

# Social Media Policy

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## 1. Introduction

Social media sites are a part of most people's everyday communication and allow for the exchange of ideas, opinions and information about both personal and work-related issues.

Staff who contribute to social media sites must do so responsibly and treat electronic behaviour as they would treat non-electronic behaviour. They should be mindful of how they represent themselves and the University on both personal and business social media sites as the lines between public and private, personal and professional expression are easily blurred and the content on social media sites may be public for many years. Posting in closed social media groups does not necessarily mean posts are private.

Use of social media is governed by the same policies and procedures that apply to all aspects of being a member of staff. Staff are personally accountable for adhering and remaining up to date with the policies and codes of conduct for each of the social platforms they choose to use.

The University has an agreed statement of principles on Academic Freedom, which gives the Open University community a common understanding of what academic freedom means for the University, the expected etiquette surrounding free and open speech and debate, and the responsibilities that come with that freedom.

This social media policy is part of a suite of policies and procedures designed to help staff communicate safely and responsibly online. This policy covers:

- Private use of social media by staff
- Advice regarding the creation and oversight of official University social media accounts
- The publication of commentary by staff (including internal staff, consultants and others working for or on behalf of the University) relating to the University on any social media network, including The Open University's official and unofficial channels, public or closed/private social media networks and groups.

## 2. Definition of social media

For the purposes of this policy, 'social media' is defined as websites and online applications that enable users to create and share content, and/or participate in social networking audiences within and outside the OU community. These social media tools enable users to share ideas, opinions, knowledge and interests and use of them includes posting, commenting, instant messaging and sharing links, images and files. Examples of such social media include, but are not limited to:

- Twitter
- Facebook
- LinkedIn
- Blogs
- Instagram
- YouTube
- Pinterest
- Flickr
- Snapchat
- WhatsApp
- Vimeo
- Online chat forums, e.g. Yammer

### 3. Responsibilities

The University respects an employee's right to a private life. The University must also ensure that the University's confidentiality and reputation are maintained, and that staff do not subject others to online abuse. Employees are reminded of their obligations under the statement of principles on Academic Freedom and University employment policies and standards when using social media sites generally, of their duty not to bring the University into disrepute and to behave professionally and respectfully to colleagues, students or other University contacts.

The Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom sets out that:

All members of the Open University's academic community, both students and staff, have freedom within the law to:

- hold and express opinions
- question and test established ideas or received wisdom
- develop and advance new ideas or innovative proposals
- present controversial or unpopular points of view

In the exercise of this freedom we acknowledge, in line with our Student Charter, that as members of a welcoming and inclusive community we have responsibilities to each other and to the wider society to:

- value diversity and recognise that different people bring different perspectives, ideas, knowledge and culture and that this difference brings great strength
- treat others with courtesy and respect, challenge inequalities, and anticipate and respond positively to different needs and circumstances
- respect the rights of individuals to hold different beliefs and views and to express them through appropriate contribution to discussion and academic debate
- communicate in ways that are clear, relevant, respectful, accurate and timely, and exemplified by transparency and constructive dialogue

This means that:

- We will be academically rigorous, justify our views with evidence and academic argument and be willing to recognise the gaps and weaknesses in our own arguments.
- In promoting our ideas, we will make every reasonable effort to minimise the risks of any harm, either physical or psychological, arising for any person, institution or community.
- We will be aware that some academic opinions and arguments may cause offence to some people but that this is not, of itself, a sufficient reason not to express those opinions and arguments. We will, nevertheless, be sensitive to the views of others and we will not present or challenge views in a way that is hostile or degrading.
- We respect the right of others to challenge our views, provided that it is based on accurate evidence, facts or reasonable argument and that it is thoughtful and made in appropriate fora.
- We will always be careful to distinguish between our personal views and those of The Open University or any other person, group of people or organisation with which we may be associated.

When using social media, whether professionally or personally, employees are advised:

- to remember that social media sites are public forums and should not assume that their entries will remain private. Any comments and images posted may be permanent and widely available, so careful consideration is advised before publication.

- to familiarise themselves with, and adhere to, policies and codes of conduct for the social media platforms used and be aware that, for example, posting offensive comments on a public site could be incompatible with a social media platforms' own policies and procedures. It could also damage an employee's reputation, and in some circumstances could call the reputation of the University into question too.
- not to do anything that could be considered discriminatory or bullying or harassing (this may also be enforced through the social media platforms' own policies and procedures).
- not to post or share defamatory comments, content and images (i.e. something which is untrue and causes or is likely to cause harm to a person's reputation).
- to carefully consider using language which could be deemed as offensive.
- not to breach copyright laws by using images or content without permission or failing to give due credit where permission has been granted. Social media networks will also have their own policies around this, which you must adhere to.
- not to publish, share or discuss confidential information relating to The Open University, or any individual, or organisation, on personal social media sites. No information is to be made available that could provide a person with unauthorised access to the University, confidential or sensitive information or intellectual property. Any non-disclosure agreements that are in place must not be violated.

Staff should refer to the [Social Media Toolkit](#), which has been designed to provide advice and guidance to staff about using social media, including support on how to mitigate risks, manage mistakes and how to contact the University's Press and Social Media team about issues arising from use of social media.

The use of internal or external social networking sites at work for personal reasons whilst working is permitted but limited to reasonable use. i.e. it does not impinge on an individual's job performance.

#### **4. Use of the University's name or branding**

Employees should not use the University's name in such a way that brings the University into disrepute. Employees are free to express their political, religious, social and academic views in private or public provided this is explicitly done in their own name and not the name of the University.

#### **5. Use of social networking sites**

In line with Open University Information Security policies, which all staff should be familiar with, public-facing references to The Open University are monitored across social media including references or associations that could harm the University, its staff, individual students or groups of students. The Marketing and Communications team take responsibility for this, along with the resulting action, for example, requests for comments to be hidden, accounts being reported or blocked, or the use of university policies to escalate a matter for investigation and potential disciplinary action.

This policy does not prevent staff from using social media to talk about their experiences or to express critical views appropriately. However, if the staff member has a complaint with an area of the University, they are encouraged to follow the appropriate internal complaints procedures for employees, so that the University has the opportunity to understand the complaint and attempt to resolve the matter.

## **Privacy and copyright laws**

Content shared on social media is subject to the same privacy and copyright laws as other public channels. Staff should familiarise themselves with Open University policies and procedures and the policies of any media platform used. When using a personal account colleagues are personally responsible for any content shared on the account. The University does not accept any liability in cases where a staff member is found to be breaking the law using their personal social media channels.

## **Restricted use of The Open University logo and crest**

The Open University's logo and crest may only be used on official, Open University-owned and -managed social media accounts. It should not be used in any other groups or accounts. Any requests to use the logo on social media should be sent to the Marketing and Communications Unit, email: [social-media@open.ac.uk](mailto:social-media@open.ac.uk)

## **Students and staff are not obliged to participate in social media**

Communication with students must be through OU provided channels. Staff should not interact with students using personal social media or other direct messaging apps such as Facebook, LinkedIn or WhatsApp and in particular should avoid using direct messages or other private channels. Guidance on [TutorHome: Mechanisms for contact](#) is available on TutorHome.

Other than where it is a requirement of their role, staff should feel no obligation to accept an invitation to join a social media platform, group, or page, or to accept a 'friend request' related to The Open University, regardless of whether that invitation comes from another student, tutor or member of staff.

## **Social media in an emergency**

Social media provides important information for staff, students and other key stakeholders during an emergency and it is important that any information provided is timely, consistent and accurate. All University updates will be provided through central University channels managed by Marketing and Communications on the official OU channels. In order to mitigate the risk of issuing conflicting or incorrect information, staff are asked to refrain from posting information or updates during a live incident.

## **6. Competition & Markets Authority**

In order to remain compliant with the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), it's important to ensure any information shared on social media relating to studying courses and qualifications is accurate. Rectifying situations where incorrect information is shared on social media is challenging as it is difficult to establish how widely it has been shared.

To ensure students and prospective students can make informed study choices, please do not share details about courses or fees on social media, but instead refer them to the OU website or student recruitment teams to get up to date information. Alternatively, refer them to The Open University's official social media accounts where a trained adviser will be able to respond directly on social media.

## **7. Setting up official OU social media accounts and ensuring they are accessible**

It's important that we have guidelines to help staff get the most out of social media while maintaining quality and standards. Social media may be free however building a strong, engaged community on any social network will require a significant investment of time and resource. There are already strict guidelines for using The Open University brand and it's important that we extend these quality controls to our activity on social media. The OU has

developed a [Social Media Toolkit](#) to support staff with this. These guidelines are not designed to stop staff using social media for their department but to ensure that social media is the right platform for their intended audience, in order to get the most value out of the time and resource they plan to invest and understand how to measure impact.

Before starting an official OU social media account, an [application](#) will need to be completed. The application will be reviewed by a panel and a response given within four weeks.

Any questions relating to the application should be emailed to: [social-media@open.ac.uk](mailto:social-media@open.ac.uk)

Staff should also consider accessibility requirements when developing content for use on official OU social media accounts. It is important that writing is legible, and that the compatibility of items such as GIFs and emojis with accessibility software and screen readers has been properly considered. Although the use of emojis, for example, will be described by a screen reader, these should be used sparingly to ensure that the flow of the document is not affected for the reader.

All video content for use on official OU social media channels must have subtitles for accessibility purposes. It is accepted that some film content for social media is either livestreamed or produced for immediate use (given the immediacy of the channel). In such instances, subtitles are not required but a full transcript of audio content of such clips should be made available on request.

### **Account Security**

The Information Security Team have created a [Hints and Tips document](#), which provides general information for staff in relation to maintaining account security.

Social media accounts are at risk of hacking, which can cause significant reputational damage and potentially serious misinformation for stakeholders. If you are concerned that hacking has taken place on an official OU social media account, please contact [social-media@open.ac.uk](mailto:social-media@open.ac.uk)

## **8. Reporting matters of concern on social media**

### **Inappropriate conduct**

Complaints about inappropriate behaviour between students, a student member of staff acting in their capacity as a student, or a student complaint about a staff member, are addressed by the procedure described in the Dignity and Respect Policy.

Complaints about inappropriate behaviour by a staff member on social media are addressed under the Bullying and Harassment Policy.

### **Prevent duty**

As part of the UK Government's strategy to reduce terrorism, the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 introduced new measures aimed at countering the risk of terrorism and radicalisation. Under the Act, the University must show 'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism'.

All staff are expected to be aware of the Prevent duty and to know what their responsibilities are in relation to it. Most staff are not expected to make a judgement about whether someone is at risk of being drawn into terrorism or not. However, all staff have a responsibility to [report internally](#) any matters of concern by emailing the [Prevent Co-ordinator](#), so that an appropriate assessment can be undertaken by staff who are trained to do so.

More information is available via the University's [Prevent \(Counter-Terrorism\) Duty](#) intranet pages. Staff are also required to complete the mandatory online Prevent training every two years.

If a staff member identifies a potential matter of concern, or a concern is escalated to them, they should contact the [Prevent Co-ordinator](#) as soon as possible for advice.

## **Safeguarding**

The University recognises that it has a duty of care in creating a safe environment for children, young people and vulnerable adults for their studies or employment, and, by working with appropriate external agencies, is committed to ensure that they are safeguarded and protected from harm. The overarching term for these responsibilities is Safeguarding. Any concerns about safeguarding should be reported to [safeguarding-referrals@open.ac.uk](mailto:safeguarding-referrals@open.ac.uk). More information is available via the University's [safeguarding policy](#). Staff are also required to complete the mandatory online safeguarding training.

## **10. Misuse of social media**

Where it comes to the attention of The Open University that content posted on a social media platform is considered to be counter to the Statement of Principles of Academic Freedom, or other Open University policies and procedures, the University will investigate appropriately and may request the removal of content. Activity on social media found to be in breach of policies and procedures may result in disciplinary action, up to and including termination of employment.

## **11. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion**

Policies are inclusive of all Open University staff, regardless of: race, sex, disability, age, religion or belief, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, gender expression or gender reassignment.

## **12. Useful References**

- Behaviours and Standards at Work
- Computer Acceptable Use Policy
- Communications Privacy
- Information Security Policy
- Data Protection Code of Practice
- Bullying & Harassment Policy
- Terms and Conditions
- Public Interest Disclosure Policy
- Social Media Toolkit
- Safeguarding policy
- Statement of Principles of Academic Freedom
- Dignity and Respect Policy