

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY



This document sets out the University's approach to managing its social media activities.

Version	1.1
Executive Sponsor	Executive Director of Marketing, Recruitment and Communications
Officer Responsible for Policy/ Procedures	Director of Marketing
Consultation Process	Colleagues within Marketing, Recruitment and Communications: Director of International Recruitment; Director of International Development; Director of Student Recruitment and Outreach; Heads of Department within Marketing and Communications, as well as College and RKE Marketing Managers; General Counsel; Executive Director of Business Engagement; Pro-Vice Chancellor for Education; PVC & Executive Dean of HLS; Interim Head of Aston Medical School
Date of Approval and Committee and/or Executive Officer	Executive Engagement Group Executive
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1. SCOPE OF THE POLICY

1.1 Purpose of the Policy

This Policy provides a framework for colleagues and students around the use of social media by the Aston University community in interactions with Aston University staff, students, potential students and other beneficiary groups. It also aims to ensure that the reputation of the University is not brought into disrepute or subject to derogatory treatment on any social media platform. This Policy communicates the responsibilities of Aston University staff and students when using social media and outlines the consequences of breaching this Policy.

1.2 What is covered by the Policy

This Policy:

- sets out the basis of requirements and expectations of staff and students regarding use of social media pertaining to the University;
- aims to protect the University and its staff and students from potential risks of social media use and to put in place mitigations against these risks, as well as outline how to escalate concerns;
- outlines the responsibilities of users of Aston University branded accounts (including central University accounts and local University accounts such as College, School and departmental accounts);
- covers expectations of staff using social media in a personal capacity, especially when personal accounts are being used to comment on matters pertaining to the University; and
- highlights the importance to students of considering how their use of social media may have an impact on their future career

The social media channels covered by this Policy include but are not limited to:

- Social networking websites such as Facebook and WeChat
- Video and photo sharing websites such as Flickr, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube
- Messaging sites such as WhatsApp, Messenger and SnapChat
- Micro-blogging sites such as Twitter
- Networking sites whether personal or professional such as LinkedIn

1.3 Who is covered by the Policy

All staff and students who make comment on University social media channels (central University and local University accounts) and/ or comments pertaining to the University on personal accounts must be aware of and comply with the Policy.

1.4 Breach of this Policy

Any breach of this Policy and its associated procedures by staff may be investigated in accordance with the University's conduct and performance management procedures. Breaches of this Policy and its associated procedures by students will be resolved in accordance with relevant University policies, procedures and regulations relating to student conduct and, where relevant, fitness to practise.

1.5 Policy Ownership

This Policy is owned by the Executive Director of Marketing, Recruitment and Communications and the Director of Marketing is responsible for the Policy. It has been approved by the Executive. Any questions about the operation of this Policy or any concerns that the Policy has not been followed should be referred in the first instance to the Director of Marketing.

2. THE POLICY STATEMENT

2.1 Guiding Principles

The guiding principles of this Policy are that it will aim to maximise the benefits and opportunities of social media as a communication channel, while supporting students and staff in communicating safely and responsibly online, while protecting the University's reputation.

2.2 Procedures and Guidance

This Policy should be referenced in conjunction with the Marketing and Communications Policy and underpinned by the Social Media Guidelines for staff and students.

3. GLOSSARY OF TERMS

The terms set out in this section apply to this Policy.

Beneficiary groups: The groups which Aston University exists to serve as set out in the University's Strategy. These are categorised as: our students, who progress to be our graduates and alumni; external organisations (businesses, public entities, the not-for-profit sector and the professions); and Birmingham and the West Midlands region, and wider society.

Central University accounts: Official corporate social media accounts that are actively managed and monitored and which represent the work and views of Aston University. These include the main corporate Aston University accounts on Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram.

Cyberbullying: Means the use of the Internet and related technologies to harm or harass other people, in a deliberate, repeated, and hostile manner. Cyberbullying behaviour includes (but is not limited to): maliciously spreading rumours, lies or gossip; intimidating or aggressive behaviour; offensive or threatening comments or content; posting private images of an individual without consent; sharing unwanted images; posting comments/photos etc. deliberately mocking an individual with the intent to harass or humiliate them; sending messages or posting comments with the intent to trick, force or pressure the receiver into doing something that they would not otherwise be comfortable doing (grooming). In the context of this Policy, it includes conduct of colleagues in private groups such as WhatsApp when used for colleagues and teams in the University to communicate with each other.

Harassment: When someone behaves in a way which makes another person feel distressed, humiliated or threatened (for example, unwanted contact, abuse and bullying online and stalking).

Hate speech: Public speech that expresses hate or encourages violence towards a person or group, based on factors such as race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation. Hate speech includes communications of animosity or disparagement of an individual or a group on account of a group's characteristics such as race, colour, national origin, sex, disability, religion, or sexual orientation.

Local University accounts: Official social media accounts for areas within Aston University (e.g. Colleges, Schools, the Students' Union, departments such as Alumni, Business Engagement and Careers and Placements, as well as Research Institutes and Centres). Local accounts also refer to third parties who manage social media accounts on the University's behalf (e.g. QSES). These are actively managed and monitored and represent the work and views of the area of Aston University that they represent, for example, College or departmental marketing teams or academic colleagues.

Social media: Platforms that enable users to create and share information or ideas with others or to participate in social networking, whether known now or developed in the future.

Trolling: This is making a deliberately offensive or provocative online post with the aim of causing distress or eliciting an angry response. Trolling behaviour may also include stalking a victim's posts in order to respond in an offensive or provocative manner.

4. INTRODUCTION

The Digital Marketing team coordinates social media marketing activities for Aston University, managing channels at an institutional level, and liaising with the College Marketing teams for local College-level social media activity as well as other colleagues for other social media accounts across the University. The main social media channels used by the University are: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube and WhatsApp.

In addition, we also have some social media accounts for student recruitment purposes. These include international accounts managed by the international recruitment team. These are offer holder groups on WeChat, WhatsApp and Facebook, with three additional channels for content delivery: Africa Instagram, India Instagram and WeChat.

Aston University regulations and policies apply to staff and students when using social media. It is expected that staff and students will treat others with respect when engaging with Aston University social media accounts and commenting on matters pertaining to the University on social media. This Policy is not intended to prevent staff or students from using social media to talk about experiences or to express critical views appropriately, but to support them in doing so to protect them and the University's reputation.

- If a student or member of staff becomes aware of a breach of this Policy, this should be escalated as outlined in this Policy. Types of unacceptable behaviour include (but are not limited to): cyberbullying; trolling; harassment; hate speech; posting or re-posting fake news, discriminatory material and offensive or defamatory images or using offensive or defamatory language; and any other activity that may bring Aston University into disrepute or threaten the safety of staff and students or anyone connected with the University.
- Students and staff must bear in mind that posting offensive comments on a public site can damage their reputation, and may be seen by potential contacts and employers, which could consequently call the colleague or student's judgement and character into question. Students are advised to familiarise themselves with any specific social media use guidance from regulatory bodies of their chosen profession.
- There is no compulsion for any Aston University student or staff member to engage on social media, and they are not obliged to engage or connect with any other individual.

Staff may make reasonable and appropriate use of personal social media accounts from Aston University devices. Time spent on social media during working hours should be during break times and must not interfere with other duties.

5. CREATION OF NEW SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS

Official Aston University social media channels have a strategic purpose to communicate with key target audiences, to positively promote the Aston University brand. Colleagues must consult with the Director of Marketing before creating any new official Aston University social media account at either University or local level. All activities undertaken on official Aston University social media accounts must be conducted in accordance with this Policy.

There are a number of central University accounts and College/departmental level accounts for the University. It is important that there is not a proliferation of social media accounts as to do so would dilute audiences for the existing accounts.

If a colleague or team wishes to create a new account at either University or local level, careful consideration must be given to its objectives and whether these can be met through an existing account. In addition, other factors need to be considered, such as: the target audience and their information needs; the content to be shared; how producing content and monitoring the account will be resourced; and how this account sits together with those already established across the University. Where several members of staff require access to the same social media account, there must be an agreed designated owner.

Colleagues who wish to create a new account must contact the Head of Digital Marketing for advice. They will need to confirm the plans for resourcing and ongoing maintenance of the site as well as a content plan for the account's launch and first six months. The Head of Digital Marketing will be able to advise on naming conventions. The account and its designated owner will be registered with the Marketing department.

6. POSTING ON ASTON UNIVERSITY'S CENTRAL AND LOCAL UNIVERSITY ACCOUNTS

Posts made on social media accounts representing Aston University are considered to be endorsed by the University. It is therefore essential that before a message is posted by a member of staff or a student, it should be carefully considered to ensure that it will not bring the University into disrepute or damage its reputation.

Social media marketing activities on University accounts for the University, Colleges or at departmental level may be undertaken provided that such use is in an official capacity, has approval from the relevant Director or Executive Dean and acts in accordance with this Policy. Social media posts on University accounts should reflect the University's brand, tone of voice and be in line with University messaging.

Safeguards should be put in place to minimise the risk of communication errors via social media, including checking content with a colleague before publishing. Content posted or promoted on central and local University accounts must be respectful of and courteous to others.

Content posted or promoted on central and local University accounts must not in any way contravene the Freedom of Expression Policy and more particularly harass, bully or intimidate others or encourage others to do so; incite violence or hatred; or be abusive in relation to an individual's characteristics such as age, sex, disability, race, religion or belief, or sexual orientation. Central and local University accounts must not be used to criticise or argue with colleagues, students, customers, partners or competitors. Colleagues must ensure that posts do not breach confidentiality, make defamatory comments or breach copyright.

Communications through social media must not: include confidential information about an individual or organisation; contain information about the University that is not in the public

domain, including commercially sensitive information; breach copyright or intellectual property rules; use a subject's images, video or written content without permission; contain 'spam', such as third party advertisements, affiliate links etc; or appear to link Aston University with groups, political affiliations or other organisations unless there is an official connection. Content must be accurate and must not commit to something which the University does not intend to deliver, with careful attention to adhering to consumer law.

Aston University expects colleagues to strictly adhere to the Freedom of Expression Policy. Furthermore, it is important that intellectual property is considered when posting on social media. Colleagues must consider whether they are permitted to copy information and whether the material being posted is the intellectual property of the individual colleague or the University. If the material being posted does not belong to the individual or the University, it may infringe someone else's copyright, unless they have given prior permission to use the material. Colleagues must also be careful about disclosing intellectual ideas through social media, particularly in relation to inventions that might be patentable. Information on social media sites is unlikely to remain confidential and disclosure could result in the University's inability to register certain intellectual property rights.

In the event of incorrect information being posted on social media, this should be corrected at the earliest opportunity.

7. PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

It is recognised that both colleagues' personal and professional social media accounts can be important channels for colleagues' professional activity, to develop and engage with their professional networks and to raise the profile of their work. When posting matters pertaining to Aston University on personal social media accounts, Section 6 of this Policy applies.

It is imperative that it is clear when a post is a colleague's personal opinion. Colleagues must make it clear on the profile statement of their personal accounts or elsewhere that the views expressed are their own and must ensure that personal views are not positioned as those of the University. If personal accounts are used to comment on a matter pertaining to the University, a disclaimer should be included in the account holder's profile, stating "*Opinions posted are my own and do not reflect the views of my employer*".

Staff must carefully consider what they are posting on their individual accounts when it relates to the University, and they must not share confidential or proprietary information under any circumstances. If a concern is raised regarding content posted on a colleague's social media account, the University may request the removal of content. If the matter is considered to be serious (e.g. harassment of a colleague or posting confidential information), it may be escalated and addressed as outlined in Section 9 of this Policy.

Students' personal social media activity may be of interest to Aston University if reference is made to the University, its students, staff or other beneficiary groups. The University is likely to be concerned if a post or comment mentioning Aston University breaches any of the principles outlined in this Policy. Students must not present themselves as speaking as a representative of Aston University on social media without permission to do so by an authorised member of staff.

In addition to the provisions within this policy, students on programmes covered by the University Fitness to Practise Regulations should also comply with any social media guidance provided by their regulatory body.

8. CRISIS AND EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

Central University accounts provide important channels of communication with staff, students and wider stakeholders during emergency and crisis situations. Information shared in such circumstances must be very carefully controlled, to ensure it is timely, consistent and accurate. It must be issued in consultation with authorities with which the University is working with, such as the emergency services.

All crisis communications from the University must be issued via the main central '@astonuniversity' social media accounts. In the event of a live crisis affecting the University, staff, students or others associated with the University, colleagues and students must not make any comment, update or express an opinion on the matter on the University or personal social media accounts.

In order to minimise the risk of issuing conflicting and/ or incorrect information being posted in the event of a live incident, information or updates must not be issued from other Aston University social media accounts (e.g. for departments, Colleges etc). Any questions or enquiries received on other University social media channels during a crisis must be signposted to the main channel.

To make comments in such a situation could have serious consequences, such as undermining a live police investigation. The exception is colleagues with access to the central University accounts with prior authorisation from a member of the University Executive.

9. ESCALATION OF BREACHES TO THIS POLICY

9.1 Breaches by staff

Alleged breaches or non-compliance of this Policy must be referred to the Head of Digital Marketing in the first instance for the matter to be reviewed and escalated to the Executive Director of Marketing, Recruitment and Communications if required. If a colleague has not complied or has breached this Policy, the sanctions are as follows:

- If the breach is not considered to be serious by the Executive Director of Marketing, Recruitment and Communications, colleagues in the Marketing and Communications department will seek to resolve the matter informally and directly with the member of staff and, where necessary, their line manager.
- If it is considered by the Executive Director of Marketing, Recruitment and Communications to be serious and/ or not resolved after informal attempts to resolve the matter, the Executive Director of Marketing, Recruitment and Communications may refer the matter to the line manager, College Director of Operations, departmental director and/ or Executive Dean who may consider taking formal action in accordance with relevant University performance management guidelines or procedures or applicable policies or contracts.

9.2 Breaches by students

Students' use of social media must comply with the rules of conduct outlined in this Policy. Alleged breaches of this Policy must be referred to the Head of Digital Marketing in the first instance, and the matter will be escalated to the Director of Academic and Student Services if necessary. The Director of Academic and Student Services will try to resolve the matter informally if possible, but for serious and/ or continued breaches of this Policy, disciplinary action will be taken in accordance with the relevant student conduct policy and/ or disciplinary regulations.

In addition, issues relating to social media use for students on programmes covered by the Fitness to Practise (FtP) Regulations will be referred to the College Fitness to Practise Officer (FtPO). Should a finding of impairment of fitness to practise be found, for many regulatory bodies, the University will be obliged to disclose this finding along with the details of any accompanying sanctions.



Aston University
Birmingham
B4 7ET, UK

+44 (0)121 204 3000
aston.ac.uk

