Social Media Policy

1. Introduction

The University of Sheffield recognises and values the numerous benefits and opportunities that the use of social media provides. It can be a tool for networking, sharing news, career development and help raise a person's professional profile. In an academic context, social media enables the dissemination of research, innovation and education activities to a wider audience, presents opportunities to forge connections with cognate scholars across the world, promotes healthy academic debate and can provide pathways to real-world impact and knowledge exchange.

This policy is designed to support and encourage staff members of the university community in their use of social media whilst also outlining the factors that staff should take into consideration when using social media in a professional context.

2. Scope

This policy:

- applies to all University staff members, (including emeritus, honorary or visiting staff who have a professional affiliation with the University)
- applies to any communication within a social media platform that directly or indirectly represents the University.
- applies to the use of social media by staff in their personal capacity, where they, or the content of their post, can be reasonably linked to the University or their connection with the University.

Further information and illustrative examples are contained throughout the policy.

3. Definition of Social Media

Social media describes digital applications that allow people to create and exchange content. In this policy, in addition to conventionally understood social media platforms, the term also includes blogs and microblogs, internet forums, content communities, messaging apps (for example when used for group chats which include colleagues and/or students) and social networking sites

4. General principles

- The University recognises that staff members routinely use social media in a reasonable and appropriate way.
- The University recognises that timeliness and authenticity are important aspects of effective social media use, and that this is best achieved by staff members using social media platforms autonomously and in the way they judge best.
- The University has legal and regulatory obligations to secure, and promote the importance of, freedom of speech within the law and academic freedom within the law and this policy is governed by, and shall be applied in accordance with, the University's Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom ("the Code"). No disciplinary sanction shall be imposed on a member of staff by reference to this Policy without consideration of whether doing so would be an infringement of their right of freedom of speech, or (where applicable) academic freedom, within the law. That assessment will involve an objective assessment of the facts and context relevant to the case and consideration of the factors in paragraph 3 of the Code.
- Posts which breach the criminal law or civil legislation (for example, the Defamation Act 2013, Equality Act 2010, or Protection from Harassment Act 1997) will fall outside the scope of freedom of speech, and academic freedom, within the law. Posts of this nature may have consequences for members of staff in relation to their employment with the University and consequences for them outside their employment with the University.
- Staff are personally responsible for how and what they communicate through social media and should apply the same standards of conduct online as they are expected to apply in all other settings.
- This policy applies to the use of social media primarily for professional purposes. Staff should however be aware that posting in a personal capacity or from a personal social media account may still have implications under this Policy, where the member of staff or the content of their post can be reasonably linked to the University or their connection with the University, in the event that the content or sentiment of the post is the subject of a complaint or allegation of misconduct, in the same way that other actions in a personal capacity (not related to social media) could also be.
- In the case of any suspected or reported breach of this policy, the University reserves the right to investigate the use of social media by the staff member concerned. Potential breaches of this policy, the University Code of Conduct or any other relevant policy would be considered in line with the University Disciplinary Procedure.

5. General guidance on the use of social media

The University recognises, promotes and protects free speech within the law. However, consideration should always be given to the potential vast reach and multiple audiences of any social media post. Whilst posting on social media can be beneficial for profile raising and enhancing connections, once information is published online, it can be difficult to remove, especially as other users may distribute it, further or comment on it or use it in a way that is detrimental to the author. Therefore, staff should consider the content of their posts carefully, as posts can potentially be viewed, commented on or distributed by anyone and for any length of time.

Some general guidelines that staff should follow are:

- Use social media with common sense and within the law
- Recognise the different views, identities, and beliefs of other people and engage respectfully about them
- Be accurate - make sure you have enough information to support your statement
- Be mindful of copyright and intellectual property
- Reflect on how your words may be perceived by others
- Avoid posting content or contributing to a discussion when you are angry or upset or if you have been drinking alcohol
- Consider the potential effect that your use of social media might have on yourself, other individuals and the University
- Make sure you are not sharing any confidential information - either about yourself or others (for example, participants in academic research)
- Think about timing when posting on social media, for example, avoid inadvertently communicating important or sensitive information before it has been officially announced
- Posts made in a professional capacity may express legitimate academic criticism of the work or opinions of other academics, but such posts or comments should be made and expressed in a professional, proportionate, reasonable and respectful manner.

Staff should also be aware that social media platforms are privately owned entities and, as such, they can establish their own rules of acceptable use within their community which may include limitations of freedom of speech such as censorship, banning or blocking users.

6. Personal vs Professional use of social media

The University recognises that staff members may use social media as part of their role/in a professional capacity or in their private lives for personal communication. Whilst this policy

applies to the use of social media primarily for professional purposes, staff should however be aware that posting in a personal capacity or from a personal social media account may still be considered under this policy in the event that the content or sentiment of the post is the subject of a complaint or allegation of misconduct, where the member of staff, or the content of their post, can be reasonably linked to the University or their connection with the University.

6.1 Use of social media in a professional capacity

When staff members use social media as part of their role, they are representing the University and therefore it's important that the University's interests and reputation are taken into account. Staff should make clear that they work for the University, use their real name and be clear about their role. When individuals are using social media in their professional capacity, they need to ensure that their content and tone is consistent with their role at work, recognising the additional reach and influence as a result of the affiliation with the institution.

There are hundreds of official University and University-affiliated accounts, some of them are listed on our 'contact us social media webpage'. Before setting up a new account, staff should consider whether the audience and objectives can be met through an existing account. All official social media accounts must follow the University policies and the University marketing and communication guidelines.

6.2 Use of social media in a personal capacity

When staff members use social media in a personal capacity and disclose their association with the University, any views should be presented as personal views and not as representing the views of the University. Even if a personal social media profile does not identify a staff member as an employee of the University, they could still be identified as an employee of the University by other means.

Irrespective of this, staff should also be aware that their conduct in a personal capacity (including their use of social media) could still have an impact on their employment. For example, posting discriminatory material in a personal capacity could create a hostile or degrading environment for colleagues who view the material, impacting the University community, or it may bring the University into disrepute. Similarly, posting discriminatory content on private social media can still constitute bullying behaviour if it is directed at, or relates to, other members of the University community.

As an organisation, we recognise that staff members are free to express their views about the University, including criticising its operations and approach. Any such views should nonetheless be expressed lawfully and without resorting to personal abuse or targeting of individuals or otherwise breaching our Bullying, Harassment, Sexual Harassment and Sexual Misconduct Policy.

7. Use of Social Media in Learning and Teaching

There are many ways in which social media may be used to support Learning and Teaching, either as an educational tool or for direct communication with students. Whilst using social media in this way can have benefits, staff should consider the following points when considering whether and how to use it for interactions with students:

- Social media may be considered to support and enhance students' learning, not as a substitution for existing platforms provided by the university, particularly when communicating core course content information, expectations, and materials.
- If using social media to provide information to students you should be mindful of the limitations of this approach and the risks of excluding students who are unable to access or uncomfortable accessing social media platforms.
- Using social media as a means of interaction with students can make it difficult to maintain appropriate boundaries, both between work and personal life, but also professionally between staff and students. The personal relationship policy outlines the considerations regarding staff and student relationships.
- Privacy concerns when sharing information that could identify a student or a group of students.
- Students may choose social media to articulate their dissatisfaction with a staff member or members. In such circumstances, it is important to handle any such complaint through an appropriate channel and not engage via social media in order to find a resolution while avoiding unnecessary escalation.
- Staff should also be very careful when posting about students on their own social media accounts as it may risk inadvertently identifying a student against their wishes.

The University offers a number of digital tools that support working with students in an online teaching context.

8. Bullying and harassment via social media

The University will not accept any form of bullying or harassment, or other behavior which breaches our Bullying, Harassment, Sexual Harassment and Sexual Misconduct Policy, by members of University staff or students.

The following examples are provided to illustrate the type of activity or behaviour, displayed through social media communications, which may be found to be be forms of bullying and harassment as defined in the [Bullying, Harassment, Sexual Harassment and Sexual Misconduct policy](#):

- Spreading rumours, lies or malicious gossip.
- Intimidating or aggressive behaviour.
- Offensive or threatening comments.
- Sexually suggestive behaviour e.g. sexualised text or explicit images.
- Posting content that intimidates, humiliates or degrades other members of the University community.
- Content which may reasonably be considered likely to cause serious distress or which causes another person to fear for their safety.

Please note that bullying and harassment may also take place via other means such as email, text or instant messaging, and could include usage in a personal capacity.

9. Online Safety

When using social media platforms it is important that staff members are aware of the risks and take steps to protect themselves and their personal information. Staff should never use their University credentials and password for setting up social media platforms and must always take care to keep login information private. Posting personal information could potentially lead to unwanted attention and could even contribute to identity fraud.

10. Dealing with online harassment against a member of the University staff

There might be times when staff members require additional support due to online abuse on social media by members of the public such as hacking, bullying, trolling and threats.

If you become involved in an issue on social media :

- Avoid engaging in online conversations with the person who is posting abuse - Responding can often quickly escalate the issue and might attract more users to see the content and get involved.
- Check how social media providers can help - all social media platforms have

functionalities for responding to negative content, such as muting, reporting, and blocking.

- If you have concerns over your immediate safety, you should contact the [University's Security Services](#) or the police if appropriate. You can also report incidents to the University via [Report + Support](#).
- Take care of your mental health - If you are overwhelmed and need support, visit the University's [wellbeing webpages](#) and find out the range of options available to you.
- Follow our [IT guidance](#) to protect yourself and keep your data secure.

11. Reporting inappropriate use of social media by a member of the University community

If you have any concerns about material published by a member of the University community on social media, you should consider the following actions:

- You can report to your line manager
- You can contact your [Human Resources team](#)
- You can report your concerns via [Report + Support.](#) (this is the most appropriate route for students and non-staff)
- You can report inappropriate material through the reporting/takedown process of the platform involved.

12. How will we treat concerns about inappropriate Social Media usage by a member of the University community

The University often receives complaints about the social media usage of individual staff members, either in a professional or personal capacity. The nature of the research undertaken at the University, and the academic freedom we provide for our staff, can mean that our research and innovation activities may be regarded as controversial and can attract criticism and contrary views.

All complaints are assessed on a case-by-case basis and in line with our core principles of freedom of speech within the law and academic freedom within the law and our legal and regulatory duties in relation to those freedoms.

Where a complaint is assessed as having no obvious merit, no action will be taken against the

member of staff concerned. Where necessary, staff members will be made aware of complaints that have been received by the University regarding their social media post(s) for their awareness, or if there are concerns for their safety and security.

Otherwise, it may be considered appropriate for the matter to be investigated, including under the University's disciplinary procedure.

13. Relevant University policies and related information

This policy should be read in conjunction with the other University policies. The following policies and guidance are especially relevant in this context:

- Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom

- Staff Code of Conduct

- Bullying, Harassment, Sexual Harassment and Sexual Misconduct Policy

- GDPR and Data Protection

- Information classification and handling

- IT code of practice and regulations

- IT information security policies

- Research and Innovation Practices

- Grievance policy and procedure

- University disciplinary procedure

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