

Protecting yourself when using social networking - A Guide for Students

Introduction

Social media allows many opportunities for communication, collaboration and discussion. It's important though, to ensure that your use of these sites does not create problems for you or for others, and the University expects you to comply with the guidance set out here in your interactions with other members of the University community, and where you identify yourself as a student of the University. The key points covered in this guidance are:

- what you say online is as 'real' as anything offline
- what you say or do may have consequences that affect your future and your career
- you should be respectful of others and in particular other members of the University
- there are proper ways of raising matters of concern or complaint
- be careful when disclosing personal information about yourself
- don't disclose personal information about others without their consent
- don't make abusive, bullying, threatening or defamatory comments about others
- think, before you post. Is this how I want the world to see me, maybe for many years to come?

The University operates a policy that all members of the University community (staff, students, and the Student Union) should treat one another with dignity and respect, and this applies to activities online as well as offline. **The University's disciplinary regulations, and the law, operate the same way in respect to social media as they would to anything published in print, or said to somebody's face. Breaches of that policy or the law can directly affect your future with the University, and your future career.**

Unfortunately the myth still exists that words used in the virtual world aren't 'real'. This isn't the case: they carry the same weight, and there have been many examples in the last year in the national media of people who have been arrested, charged and acquired a criminal record because of what they have said on social media, or how they have said it.

Social media is a good way of getting yourself and your work into the public eye and establishing a reputation – and a very easy way of ruining that reputation. People have found opportunities ruined, because someone has dug up something they said or posted from months, even years before. Many employers now look up the social media history of applicants for jobs. Students in the UK who have run into trouble for misuse of social media, now face a situation where a search for online them turns up articles on the court case as all the top hits for their name. **Please think before you post, and treat others in a respectful manner, so it doesn't happen to you.**

At the end of this document is a list of other University procedures which might be used to deal with issues arising from social media use and abuse.

Raising issues of concern with the University

The University values feedback from students, but you should remember **that there are well-established ways to raise issues of dissatisfaction or complaint, such as through your student representative or via the University's complaints procedure** - and that using these methods are a constructive way of raising an issue in a manner that is likely to lead to action to address your concern. Using these channels is the best way to get things done, by the right people.

Posting in a way which brings the University into disrepute can devalue the way in which your degree or other award is seen by the outside world. You are of course free to talk about the University and your experience, but **remarks which are not true, which are offensive or abusive to staff, or which bring the University into disrepute may result in the University taking action which can result in suspension or exclusion from the University.**

Giving away too much information about yourself or others

Think very carefully about the personal information you post on social networking sites.

Sometimes people have included their information such as home phone number, mobile number, or even their home address. You may limit access to your friends, but on some sites when you join a network your details are visible to thousands of people on that network.

Identity theft and stalking based on such information can and does happen. So it makes sense to control what information you reveal about yourself. **Would you put it on a public notice-board? If not, think carefully before you post it to a social networking site.** Take some time to understand the privacy settings that your site uses, and make sure you apply them the way that you want them to be.

If you post a photo to a social networking site, you appear to have some degree of control over it. But if anyone who has access to it copies the photo, or text that you have written, or a video, or any other form of content, and reproduces it on their page, or elsewhere on the web, you have lost control over that image, and it maybe be reproduced or remain on the internet for ever. So when you post content to social networking sites, think about what it might mean if prospective employers, future colleagues or your family were to see it in a year, two years, five years. While you can take down the content that *you* post, you can't take the content that others have copied or reposted. Think about the potential for embarrassment or harm to your future career, particularly if you want to work in a career where professional standards and expectations are in place. Employers may look at Facebook or run a web search on applicants for a job.

Being held accountable for what you post relating to others

All of this applies to other people too. **Please don't post any personal details about someone without their consent. This includes photos and video, particularly where that might embarrass or demean the other person.**

Before you post, assume that the person to whom you are referring is going to read what you say - because very often they will, either directly, or because someone else who has access to the material chooses to send them a copy. Your usage of social media is tracked by the providers, and what may feel like an anonymous post will turn out not to be so if the provider receives a court order or request from the police and discloses information that will identify you.

The University has a duty of care to members of the University community, staff and students, and has rules in place to deal with student and staff misconduct. **Making defamatory, abusive, threatening or bullying comments about members of that community, or breaching their personal privacy, can mean that disciplinary action is brought against you by the University which in serious cases could lead to suspension or exclusion from the University. Beyond that, any student, member of staff or third party has the right, if they choose, to pursue legal action against you.**

Remember also that any posting is subject to UK law in regard to conduct such as incitement to racial hatred, incitement to violence, or harassment. In some cases the police can be involved, and such behaviour can result in a criminal record.

There have also been a number of well-publicised cases where joking statements online about (for example) airport security and bombs have landed the poster in serious trouble. Lengthy prison sentences were handed down recently to individuals in connection with the 2011 riots in the UK purely on the basis of posts that they had made on Facebook.

So it makes sense to think carefully about what you post, and the consequences it might have for yourself, or for others. Those consequences might include the University taking action where appropriate, or might include the police taking action.

Intellectual property

You should not infringe the intellectual property rights of others when posting on social media by posting content which is not yours, or using social media to distribute content which is not yours for others to download.

Raising concerns

If you are concerned about something posted on social media, you should report this to the provider of the social media service (e.g. Facebook or Twitter) through the reporting functions within their software, and we encourage you use this 'report' link where you find abusive or unacceptable behaviour. The University doesn't 'own' content other than that posted on its official pages or sites, and so cannot remove content itself – usually, only the social media company or the original poster can do this.

If your concern involves the safeguarding of children or vulnerable adults, you can report this to a member of the University Safeguarding Team, or directly to the police if an emergency.

<http://services.sunderland.ac.uk/hr/safety/safeguarding/>

If your concern involves potentially criminal behaviour, especially where you think there is immediate risk of harm to others, you should report it directly to the police first, and also to University Security if there is a risk to others/criminal activity on campus.

The University does not tolerate bullying or harassment, and this can be dealt with under the University's disciplinary procedure (see the end of this procedure for a link).

If you are ever reporting content, please take screenshots or save the content (unless illegal) so that you can supply it if asked.

Other Relevant Procedures

Student Disciplinary Regulations

<https://my.sunderland.ac.uk/download/attachments/105484836/Student%20Disciplinary%20Regulations%20v4.pdf?version=1&modificationDate=1505382427000&api=v2>

Student Complaints Procedure

<https://my.sunderland.ac.uk/download/attachments/105484836/Student%20Complaints%20Process%20v7.pdf?version=1&modificationDate=1505730361000&api=v2>

University of Sunderland IT Acceptable Use Policy

<https://docushare.sunderland.ac.uk/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-8380/IG07%20IT%20AUP.pdf>

University Safeguarding Policy

<http://services.sunderland.ac.uk/hr/safety/safeguarding/>

Dignity and Respect and Keeping Everyone Safe – University Statement

<https://my.sunderland.ac.uk/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=106739261>