

Concordat of the White Rose Doctoral Training Partnership on Professional Boundaries between Staff and Postgraduate Researchers

This document has been developed by the WRDTP to provide guidance on best practice with regard to professional boundaries for postgraduate researchers (PGRs). It is not a replacement for formal guidance or Human Resource (HR) policies on conflicts of interest or equivalent policies at partner institutions which can be found on your home University website. The Students' Union can also provide independent advice to PGRs on any issues that they encounter

Rationale:

This concordat provides indications of best practice that we encourage staff and postgraduate researchers based at WRDTP institutions to observe.

It is underpinned by the shared belief across the WRDTP that staff and PGRs should behave in a professional and respectful manner at all times and demonstrate exemplary behaviours and observe codes of conduct in their home institutions.

Staff and PGRs should avoid situations where their behaviour could be considered as breaching professional boundaries or lead to accusations of a conflict of interest, no matter how well intentioned.

It is important to explicitly state expectations of how PGRs can navigate relationships with all staff (academic and professional service) and other PGRs in order to:

- create acceptable norms for how PGRs conduct themselves whilst studying for their post-graduate qualification;
- create acceptable norms for when PGRs can expect to access staff;
- create acceptable norms for what behaviour is considered acceptable for the supervisor/supervisee and staff/PGR relationship;
- avoid misuse of power or authority over postgraduate researchers (PGRs);
- avoid relationships of favouritism between staff and PGRs;
- enable staff and PGRs to protect themselves from compromising situations.

Context:

The WRDTP has a diverse postgraduate community. As part of training during the PhD PGRs will establish networks with academic staff and encounter staff in a variety of contexts both professional and social. PGRs will also often act as staff members when they undertake teaching. When they do teach PGRs are expected to observe professional boundaries that apply to all staff members at the University in which they are employed.

It is a vital part of the PhD process that PGRs should be able to have regular contact with staff and to be able to engage with them intellectually. However, it is also important that where inappropriate conduct or behaviour takes place that there are transparent processes and clear guidelines that can be followed to protect both staff and PGRs. It is against this background context and following consultation with the WRDTP PGR forum that the following recommendations of best practice are proposed.

Recommendations of usual practice for Staff and PGRs:

- Staff and PGRs should treat each other with professionalism, respect and courtesy at all times, in line with relevant codes of conduct and policies at their Universities.
- Staff and PGRs should be alive to cultural differences that may lead to misunderstandings and be clear and transparent in addressing such cases about how and why behaviour may be viewed as inappropriate.
- Staff and PGRs should meet in a professional space where both parties feel comfortable.

Recommendations of usual practice for PGRs:

- If a PGR feels there has been an issue of misuse of power/authority, or inappropriate behaviour that cannot be raised with their supervisor, there should be a clear path available for the PGR to raise this issue.

This process should be accessible and transparent to all parties. Information about how to report an issue of concern should be accessible and clearly and transparently indicated in all relevant documentation. Home University PGR guide and HR processes should be the first port of call.

- Similarly, if it comes to staff attention that a PGR feels there has been an issue of misuse of power/authority, there should be a clear path available for the staff member to raise this issue, subject to the PGR's consent.¹ Information about how to report an issue of concern should be accessible and clearly and transparently indicated in all relevant documentation/webpages.

A possible route to raise the issue with the relevant staff maybe via the Director or Deputy Directors of Postgraduate Research or the Head or Deputy Heads of Department/School.

If the individual is not comfortable raising an issue within their home Department/School another clear path for raising the issue should be available such as via the Faculty Director of PGR, the Graduate School/Doctoral College or Human Resources. Information about how to report an issue of concern should be accessible and clearly and transparently indicated in all relevant documentation. The Students' Union can provide independent advice on the best route to follow.

Recommendations of usual practice for Staff:

- If a Staff member feels there has been inappropriate behaviour by a PGR there should be a clear path available for the staff member to raise this issue.

This process should be accessible and transparent to all parties. Information about how to report an issue of concern should be accessible and clearly and transparently indicated in all relevant documentation. Home University PGR guide and HR processes should be the first port of call.

- It is best practice for staff to use work email to manage their communications with PGRs and where possible use University email addresses to ensure a record of contact is kept on University servers.
- Staff should also where possible use work telephones to manage communications with PGRs. Staff may provide their mobile phone number to PGRs if PGRs request it for access reasons and the staff member is comfortable with doing so. However, staff do not have to and should not feel obliged to provide personal mobile numbers. HEIs

¹ In cases where the student or others are deemed to be at risk or the issue is judged to be a police matter staff may report the issue without student consent subject to normal confidentiality and safeguarding protocols.

should consider provision of work mobiles in the event that a mobile number is likely to be needed for professional reasons (e.g. fieldwork trips).

It is not possible to provide guidance on every eventuality. If in doubt staff should seek a second opinion from their line manager, Post Graduate Research/Graduate School Director. PGRs should seek advice from Post Graduate Research/Graduate School Director/ Doctoral College, a staff member they trust or the Students' Union.