

Work-related asymmetrical relationships

Aarhus University has passed a set of guidelines for personal relations, the general purpose of which is defined as follows: “Aarhus University is a large workplace, and it will often be possible for staff with close personal relationships to carry out their separate functions at the university. However, in some cases, the personal relationship and the professional roles involved may be so close that working in close proximity, either organisationally and/or geographically, is neither possible nor appropriate. The same applies to close relationships between staff and students.”

<https://medarbejdere.au.dk/en/administration/hr/recruitment-and-employment/close-personal-relationships>

In line with these guidelines, and to further clarify some issues, the aim of the following guidelines for the School of Culture and Society is to create a common understanding of asymmetrical relationships between students and staff and between staff and managers in order to avoid close personal relationships having a negative impact on the work environment. This paper focuses on work-related asymmetrical relationships as an area which can give rise to questions regarding conflicts of interest and the abuse of power. The overall message is that it is important to avoid getting into situations in which a person's behaviour can be perceived as abuse of power due to a close personal relationship.

Basis for drawing up recommendations and guidelines for the School of Culture and Society

- *Recommendations* are to serve as a compass with a view to establishing the desired common understanding; *guidelines* are more binding, and violation may result in sanctions.
- Managers, supervisors, and teachers have a special responsibility to act professionally and objectively in situations in which they form part of an asymmetrical (unequal) collaboration, relationship, and power structure.
- It must be made clear that the role of teacher and supervisor involves a position of power vis-à-vis the students, including PhD students. This also applies if the student in question is currently not in one of the teacher's courses.
- If teachers are in a relationship with a student whom they are responsible for supervising, it is considered a conflict of interest. This also applies in connection with e.g. academic assessments of students' work.



Our definition of a close personal relationship

Relations to parents, children, a spouse or a long-term cohabiting partner, in-laws and nephews and nieces count as 'closely related'. In addition, the definition also applies to stepchildren, close friends/enemies, and any other family members with whom the staff member frequently spends time. Any sexual relation counts as a close personal relationship.

Recommendations for close personal relationships between staff and students

- It is important to avoid getting into situations in which a person's behaviour can be perceived as abuse of power due to a close personal relationship.
- The local liaison committee and the management at the School of Culture and Society recommend that staff (teachers, supervisors etc.) avoid close personal relationships with students (including PhD students) within their own subject area.
- If a member of staff and a student start a relationship, it must be considered how this will affect the working conditions, including teaching activities and exams, not only for the student in question, but also for the student's class or year group or the staff member's collaboration with others.

Recommendations for close personal relationships between staff and managers

It is important to avoid getting into situations in which a person's behaviour can be perceived as abuse of power due to a close personal relationship. The asymmetry between managers and staff may vary, as there are many different types of management roles, such as research director, head of department etc.

However, there is a significant asymmetry between tenured staff and staff on short-term contracts (such as assistant professor, postdocs etc.). Therefore, everyone in a management position should consider what impact this may have when it comes to close personal relationships. Following the guidelines below, the necessary openness and transparency must be ensured with regard to close personal relationships at the workplace, in particular with regard to processes involving recruitment, appointment and elections.

Guidelines for close personal relationships between staff and students

In the case of close personal relationships between staff (teachers, supervisors etc.) and students from their own subject area, the immediate manager must be informed. If in doubt as to whether a personal relationship may be considered problematic, it is recommended that staff discuss the situation with their immediate manager.

Staff may participate in social events together with students, such as Friday bars, parties, and other work-related social events. Under these circumstances, staff represent Aarhus University and are responsible for their own behaviour, e.g. in connection with the consumption of alcohol.

Examples:

- An associate professor starts a relationship with his/her PhD student. In this case, the immediate manager must be contacted with the aim of appointing a new supervisor (due to a conflict of interest).
- A member of staff has had a short-term relationship with a student. It must be ensured that the member of staff in question is not subsequently tasked with assessing the student's work. Therefore, the head of department must be informed about the relationship and any issues that may arise due to a conflict of interest.
- A member of staff has had a long-term, close friendship with a student's parents and has therefore known the student well for a long time. In this case, the head of department must be informed so that it can be clarified whether the situation may bring into question the impartiality of the member of staff when assessing the student's work.

Guidelines for close personal relationships between staff and managers

In the case of close personal relationships between managers and staff, the immediate manager at the next level must be informed. Managers may participate in social events together with staff. Under these circumstances, managers represent Aarhus University and are responsible for their own behaviour, e.g. in connection with the consumption of alcohol.

Examples:

- A head of department is close friends with a member of staff. In connection with the filling of a position, the head of department considers whether this may cause problems with regard to decisions about who participates in the appointment committee and process. The head of department contacts the head of school, which results in the head of department openly addressing this at a department meeting and proposing a solution. This means that feedback may be given on whether there is confidence in the proposed solution.
- A PhD programme director starts a relationship with a student. The student in question is interested in applying for a PhD position. In this case, the programme director is disqualified from participating in the assessment process, and a replacement must be appointed. This must be discussed at the department. Therefore, the head of department must be informed about the relationship.