduct. In such cases, further investigation or evaluation of the matter may take place. This policy is intended to complement, rather than replace, other College policies that may be relevant, such as the Harassment and Sexual Misconduct Policy, Staff Disciplinary Procedure, Staff Grievance Policy.

## **9. Advice to Students**

Students are expected to be familiar with this Policy and understand the obligations and requirements imposed on staff members. Expectations regarding students' behaviour are detailed in the Student Terms & Conditions, the Student Code of Conduct, and the Student Disciplinary Policy.

If an intimate or personal relationship has developed contrary to this Policy, whether it is pre-existing or not, and they are unsure if the staff member has disclosed the relationship, they are encouraged to speak with the Wellbeing team, Programme Leader, or any senior member of the College they feel comfortable approaching. Students will not face any disciplinary consequences for choosing not to disclose such relationships.

Students should seek support if they experience any inappropriate behaviour from a staff member during such a relationship, regardless of whether the relationship has been disclosed.

If a student engages in behaviour towards a staff member that could be interpreted as flirtatious or suggesting an intimate or personal relationship, staff are required to report this to their Line Manager or Head of Department.

In such cases, following review and consultation, a record will be kept, and measures may be put in place to separate the parties involved, or minimise the risk of conflicts of interest, concerns over academic integrity, or professional conduct.

Any behaviour by a student that amounts to sexual misconduct, physical misconduct, abusive behaviour, or breaches the College's Student Code of Conduct will be taken seriously and addressed through appropriate procedures.

## **10. Support and Guidance**

William College is committed to supporting both staff and students in maintaining healthy, professional relationships. In situations where there is uncertainty regarding the implications of a personal relationship or when guidance is needed, staff and students are encouraged to consult with a member of the Human Resources team or the College's Wellbeing team.

While the College acknowledges that personal relationships can form naturally, it is committed to safeguarding the integrity of its academic and professional environment. Therefore, staff are expected to conduct all communications through the College's official systems. Personal email addresses should not be used for student communications, and any meetings should be held on the College's premises.

## **11. Confidentiality, recording data and retention**

Any reports or disclosures of personal relationships will be handled with the utmost confidentiality, and only those who need to be informed will be involved in discussions or decision-making processes.

It is necessary and proportionate to record and retain information regarding any relevant disclosure of a staff-student relationship for the duration of the relationship. This information will be retained for a minimum of 6 years following the cessation of the relationship, to ensure compliance with legal obligations and the College's policies.

The relevant information related to the disclosure will remain on the employee's or individual's personal HR file. This file will typically be retained for up to 6 years after employment or service has ended, in line with the College's Data Protection Policy and the Limitation Act 1980.

## **12. False disclosure**

Any instances where disclosures or concerns are raised with malicious intent or in a vexatious manner will be taken seriously and may lead to disciplinary action against the individual making the false disclosure.

## **13. Review of the Policy**

This Staff-Student Relationships Policy is reviewed annually by our Senior Leadership Team (SLT). Any amendments require the approval of our Board of Governors. Any updates or amendments will be communicated to all staff and students.

## **14. Related Internal Policies and External Reference Points**

### Internal Policies

- Student Code of Conduct
- Equality and Diversity Policy
- Harassment and Sexual Misconduct Policy
- Data Protection Policy
- Safeguarding and Prevent Policy
- Academic Freedom and Freedom of Speech Code of Practice
- Abuse of Power Code of Practice
- Staff Disciplinary Procedure
- Staff Grievance Procedures
- Gift and Entertainment Policy
- Anti-Bribery and Corruption policy
- Conflict of Interest Policy

### External Legislations

- Human Rights Act 1998
- Equality Act 2010
- Sexual Offences Act 2003
- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)
- Limitation Act 1980

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