

Social Networking Code of Practice

Social networking is a phenomenon that raises issues for the College in terms of interactions between student and student, and staff and student. Facebook, Bebo, and Twitter are new ways in which members of the college community can communicate with each other. As these methods of communication are relatively new, students and staff can be unaware of the implications of their comments/postings. In particular, a comment that might be recognised as casual or throwaway when spoken in the canteen can become something much more powerful or hurtful when saved online and viewable by a wide circle. Interactions between staff and students have the potential to be much less professional (again because they become “permanent”) than they would in other contexts.

Protocols and “Net-etiquette” are not well established or understood. The act of posting a comment on Facebook *feels like* an interaction between individuals. However, unless both parties have made their privacy setting as secure as the site allows, these comments may be viewed, not just by their mutual Facebook friends but, by anyone choosing to browse for them by name. Comments which may be understood as humorous or flippant by the people making them can be misinterpreted or cause great offence to a wider audience and bring the College or the individual into disrepute.

For these reasons a code of practice has been developed which

- Makes clear the limits of “free speech” on the internet
- Draws clear boundaries that staff must not or would be ill-advised to cross
- Lays out the potential penalties for breaking the code of practice

Students

Students clearly have more freedom than staff to live their private lives as they choose and that would include what they post on social networking sites, blogs etc. However, they need to understand that if they want to remain members of the college community they do not have total freedom to express themselves as they wish.

The following types of communication are not allowed and may lead to a student being disciplined, or in extreme cases being asked to leave the college:

- Posting any comment that could be viewed as bullying or harassing another member of the College community: student or member of staff. It will be viewed as particularly serious if a student sets up a site or page which has the clear purpose of criticising, bullying or harassing another member of the College community. It will also be viewed as particularly serious if a student makes libellous statements about any other member of the College community.
- Posting any comment that breaks the terms of the College Equality and Diversity Policy, in particular any racist or homophobic comment.
- Posting any comment that explicitly encourages other members of the college community to actively break the law. It will be viewed as particularly serious if a student actively encourages others to take prohibited substances, or commit violence.

Students are reminded that material posted on the internet can be very hard to make “disappear”. They would always be advised not to post photographs of themselves or other members of the community that they might not wish others to see, now or in the future. They are also advised not to make written comments that they might regret if used against them in the future. It is becoming increasingly common for prospective employers to check social networking sites to ensure a job applicant is of good character.

Staff

There are many ways in which staff can potentially interact with students online but would probably never consider interacting in the same way offline. Staff would probably not sit down with a group of students at lunch-time in a busy canteen to be one member of their social group, or invite students round to their houses with their other friends, or out for a drink in a group on a Friday night. However, Facebook and other social networking sites create opportunities where staff might compromise themselves by being similarly unguarded and this includes allowing students to see their own Facebook pages. These may contain pictures and comments which would be considered unprofessional to make or show to a student who we have a duty of

care for. Staff may also unintentionally compromise themselves by making comments on students' pages, for example.

They might also find themselves linked by association to unacceptable comments by making comments on a student's social networking page, or appearing to endorse the page by having viewed it with the knowledge of students, and then find that derogatory remarks have been made on the same student's page.

Staff would probably not consider giving out their addresses and telephone numbers to students, but they might be allowing students to see their social networking sites.

In addition, photographs and comments that might be acceptable between friends might not be acceptable to be viewed by students. Photographs or comments that imply acceptance of any illegal activity, or gross irresponsibility, for example alcohol abuse, would be very inappropriate if viewed by students or parents of students. Similarly any comment that runs counter to the Equality and Diversity policy would also be completely unacceptable.

Finally, although the College encourages "whistle-blowing" it must be undertaken through the appropriate channels. It would not be acceptable for staff to display direct or indirect criticisms of the College, its management, or any colleagues on a social networking site, or anywhere on the internet.

The following code of conduct is therefore suggested for staff. There are two categories: Activities in breach of the Disciplinary Procedure and Activities that are Not Recommended. Disregarding the code of conduct on activities that are in breach of the Disciplinary Procedure could lead to disciplinary action up to and including dismissal. Disregarding the code of conduct on activities that are not recommended will mean that the College cannot defend a teacher against action by parents or students. For example, if a teacher willingly gives a private email address to students the college might find it hard to take action if subsequently the teacher receives inappropriate email from a student or parent. Similarly if a teacher gives students access to their social networking site/s then the college might not be able to defend the teacher if this leads to abuse of this trust by students, or complaints from parents.

Staff should note that College has an IT Acceptable Use that this guidance should be used in conjunction with.

Activities in breach of the Disciplinary Procedure

The following activities will be considered to be in serious breach of the Disciplinary Procedure

- posting comments, photographs etc. critical of the College on any forum, web-site, social networking site, blog etc. Posting comments critical of any other member of staff. Any criticisms of the College or its community members must be made through appropriate channels.
- posting comments critical of any student or parent.
- Posting comments that run counter to the College's Equality and Diversity policy and mission.
- using publicly accessible chat forums or "walls" on facebook to express views or opinions which could be judged as unprofessional, cause offence to a wider audience or bring the College or the individual into disrepute.
- posting comments that recommend, or appear to endorse, law-breaking of any kind. If there is any doubt about this where the member of staff is an active member of a pressure group they should discuss with the Principal before posting anything under their own name that appears to endorse law-breaking.
- posting comments that exhibit grossly irresponsible behaviour that could be argued to encourage "copycat" behaviour by students. This would include, for example, dangerous driving, or extreme alcohol abuse.
- breaking the confidence of students and parents by posting any information about them on the Internet either by name or by implication.

Staff should also refer to the Code of Conduct and The Guidelines on Personal Relationships at Work which reminds staff that clear expectations about social contact are part of the contract of employment. This would preclude any form of sexualised conversation or comment through the medium of the Internet.

Kirklees College strongly recommends that employees do not:

- communicate with student or parents on the internet other than by emails sent from the College Intranet.
- give students or parents any other email address than their College address. (It is also not recommended that staff give students or parents their mobile telephone number/s).
- allow students to see their social networking sites where permission is required to see those sites.
- use publicly accessible chat forums or “walls” on facebook to express views or opinions which could be judged as unprofessional.
- look at the individual social networking sites, blogs etc of students. Exceptions to this would be the process of collecting information or evidence for disciplinary purposes. Care should be taken to ensure that this is done in a way which secures valid and attributable evidence and with the knowledge of a senior member of staff. Where students have their own web-sites that are not connected in any way to the College, and are not social sites, but are special interest sites that the student administers or contributes to and which are concerned with legal and responsible activities, it may be entirely reasonable for a member of staff to view such sites.
- post any comments on the external blog, social networking site, etc. of any student or parent.
- post any comment that appears to endorse irresponsible behaviour.

Staff who take part in these activities are putting themselves at risk that disciplinary may be taken against them.

Staff are referred to the safeguarding duty of care outlined in the Code of Conduct, The Guidelines on Personal Relationships at Work and Guidelines on Student Contact which states that staff should take care not to place themselves in a vulnerable position with a student or, through inaction, allow a student to become too emotionally dependant on them. This would clearly include regularly conversing with a student on the wider internet about matters that were not directly connected with curriculum requirements.

If there is any doubt in a member of staff’s mind about the appropriateness of conversations or internet transactions with students or parents, for their own protection they should immediately consult with a Safeguarding Coordinator. Such consultation would always be treated in the strictest confidence unless it suggested possible sexual or emotional abuse on the part of the member of staff in which case confidence could not be guaranteed.