

STUDENT GUIDANCE ON THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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Student Guidance on the use of Social Media and Virtual Learning Environments

1. Introduction

The University of Strathclyde recognises the opportunity social media and virtual learning environments provide in enhancing communication for students and supporting their learning and student experience. Social media and technology evolve rapidly and this guidance has been developed to educate students in the safe and constructive use of digital technologies, and model best practice in order to ensure our University is operating in line with our values and within the law relating to how we behave online. The guidance in this document applies to all registered students in all locations on and off campus, both in the UK and overseas.

Social media channels - such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram - are platforms dedicated to communication and content sharing. The number of social media channels is continually changing, and this guidance covers any such platform. In addition, online communication and learning is commonly carried out on the University's Virtual Learning Environment, Myplace, and other e-learning environments, via email and also on tele- and video-conferencing platforms such as Skype and Zoom.

This guidance relates to all online conduct, which includes posting and commenting on social media platforms, private or direct messaging and participation in online learning activities. The scope of this policy includes all students (at all levels of study), as well as visitors, representatives and participants on our physical, digital, and global campuses.

The wellbeing and safety of every member of the university community, and all beneficiaries of University activity, is our priority. This guidance recognises that everyone, regardless of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation, care experience and socio-economic background have a right to be protected from all forms of harm, abuse, harassment or discrimination.

It also promotes the University's commitment to the care and protection of all children and young people who are undergraduate students, use, or are beneficiaries of our services and those who participate in activities organised by the university or those involved in research, outreach or development programmes. In accordance with the United Convention on the Rights of the Child and the [Children and Young People \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#), a child is anyone under 18 years of age. A young person is aged 16-17. This definition is recognised internationally as identifying a population who are particularly vulnerable and require additional safeguards to protect their rights.

2. Your role as a Strathclyde student

As a student of the University and representative of Strathclyde you have a responsibility to help create and maintain a healthy online environment for yourself, other students, staff, and members of the public. The University has instituted policies to help protect you and your learning environment while you are at Strathclyde. These policies ([Dignity and Respect Policy](#) and [Equality and Diversity Policy](#)) aim to foster a culture of respect, tolerance and inclusion in line with our values on campus, in accommodation and further afield - this includes online and when interacting with members of the public.

You should take care to ensure that any content you create or messages you send could not be considered offensive or discriminatory, as it could mean that you are in breach of the above regulations. When providing feedback in online surveys, module evaluation forms and other student forums, please be respectful and constructive in your comments in line with the University's [Dignity and Respect Policy](#). This gives us the best opportunity to use your feedback to improve our learning and teaching experience at Strathclyde.

Failure to follow this policy, guidance and related procedures may not necessarily constitute abuse, but it is nonetheless a matter of concern for the university and may lead to disciplinary action. If any member of the University community is concerned that another member of the University of Strathclyde's community is not following the guidance and procedures, they can report this using [Report and Support](#).

3. Good practice in using online learning and social media platforms

It is expected that students will behave respectfully towards others at all times online, just as they would in a campus or non-University setting. The Student Discipline Procedure can be enacted when students are found to be in breach of this. Please refer to section 8 of this guidance for more information.

The following list outlines recommendations on how to conduct yourself when using online learning and social media platforms.

- Always maintain a respectful tone and be patient as users of all abilities may be participating.
- Think about how your message might be interpreted and always be professional with your communications.
- Check the accuracy and sensitivity of what you are posting before pressing submit, just as you would with any other form of communication. If you aren't sure, consider asking a friend to review your content.
- If in doubt, don't post. If you make a mistake, admit it. Be upfront and quick with your correction.
- BLOCK capitals can occasionally be interpreted as shouting so they are best avoided. If you want to emphasise a point use *asterisks* instead.
- In discussion forums, keep your messages to the point and state who the message or post is coming from and add a descriptive title.
- When lectures and seminars are delivered over video platforms, the member of staff leading the session will set expectations around the use of cameras and microphones. In most scenarios it is best practice to 'mute' your microphone while others are talking so as not to add background noise to the call. In the case of video, we understand that it may not always be possible or practical for you to have your video on during a call, however it is preferred that you switch on your video during teaching sessions to promote open communication.
- Carefully consider the types of personal information you wish to share about yourself online. Personal information includes but is not limited to gender, sexuality, age, religion, relationship status, address, contact details, planned movements etc.
- Keep yourself and your personal data safe online: consult [10 steps to cyber success](#) for advice.
- Do not reveal the personal information of other people online, even if you believe that the information is already widely known.

- Always make sure you have permission before posting videos and photographs featuring other people. It is important to note that placing images of another person online may expose them to danger.
- Make sure you have permission before using someone else’s written content. Be aware that extracts of written content may be misconstrued if the full context is not available to the reader. Avoid putting writers in a position where their intent could be misinterpreted.
- You have a responsibility for what you say. Please remember that once something is posted online it can be very difficult to remove. Written comments can be misunderstood or taken out of context.
- Remember that text, images and video that you post, share or put in a private message may be shared beyond the intended recipients: as soon as you post or send, the content is no longer in your control.
- Please note that, should private messages come into the public domain, the University can consider them under the relevant policies and impose penalties when required.
- Remember that everything you post online contributes to your digital profile, and is potentially visible to friends, family, University staff and also to potential employers.

4. Social Media Use for Work, Study and Research

Social media is changing the way individuals and organisations communicate and interact. It creates new opportunities to engage with audiences who are interested in all aspects of what we do as a University, and what you might be doing as a student – our research, our programmes of study, and our wide range of intellectual, social, sporting and cultural activities. Online networking is transforming our communication with others, enabling us to communicate one to one, or on a platform amongst large groups of people, increasingly from personal devices. Social media apps, networking sites, chatrooms, blogging, vlogging, instant messaging and video calls allow us to share personal information and communicate remotely with many people whom we do not know.

During your time as a student of the University it may be advantageous to use social media for work, study or research purposes. Many social media sites permit the creation of multiple accounts and you may wish to consider whether using this facility would assist in delineating your professional use of social media from your own personal use.

When using social media for research, it is essential that you gain the necessary ethical approval for the research from your Departmental/School Ethics Committee or the [University Ethics Committee](#) as appropriate. You should refer to the [Code of Practice on Investigations Involving Human Beings](#) when designing your research.

Social media also brings with it a new dimension to the student-staff relationship and this can be far more informal in nature than a typical classroom setting. You should be aware of this when interacting with staff via social media, particularly when considering becoming “friends” with staff as well as the types of platforms on which you interact. For example, some Social Media platforms such as LinkedIn are dedicated to professional interactions, whereas platforms such as Facebook and Instagram can contain more personal content. It is important to recognise that staff are individuals with a right to a private life and you should develop professional relationships only. Do not interact with staff in any capacity or environment that you would not willingly share in a University or other public setting. University staff also have a set of [Guidance on the Use of Social Media](#), which sets out the context in which our colleagues use social media platforms and online networking. Everyone that is working and volunteering for the University, including students working in paid, or unpaid

positions representing the University, or acting on the University's behalf, is in a position of trust when working with Children and Young People.

5. Creating a safe and supportive environment for learning and working

All students participating in online learning have a right to participate in a safe and supported manner. This means that everyone engaged with online learning has an obligation to behave responsibly. If you identify a problem in an online learning platform – for example, another user being abusive, disrespectful or intimidating to other users or members of the public, you should consider raising this directly with the person that has commented, and if it is not possible to resolve this directly;

- Raise this with the person running the module or activity;
- Consult our information on [Dignity and Respect](#) for more options;
- Consider reporting this via [Report and Support](#).

You can take some basic steps to protect yourself online. [Guidance from our Information Services Directorate](#) will help you keep yourself more secure. If you experience harassment, bullying or stalking online, or you are concerned about the online behaviour of others, you can consider:

- Reporting abusive posts, comments or messages to the relevant social media provider;
- Raising the issue with a lecturer, tutor, or member of staff;
- Reporting a problem to the University via [Report and Support](#).

It is important to remain aware of online scams, fraud and invitations to participate in academic dishonesty, such as using essay writing services. If you are concerned that you've been a victim of any of these, you should seek support via [Report and Support](#).

6. Safeguarding children and young people

We all have a responsibility to lead by example and remain alert to the fact that we may be engaging with under 18s in our digital learning and work environment. Children and young people may expose themselves to danger, intentionally or unknowingly when using the internet, social media and other technologies. They may be 'braver' online and unaware of the dangers.

We want young people who use our services to feel safe and valued and so we must understand the risks and issues associated with children and young people being online and apply this to our context. We recognise that children can be at risk of harm when they use technology. This could include:

- Inappropriate or harmful online content incl. disturbing or upsetting videos, adverts and pop-ups.
- Talking to strangers, or having strangers view content.
- Lack of privacy (perceived or actual).
- Sexual offending against children online.
- Bullying online.
- Risk of sharing personal information, images and sexting.
- Online radicalisation and extremism.

Young people who send naked or inappropriate photos of themselves are sending child images which is a criminal offence. Taking or sharing images of themselves or others can lead to disturbing consequences that can have a long-lasting impact, including blackmail, bullying, unwanted or public attention and emotional distress.

The University is committed to providing a safe and respectful learning and working environment. Our commitment to equality, diversity and fair treatment for all underpins this guidance and procedures. We recognise that the Protection of Vulnerable Groups Scheme (PVG Scheme) and Disclosure system is an important part of the protections the University implements to fulfil its obligations to keep children and protected adults safe across all physical and digital environments. Respectful and safe behaviour online is a fundamental to this objective.

Our PVG Guidance and related procedures apply to all applicants, staff, students and volunteer representatives of the University (paid or unpaid) whose work constitutes a 'regulated role' with children and / or protected adults, under the Disclosure (Scotland) Act 2020, requiring them to be members of the Protecting Vulnerable Groups Scheme (PVG Scheme). This is to ensure that they are not barred from carrying out duties with children and / or protected adults. Harmful activity across digital environments, particularly where it constitutes a criminal offence, has the potential to impact on an individual's Scheme Membership and subsequently has a direct impact on future employment opportunities.

With regard to communication, we expect University representatives to comply with the following:

- Wherever possible, only communicate with children via a professional email address.
- Do not give your personal contact details, if children or young people need to contact you always use University details.
- All video call interactions such as Skype, Zoom Microsoft Teams, Face Time meetings may be used, but must follow the same parameters of a face-to-face meeting, with both parties being mindful of the space they are in when they join the meeting. For example, avoiding breaching another person's privacy by inadvertently including them in the background of your video call.
- Never give personal information, including personal contact details or social media connections.
- Ensure privacy settings on personal social media, and do not accept friend requests or 'follow' any personal accounts of children or young people, or their families.
- Consider your own conduct online: certain behaviour could result in disciplinary or legal action.
- Do not show social media, photos or videos from your personal device.

If you are concerned about online activity that may risk harm to a child, the national crime agency's [Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command](#) (CEOP) unit has a reporting facility.

The University will take all reports of safeguarding concerns seriously, responding promptly and according to due process.

7. Your mental health online

Social media can be an invaluable tool for staying connected and communicating with friends, family and the wider world and many people find it positively beneficial in supporting their wellbeing. It can

help individuals develop new friendships, offer emotional support, and, find vital social connections for people who are residing remotely.

Whilst acknowledging the many extremely positive aspects of social media use, and its integral part in everyday life, it is important to recognise that excessive social media use can have a negative impact on our mental health and wellbeing. Being aware of how social media use makes you feel and the development of healthy social media habits is, therefore, fundamental. This can include simple steps such as:

- Tracking how much time you spend online each day and aiming to reduce this.
- Turning off your phone at certain times of the day e.g. when in lectures or completing an assignment to enable you to distinguish between study and free time, and, focus on the task.
- Not taking your phone or tablet to bed with you.
- Disabling social media notifications to help regain focus.
- Limiting checks to every few hours. You can gradually build up the amount of time between checks.
- Considering removing social media apps from your phone.

When participating in group chats, please consider the mental health and wellbeing of all users in the group when planning the frequency and timing of your engagement. Be considerate of the impact your messages might have on others. It is essential to fact-check before you post, especially in the case of information about assignments and deadlines.

The [Disability & Wellbeing webpages](#) have a range of tips and resources on healthy social media use. These pages also include links to support services and self-help tools if you are experiencing a difficult time with your mental health. Please be aware that the University has support in place for students at times of crisis, for example during mental health challenges. We strongly advise that students use the dedicated channels rather than approaching University contacts on social media as this is the fastest way to access help, and is considerate of the potential impact on staff that are not in a position to be able to respond to issues of this type.

8. Dignity and Respect and the University Student Discipline Procedure

Our [Dignity and Respect Policy](#) and [Student Discipline Procedure](#) apply equally to all online activity, including activity on social media whether you are interacting with other students, members of staff or the general public. We all have a role to play in creating a safe environment within which everyone is treated with dignity and respect at all times. We are committed to providing an environment which is based on a sense of community and which is free from discrimination, harassment, bullying and victimisation.

Critical thinking and free debate are cornerstones of healthy discourse, and we encourage students to engage in these whilst keeping an open mind to the perspectives of others. In cases of your own strongly-held opinions or beliefs, it is your responsibility to express yourself in a manner that maintains respect for others. Your words and actions online can affect anyone who views them, not just the direct recipients. Even if it is not your intention to offend, should another person from the university community or the general public feel discriminated against or victimised by you or your comments online, then this will be considered under the Student Discipline Procedure.

The University of Strathclyde [Student Discipline Procedure](#) applies to interactions and conduct both in a face-to-face setting and online. The Procedure contains information relating to what constitutes a disciplinary offence, as well as the steps the University takes to process alleged offences. It is recommended that students familiarise themselves with the Procedure as a matter of course. Specific attention should be paid to sections 1.2 & 1.3, which are outlined below:

1.2. The purpose of the procedure is to regulate student behaviour in order to secure the proper working of the University in the broadest sense. In support of this goal, students are expected to conduct themselves at all times in a manner which

- 1. demonstrates respect for staff, fellow students, and University property;*
- 2. enhances the reputation of the University;*
- 3. is sensitive to a culturally diverse environment; and*
- 4. demonstrates active engagement in the learning process, a commitment to university-level study, and determination to succeed.*

1.3. A breach of discipline is, for the purpose of these procedures, called a “disciplinary offence”, and this will include, but not be limited to, failure to observe all University rules and regulations including any local regulations for the governance of Academic Faculties, Schools/Departments, the University Library, Professional Services Directorates, and University Residences. The essence of an offence under this procedure is improper conduct or improper interference, in the broadest sense, with the proper functioning or activities of the University, or those who work or study in the University. It also includes conduct which otherwise damages the University, reputationally or materially. Failure to adhere to the requirements of any policies, notices or codes of conduct that the University may, from time to time, introduce may also constitute a disciplinary offence.

It is important to note that penalties for serious breaches of discipline can include suspension from attendance at the University for a stipulated period and/or expulsion from the University without an award.

9. Data protection guidance

All of us deserve the right to privacy online and the opportunity to make informed choices about how our personal information is used and shared. We are all entitled to a number of rights when it comes to our data, in line with GDPR, these are:

- [The right to be informed](#)
- [The right of access](#)
- [The right to rectification](#)
- [The right to erasure](#)
- [The right to restrict processing](#)
- [The right to data portability](#)
- [The right to object](#)
- [Rights in relation to automated decision making and profiling](#)

More information and guidance can be found on the Strathclyde’s [Information Governance](#) webpages.

10. Training

It is recommended that students undertake training to enhance their awareness of the lasting impact of their online conduct. An online module has been developed for students by students, and is available through Myplace - [Digital footprint: watch your step!](#)

Students may be required or advised to undertake modules to support safety online in relation to their programme of study, professional practice, a volunteer or paid role. Please note that Students undertaking roles as representatives of the University may be required to undertake training and a [PVG check](#) commensurate to their role.

11. Review

This guidance will be updated in line with national guidance and wider University policy development on a regular basis. The guidance will be reviewed periodically through the Student Experience Committee and the Quality Assurance Committee.

12. Summary

Social media is an important part of the lives of many students, and it is not the University's purpose to inhibit dialogue or respectful debate. However, as a student of the University, you are bound by our [Student Discipline Procedure](#) and the [Dignity and Respect Policy](#). Your activity online reflects on you as well as the University.

Whether you are using social media in a personal capacity or as part of a University activity, you should consider the advice in the guidance outlined above.