Student Social Media Policy

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Note: Hyperlinks have been provided for ease of reference. For other documents (referred to in italics) please see the Policies page on the main University website (https://www.bucks.ac.uk/aboutus/how-our-University-operates/policies-and-strategies)

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Purpose

1   Buckinghamshire New University (BNU) aims to support learners in using social media responsibly to enhance their personal and professional development.

2   In this policy, "learner" refers to all students and apprentices at BNU and its partners, including those on professionally regulated programmes, whether undergraduates or postgraduates, to ensure clarity and inclusivity across BNU documentation.

3   This policy does not restrict Freedom of Speech but upholds it as fundamental to academic and personal expression while emphasising responsible and respectful communication; concerns or complaints should be raised through the appropriate channels—Freedom of Speech Policy, Prevent Policy, Student Complaints Procedures and Student Representation Policy—to foster constructive dialogue and maintain a positive, supportive online environment that safeguards the well-being and rights of the BNU community.

Applicability and Scope

4   This policy applies to all BNU learners using social media for academic, personal or professional purposes.

5   Learners are expected to recognise that social media activity can impact their own, others, staff, placement providers, employers and the University's reputation.

6   Content that could harm BNU's standing or public perception should be avoided. This includes activities that could negatively impact relationships with external partners, practice placements or professional bodies.

7   The policy also covers the creation, use and sharing of AI-generated or manipulated content, such as altered images or videos, and the ethical considerations of using such technologies in social media spaces. AI-altered media can perpetuate misinformation, harm reputations or infringe on privacy. Learners are encouraged to stay informed on AI policies and other emerging technologies and refer to BNU guidance here.

8   This policy does not override BNU's Whistleblowing (Raising concerns) Policy and Procedure. Concerns related to misconduct should be reported through official channels.

Policy

What is Social Media

9   Social media 'Platforms', 'Sites', 'accounts' and 'Social Networking Sites' refer to any interactive technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression through virtual communities and networks. These include but are not limited to Facebook, X, Blue Sky, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp, Pinterest, Snapchat and other UK and international-based subscription-based platforms.

Benefits of Social Media

10   Social media can be used by learners to enhance their personal, academic and professional journeys. By engaging constructively on social platforms, learners can build professional

networks, engage in learning communities, access the latest research and developments, promote positive representation and inspire others, develop a professional online presence, use AI technology ethically, and stay informed and engaged with university news, events, and opportunities.

11   Building professional networks allows learners to connect with global professionals and peers, fostering relationships that support future career goals. Joining online communities provides a collaborative space for learners to share experiences and learn together. Staying informed on trends and innovations in specific academic or professional areas prepares learners for evolving professional and industry demands.

12   Promoting positive representation and inspiring others on social media encourages a culture of pride and ambition within the BNU community. Building a thoughtful online profile allows learners to shape their perception by future employers, collaborators, and peers.

13   Using AI technology ethically allows learners to demonstrate innovative skills while respecting ethical considerations, including accuracy, authenticity, and potential for misrepresentation. Staying informed and engaged with the university community is also a benefit of social media.

Personal Safety and Digital Well-being

14   BNU is committed to supporting learners in maintaining their safety and well-being online. Social media can be a valuable tool, but it also comes with risks that learners must navigate responsibly.

15   Excessive social media use can contribute to stress, anxiety or feelings of inadequacy. Learners are encouraged to set boundaries for online activity, reduce screen time, and focus on offline relationships and activities. Additionally, engaging with negative content, even briefly, can impact mental health. Be mindful of what you view and interact with online to maintain a positive digital well-being.

16   Learners should regularly review and update privacy settings on their social media accounts to control who can view their content and interact with them online. This includes setting profiles to private, managing friend or follower lists, limiting visibility of personal information such as contact details, location and daily routines, using two-factor authentication, when possible, for added security and reviewing privacy settings guides provided by social media platforms or accessing tutorials available on the National Cyber Security Centre website.

17   Sharing personal information online can make learners vulnerable to identity theft, fraud or unwanted attention. Learners are advised to avoid posting sensitive details such as addresses, financial information or specific schedules. If personal information must be shared (e.g., for professional or academic networking purposes), learners should ensure it is shared securely and only with trusted parties. Additionally, learners should be mindful of the content they share, ensuring it does not have the potential to be harmful or distressing to others.

Cyber Risks and Cyberbullying

17. Social media platforms can expose users to cyber risks such as phishing scams, hacking attempts and malicious links. Learners should remain vigilant about suspicious messages or requests and report any security breaches to the platform. Any concerns about information security or cyber

security must be reported directly to BNU's IT Service Desk by emailing: IT@bnu.ac.uk or calling 01494 605000. Additional contact details are available on the 'If in doubt, call it out page'.

18. If learners experience cyberbullying, harassment or abusive behaviour online, they are encouraged to:

- Avoid responding to or engaging with the perpetrator.
- Document and save evidence of the behaviour, including screenshots or links.
- Report the behaviour to the social media platform, where applicable, and use available blocking or muting tools.
- Report it immediately to BNU Student Hub so that emotional support and practical help can be provided. Contact students@bnu.ac.uk or 01494 603020.
- You can also report anything experienced or you have witnessed via the 'Report & Support' link.
- If the action is committed by a BNU learner, it may result in disciplinary action in line with the Student Code of Conduct.
- For serious abuse involving threats of violence, stalking or hate crimes, learners should report the incident to the police immediately. BNU staff can assist learners in contacting the police and providing necessary documentation if needed.
- Follow a detailed action plan provided by BNU, including timelines for response and follow-up.

Additional guidance and advice:

19. Please visit our BNU Social Media Advice here which offers more comprehensive guidance on responsible social media use, building a positive online presence, maintaining digital well-being and practical tips to help you navigate social media safely and effectively. Additionally, you can find valuable information on understanding and managing your digital footprint, as well as tips for safe social media practices, on the National Cyber Security Centre website. This site provides essential information on protecting your personal information and staying safe online. Each PSRB also provides specific guidance on their respective websites. These guidelines can help you align your social media activities with professional standards and expectations relevant to your field of study. Be sure to review these resources to ensure compliance with industry-specific requirements. Any learners posting on behalf of Bucks Students' Union (SU), please refer to the associated SU policy and seek guidance from the SU communications team. They can provide advice on what is appropriate to post, ensuring that all content aligns with the values and standards of both the SU and BNU.

Expected Conduct and Online Behaviour

20. Learners are expected to maintain respectful and responsible conduct on social media to uphold their personal and professional reputation and the values of BNU. They must be aware that their views and opinions expressed on social media are their own and not endorsed by BNU. They should include disclaimers where appropriate, stating that their views are personal and do not reflect the official stance of BNU.

21. Learners must not post content that could be considered offensive, discriminatory, defamatory or otherwise inappropriate. See <u>Student Bullying and Harassment Policy</u> Appendix 1 for some examples. This includes bullying, hate speech, harassment, sexual harassment, unprofessional language or material that breaches confidentiality or privacy. Online behaviour must align with BNU <u>Student Code of Conduct and Learning Partnership Agreement</u>, any professional standards expected in your field of study and UK law.

22. Learners must refrain from sharing AI-altered media or manipulated visuals, videos, or text content that distorts the truth, defames individuals, or misleads viewers. They should ensure their online activity aligns with BNU and professional expectations of their academic or vocational programs and is within the law.

23. Once shared online, content may remain accessible indefinitely, even if deleted. Learners are advised to carefully consider the implications of their posts before publishing to avoid potential harm to their personal or professional reputation.

24. Current and future employers, placement providers, and regulatory bodies may review social media activity as part of their assessments. Learners are encouraged to proactively manage their digital footprint by regularly reviewing and removing historical posts that do not reflect their values or professional aspirations.

Communication Between Learners and BNU Staff

25. To maintain respect for boundaries, learners are advised to use BNU-approved platforms like Unibuddy, MyBNU, Blackboard, MS Teams, or via email for official communication with staff. Social media platforms, like WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger, should not be used as they may compromise privacy and blur professional boundaries.

26. Learners are encouraged to maintain a professional relationship with staff. While we appreciate that learners may wish to follow the professional activities of staff on various social media sites, we discourage learners from connecting with staff on their personal social media accounts unless explicitly invited for academic or professional reasons. Unsolicited and direct messages sent without permission or invitation will be rejected by staff.

27. Some social media platforms allow a public "follow" option, allowing individuals to see each other's shares, updates and messages. However, learners must not use social media to discuss study or work-related issues or with third parties that disclose confidential or sensitive business-related information, including any information that could be considered a breach of data protection legislation. Any necessary exchanges should occur via approved BNU communication channels with necessary permissions.

Confidentiality and Privacy

28. Learners are required to respect the privacy and confidentiality of individuals, BNU, and affiliated organisations. This includes not sharing private or sensitive information without explicit consent, which includes personal, professional, or organisational details not intended for public sharing. Obtaining explicit consent means obtaining clear and direct permission from the individual or organisation involved before sharing such information.

29. Photos, videos, or commentary taken in professional or placement settings must not be shared publicly unless allowed by placement/employer guidelines. Examples of prohibited sharing include posting images of patients, service users, or sensitive workplace environments. Even anonymised information or seemingly innocuous comments about the workplace may inadvertently breach confidentiality or misrepresent the organisation.

30. In practice, voluntary, or work experience placements, learners should not post photographs or videos on social media while in uniform or identifiable as part of their placement or professional environment. Confidentiality expectations are especially strict for regulated professionals or studying to become a regulated professional, impacting their Fitness to Practise status. See Maintaining Academic Confidentiality Policy for further information.

    See *Compliance with Professional and Regulatory Guidelines* section.

31. Learners should consider the reputational implications for BNU and their placement providers when sharing any placement-related content, even if they have obtained explicit consent.

Compliance with Professional and Regulatory (PSRB) Guidelines

32. Learners on regulated or professional programmes must adhere to social media standards set by their professional or regulatory bodies, which often impose stricter guidelines to uphold the values, ethical principles, and expectations of the profession.

33. Learners must familiarise themselves with the specific social media policies, guidelines and codes of conduct issued by their professional or regulatory organisations as these outline the online behaviours expected of professionals and the standards learners must meet to maintain Fitness to Practise.

34. Online activities, including sharing, commenting, or liking content, must align with professional standards of integrity, respect and confidentiality. Posts or actions that bring the profession into disrepute, breach confidentiality or harm public trust may lead to Fitness to Practise investigations.

35. Social media misuse, even if unintentional, can raise questions about a learner's Fitness to Practise. Examples include:
    - Posting inappropriate or disrespectful content related to placements, practice environments, practice staff or service users.
    - Sharing confidential information without consent, including details about patients, clients or organisations.
    - Engaging in behaviour online that could be seen as unprofessional, such as discriminatory comments or inappropriate humour.

36. **Dual Compliance with Employer and Placement Policies:** In addition to University guidelines, learners must comply with the social media policies of their employers and placement providers. Any conflicts with University policies should be clarified with practice supervisors, assessors or educators, apprenticeship partnership managers, link lecturers, programme leads, or personal tutors to avoid violations that could affect Fitness to Practise.

Consequences of Misuse

37. Misuse of social media can lead to disciplinary action, as per the <u>Student Code of Conduct.</u> Sanctions, for proven misconduct, range from warnings to removal from the course/expulsion from BNU, depending on the severity of the breach. For all incidents, students are expected to remove content and demonstrate understanding.

38. Learners on regulated or professional programmes leading to a professional registration, even if they already hold one, may face academic or disciplinary action by the University via the above policies, or <u>Fitness to Practise Procedures</u>. Sanctions include placement suspension or termination, removal/expulsion from the programme, or revoke of award gained and /or denial of professional registration.

39. For registrants undertaking further study which does not lead to an additional or enhanced registration status, they may also face academic or disciplinary action by the University via the above policies, any concerns may also be referred for consideration by the student's employer and professional body.

Responsibilities

The effective implementation and enforcement of this policy require collaboration across various roles and areas of the University. The following outlines the key responsibilities:

Learners:

40. Are responsible for familiarising themselves with the policy and any professional or regulatory social media guidelines, ensuring their activity aligns with BNU's values and professional expectations, reporting concerns about cyber risk, inappropriate online behaviour, or cyberbullying to relevant IT and support services, and following the policy and communications team advice for learners posting on behalf of Bucks Students' Union (SU).

All BNU staff:

41. Are expected to address alleged minor misconduct by learners immediately if they become aware of it or if it is reported to them.

42. Should provide clear and specific guidance to learners on interpreting and applying social media expectations. This includes reminding them of the appropriate channels for discussing University matters as well as explaining how these expectations relate to professional standards and Fitness to Practise requirements. For example, tutors should discuss the importance of maintaining confidentiality, avoiding inappropriate content and understanding the impact of social media behaviour on professional reputation and employability.

43. Must ensure that PSRB social media guidance is shared with learners on PSRB programmes, helping them understand and comply with the specific expectations and standards set.

44. Should help address any confusion regarding discrepancies between BNU's social media policy and placement provider guidelines.

45. Must ensure that all interactions with learners on social media are professional and appropriate. This includes declining unsolicited connection requests and direct messages from learners on personal social media accounts**.**

Practice/Placement Supervisors, Assessors, Educators:

46. Are responsible for ensuring that learners are informed of any specific social media policies or expectations relevant to their placement environments.
47. Must communicate any concerns about a learner's social media behaviour to the University promptly to address potential breaches of this policy.

Communications and Digital Media Team:

48. Monitor publicly accessible social media content related to BNU to safeguard the University's reputation and ensure adherence to this policy. This includes identifying potential risks and responding to content that could bring the University into disrepute.
49. In line with the Counterterrorism and Security Act 2015, uphold Prevent responsibilities which includes monitoring for extremist content and escalate concerns as required by safeguarding protocols.

Digital and Technical Services:

50. Ensure the security of University systems used for social media access, including approved platforms for learner-staff communication.
51. Ensure that social media activity complies with the *Data Protection Act 2018 (UK GDPR).* and BNU's Data Protection Policy.

Student Hub

52. Is a central point of contact for a wide range of services including mental health support and resources including counselling services for learners affected by social media-related challenges, including cyberbullying or digital stress.
53. Assists learners in addressing and resolving social media incidents, ensuring appropriate reporting and follow-up actions.

Monitoring and Enforcement

54. BNU staff will enforce the policy. Violations will be addressed in accordance with BNU's Student Code of Conduct or Fitness to Practise Procedure, as appropriate.
55. Comments, videos, photographs or other online materials posted publicly on social media may be used as part of investigations into policy breaches.
56. **Legal Implications**: Social media misuse may, in some cases, constitute a violation of the law. Examples include:
    - Defamation: Posting false or damaging statements about individuals, organisations, or groups can result in legal action for libel or slander.
    - Harassment or Hate Speech: Online behaviour that constitutes harassment, discrimination, or incitement to hatred is a criminal offence under UK law, including the *Equality Act 2010* and the *Malicious Communications Act 1988.*

- Privacy Breaches: Sharing personal or confidential information without consent may violate the *Data Protection Act 2018 (UK GDPR).*
- Copyright Infringement: Using copyrighted materials (e.g., images, videos, music) without permission may lead to legal action under the *Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.*
- Criminal Content: Posting or sharing illegal content, including threats of violence, revenge pornography or extremist material, may lead to prosecution under relevant criminal laws, such as the *Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015.*

57. BNU will cooperate with the police or other relevant authorities if a policy breach also constitutes a potential legal offence.

Table of Definitions

AI-Generated Content	Content created using artificial intelligence tools, such as altered images, videos, or text, which may include deepfakes or other manipulated media.
Confidential Information	Any personal, professional, or organisational details that are not intended for public sharing, such as personal contact details, medical information, placement or employment schedules, confidential project data, or privileged organisational communication
Cyberbullying	The use of electronic communication to bully, harass, or intimidate someone, typically by sending messages of an intimidating or threatening nature.
Digital Detox	A period during which an individual refrains from using electronic devices such as smartphones or computers to reduce stress and focus on offline relationships and activities.
Digital Footprint	The trail of data that individuals leave behind when they use the internet, including social media activity, online posts, and interactions.
Explicit Consent	Clear and direct permission obtained from an individual or organisation before sharing private or sensitive information.
Fitness to Practise	The standards and requirements set by professional or regulatory bodies that learners must meet to be deemed fit to practise in their chosen profession.
Learner	Refers to all BNU students, apprentices, and partners, including those on professionally regulated programmes, whether undergraduates or postgraduates.
Prevent Responsibilities	Obligations under the Counterterrorism and Security Act 2015 to monitor for extremist content and escalate concerns as required by safeguarding protocols.
Privacy Settings	Controls available on social media platforms that allow users to manage who can view their content and interact with them online.

Professional Standards	The ethical and behavioural expectations set by professional or regulatory bodies that learners must adhere to in their online and offline conduct.
Social Media	Interactive technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression through virtual communities and networks. Examples include Facebook, X, Blue Sky, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp, Pinterest, Snapchat and other UK and international-based subscription-based platforms.

Appendix: Equality Impact Assessment

As a University, we are committed to enhancing equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). We have a legal (Equality Act 2010) and ethical obligation to ensure our policies, systems and processes are fair, inclusive and ensure every member of the BNU community can thrive.

Whilst we all have protected characteristics, we know there are certain characteristics and communities that are marginalised and underrepresented in Higher Education and the workplace. These are: different ethnicities (including Gypsy, Roma, Traveller, Showmen and Boaters, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers) Disabled individuals; neurodiverse individuals; pregnancy (including maternity and paternity impact); the LGBT+ community; carers; people of different faiths; people impacted by menopause and individuals from a range of backgrounds including: socio-economic disadvantage, homeless, alcohol and/or substance misuse, people experiencing domestic and/or sexual violence, ex-armed forces, looked after children and care leavers. We also know individuals have multiple intersectional experiences and different points in their lives and careers.

1. With reference to the above characteristics, in what ways does this policy enhance equality and the access of opportunity at BNU?

The Student Social Media Policy actively supports BNU's commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) by fostering a safe, respectful, and inclusive digital environment. Specific measures include:

- Respectful Online Conduct: The policy explicitly prohibits hate speech, harassment, or discriminatory behaviour on social media, which protects marginalised and underrepresented communities from harm.
- Promoting Accessibility: The policy encourages the use of social media as a tool for learning, networking, and professional development, ensuring all learners have equitable opportunities to enhance their academic and career prospects.
- Targeted Support for Digital Well-being: Resources and support are available for learners who experience cyberbullying or digital stress, which can disproportionately impact disabled learners, neurodiverse individuals or those experiencing mental health challenges.
- Fitness to Practise Guidance: Clear expectations for expected conduct help ensure fair and consistent treatment for learners on all, but in particular, regulated programmes, protecting their future opportunities and mitigating biases.

2. In what ways does the policy adversely impact individuals from marginalised and underrepresented communities?

While the policy aims to be inclusive and protective, potential adverse impacts include:

- Complexity of Compliance: Learners with neurodivergent conditions may find navigating detailed social media guidelines challenging without appropriate clarity and examples.

- Digital Access Disparities: Learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds may lack sufficient access to secure devices or adequate privacy settings, which could limit their ability to fully comply with the policy.
- Unintentional Oversight: Marginalised groups such as migrants, refugees or asylum seekers may face unique cultural or linguistic barriers to understanding the nuances of the policy, potentially leading to unintentional breaches.

3. How does this proposal work towards achieving the BNU Equality Objectives as outlined in the Equality Strategy 2023-2028? Please signpost objectives and actions in the BNU Equality Strategy.

The Student Social Media Policy directly aligns with and supports the priorities and objectives outlined in the BNU Equality Strategy 2023–2028, contributing to the University's commitment to fostering an inclusive and equitable community.

- Priority One: Involve and Empower Our Community
  - The policy enhances inclusion literacy (Objective D) by educating learners on respectful, professional and safe social media use. This fosters an understanding of how online behaviour can impact diverse communities and amplifies unheard voices by encouraging learners to engage positively with BNU's online presence.
  - Through collaboration with the Students' Union (Objective F), the policy helps tackle inequality by creating shared frameworks for addressing inappropriate or harmful online behaviour.
- Priority Two: Take Action to Tackle Inequalities
  - By explicitly addressing online harassment, hate speech and the ethical use of AI-manipulated content, the policy upholds BNU's Race Equality Charter commitments and broader efforts to decolonise spaces (Objective D).
  - The policy contributes to supporting underrepresented communities, including disabled learners, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those from socio-economic disadvantage, by providing guidance and support for digital well-being and the reporting of harmful behaviour (Objectives A and B).
- Priority Three: Build a University Community Where People Can Be Themselves
  - The policy promotes a culture of belonging (Objective C) by ensuring that online spaces connected to BNU are inclusive and respectful, making all learners feel safe to engage and express themselves authentically.
  - Clear guidelines for online conduct and reporting mechanisms align with actions to improve the processes for handling discrimination and harassment complaints (Objective C).
  - Developing a welcoming and supportive online presence (Objective E) is supported by the policy's emphasis on positive social media interactions, ensuring BNU is represented as an inclusive and supportive community.

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If you have any queries about this policy, please contact the School or Directorate responsible for the policy