Guidance for postgraduate research students on the use of social media and email

Who is this guidance for? This guidance applies to all postgraduate research students registered on a higher degree by research at the University of Sheffield. This guidance also applies to students who are on a leave of absence, as they remain affiliated with the University and are still subject to its regulations and policies.

What is social media? These are Internet-based applications that allow communication and information exchange with a particular person; or more usually amongst large groups of people who may or may not know each other personally. Examples of social media include LinkedIn, Twitter, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, Weibo and TikTok. Often email is not regarded as social media. The distinction focuses on pattern of interaction; email is mainly a distribution mechanism whereas Twitter or Instagram are collective mechanisms. This policy focuses on social media but many principles equally apply to other forms of communication, e.g. email, and media, including interviews with television or written press.

Responsible use of social media

Social media use has expanded from being used primarily for social or fun reasons to becoming a valuable tool for career development and professional publicity. Increasingly employers are also using social media as a way of advertising their products or services but also to identify suitable candidates for recruitment. Therefore, you should be careful about how you present yourself through social media.

Accounts are often connected to each other and when you use social media of any sort you leave a record of yourself (i.e., posts, comments, blogs, videos you uploaded etc) on the internet: this is called the digital profile. You should ensure that your digital profile adheres to the policies or values of the University and the expectations of students’ behaviour. These are set out in a number of policies and guidance documents, outlined below.

Even when you delete your social media account your previous conversations or content from your account can be stored in various places in the World Wide Web and exist for a long time through different World Wide Web sources. This is known as the digital footprint. It may be advisable to check periodically that your digital footprint is appropriate and is fitting to the values of the profession that you hope to join.

The Careers Service has produced guidance and a video on these issues, which is available here: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/careers/social

General Principles and adherence to the University’s regulations and guidance

The professional values and behaviours expected of University students extend to the use of social media and email (see links to guidance below). So for example, professional values such as Respect, Fairness, Trust, and Confidentiality apply to behaviours or actions related to the use of email, social media and electronic devices.

There are many recognised benefits of using social media. However at the same time it is important that you make reasonable and appropriate use of the opportunities afforded. Due to the nature of how social media works, it is difficult to separate personal and professional use of social media. It is therefore important that appropriate conduct expected by the University applies during social media use at all times.

The University of Sheffield has clear expectations about appropriate behaviours and values; it is your
responsibility to find out what these are and adhere to these in your general conduct, including in online settings.

The following policies and guidance are especially relevant in this context:

- The University of Sheffield Student Code of Conduct
- Our Commitment
- Policy on Good Research & Innovation Practices
- University Regulations as to the Discipline of Students and Student Fitness to Practice
- Harassment and Bullying

Important Considerations

**Your identity:** If you identify yourself by your association with the University you should also identify yourself by your name. Any material written or shared by authors could be taken to represent the view of the University more widely. Therefore, in some instances you may want to add appropriate confidentiality clauses or disclosures.

**Information relating to human participants in research:** It is your responsibility to ensure that research undertaken with the use of human participants fully complies with the University’s policy and guidance on research ethics and integrity. You may need appropriate training to adhere to the new General Data Protection Regulations especially if you are involved in research-related activities using human participants.

**Concerns and Complaints:** Social media is not the place to communicate concerns or contentious views or complaints about fellow students or members of University staff or other persons or institutions. Where a student has a complaint about any aspect of their University studies they should follow the established complaints procedures.

**Mobile devices:** Students should note that they are not permitted to make audio recordings of supervisory meetings without prior permission from their supervisor(s), in line with the University’s policy on this issue. Supervisory meetings are not normally recorded other than in specific circumstances, e.g. where it is recommended by the Disability & Dyslexia Support Service (DDSS) as part of a student’s Learning Support Plan and where all parties are in agreement.

**Professionalism and Fitness to Practise:** Appropriate use of social media and email communications falls within professional behaviours and any potential misuse may be subject to disciplinary procedures or, where applicable, fitness to practise investigations.

You should be cautious of forwarding emails or social media messages to others as this may breach the senders’ confidentiality. When this is done you become responsible for the content of the redistribution.

**Additional recommended policies and information**

How Social media can affect employability: [https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/careers/social](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/careers/social)

University of Sheffield Student Code of Conduct: [https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/sss/student-code-of-conduct](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/sss/student-code-of-conduct)

Communicating and Disseminating your work and Social Networking: [https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/research/communicating](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/research/communicating)