



Good practice guide: Using social media responsibly

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Introduction

Social media is a way for people to connect and share information online. It allows users to create and share content, interact with others through comments and messages, and stay updated on what others are doing. The term covers websites and apps, as well as email, text, and instant messaging.

Whilst social media can provide numerous educational benefits to registrants and learners, it is also an area of significant risk. This guide aims to help you make the right decisions when using social media, and to better equip you to stay connected and safe online.

This is not regulatory or mandatory guidance. Scenarios have been included to help you think about and explore some of the issues which might arise, and how our advice might apply. We have also included examples of unacceptable practices where professional boundaries have clearly been crossed.

The Code

All Education Workforce Council (EWC) registrants are subject to the Code of Professional Conduct and Practice (the Code), which sets out the key principles of good conduct and practice for registrants. This guide should be read in conjunction with the Code.

The principles and expectations in the Code which refer to social media are:

1. Personal and Professional Responsibility

Registrants:

- 1.1 recognise their personal responsibility as a role model and public figure, to uphold public trust and confidence in the education professions, both in and out of the workplace
- 1.2 conduct relationships with learners and young people professionally by:
 - using all forms of communication appropriately and responsibly, particularly social media
 - maintaining professional boundaries

2. Professional Integrity

Registrants:

- 2.1 are accountable for their conduct and professional competence

The Code is an important point of reference. Think about the five key principles and the expectations they place upon you. The Code will help you make the right decisions when faced with the challenges covered in this guide.

[The Code is available on our website.](#)

Using social media today: dangers and pitfalls

The way in which children, young people, and adults learn has changed significantly in the past few years. Social media, as a communication tool, has never been so relevant. There is little doubt it benefited a significant number of learners, young people, and registrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. That said, there are still challenges for registrants to face.

The most common is that online contact can encourage casual dialogue, and blur the boundaries between public and private life. You must remember that the standards expected of you as an EWC registrant do not change when online.

Online behaviour can also result in civil or criminal action, and the laws of copyright and defamation still apply.

Consider the following privacy and confidentiality facts:

- once you post, you have lost control of the information/data you have shared
- any post, comment, message, or share is permanent
- your posts can be copied, screenshot, shared, and retrieved, even if deleted
- deleted items stay on servers
- powerful search engines collect and store our data, you do not know what is being retrieved, viewed, or archived
- there is no such thing as a 100% privacy, or anonymity
- employers, parents, learners, and young people may look for your social media accounts
- anyone may record you, even at work
- breaching confidentiality is easy to do without realising, separate comments could be combined to identify a learner, young person, or parent

Raising your general awareness

To support your understanding of how social media use can bring your professionalism into question, we remind you of the basic principles of responsible use below. The following important points of advice should help you make the right decisions, and protect you day to day.

Think before you post, comment on, or join anything online.

Act responsibly:

- what you share reflects on you, your employer, and your profession
- be aware others can share, screenshot, and copy your posts
- protect your professional reputation, think about your online image

Take care whom or what you associate with online:

- protect your personal data and information, be cautious what you share
- do not accept friend requests or follows from learners/young people, or share any personal contact data
- do not discuss learners, young people, parents, colleagues, management, or your place of work

Don't be complacent:

- use privacy and security settings on your online social media accounts, and check these regularly
- do not share passwords or devices
- spring-clean your social media presence, track where your data is

Follow the guidance, it's there to protect you:

- comply with employer policies, procedures, and the Code
- use only official channels of communication, keep personal and professional accounts separate
- understand the pros and cons of applications you decide to use

Ask yourself if you would be happy if the content you are about to post was shared widely in public, so anyone, including your employer and people you don't even know, could see it?

If your answer is 'no', this is a good time to think very carefully about our guidance above.

If you do make a mistake online, get advice and support as early as possible from your line manager, trade union, or at the very least, someone you trust. Early intervention can often be invaluable.

With all professions subject to increased scrutiny, now is the time to think carefully about your online behaviour.

Breaches of the EWC Code

The examples below are illustrative of cases where registrants (from all the registrant categories), have been subject to EWC disciplinary proceedings as a result of using social media inappropriately and/or unwisely.

In all cases, there has been a clear breach of the Code and the registrants received a range of disciplinary sanctions including, in some cases, being prohibited from practicing in the education workforce in the future.

A registrant:

- posted pornographic images of themselves on their personal Twitter account
- engaged in a sexual relationship with a learner which began with communication via mobile telephone and text messages with sexual content
- commented on Facebook group posts which contained religiously offensive content
- showed his own sex toys-selling website to his students
- sent a string of sexually explicit messages via Facebook and Skype to a young person, with a view to pursuing a relationship
- was found with hundreds of downloaded indecent images on their work computer
- posted inappropriate comments about drinking and parties with a number of learners as 'friends' on Facebook

- received excessive press coverage when inappropriate photographs and video clips previously posted online were accessed by the press
- used an eBay account to illegally sell counterfeit goods
- re-tweeted, and in doing so, made an insulting comment about the victim of a serious criminal offence, they were subsequently convicted for that re-tweet
- posed online as a young person and made a false report of abuse to a charity helpline about a senior member of staff

Further support

We offer presentations which focus on fitness to practise and responsible use of social media. If you or your employer would like to arrange one in the workplace, please contact us.

The [Code, and information about the EWC's fitness to practise work](#) are on our website.

If you require any of our publications in an alternative format, please contact us.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh and English.

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