

Social Networking sites (Facebook, Myspace etc) and student issues

Guidelines – November 2011

The University values feedback from its students and recognises that social networking sites, such as Facebook and Myspace, are popular websites for student discussion. However, students are reminded that these sites have in place terms and conditions that discourage activity that could lead to defamation or incitement to hatred. These types of public comment are prohibited under English Law and may result in legal action against you by the affected party. You may also be subject to University discipline as it is an offence to bring the University into disrepute or to harass or bully *any* member of the University. This very specifically includes members of the teaching staff.

Students are also reminded that the appropriate place to provide feedback on their course or any other aspect of University life is through their student reps, the Guild of Students, surveys and questionnaires and, if appropriate, the formal Student Complaints Procedure.

FAQS

How could Facebook cause me to have a problem with University discipline?

As new technologies evolve, it is an unfortunate fact that new offences, or arguably simply variations of old offences, can arise e.g. e-bullying or e-harassment. Here is an example: *On Facebook, a student mounts a campaign ridiculing a fellow student for a particular character trait. Whether the description is correct or not is irrelevant. Such an action is likely to constitute harassment/bullying in electronic form. It would be upsetting for the person concerned and the University would be likely to take firm action.*

Why is defamation serious?

This is an offence in law and you could get sued by the other person. Defamation is the communication of a statement that makes a false claim, expressly stated or implied to be factual, that may harm the reputation of an individual.

What is the complaints procedure?

Any student can initiate a Complaint against the University. For more information see: <http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/legislation/complaints.shtml>

Feel you're being bullied?

Free, confidential advice is available from the University's Harassment Advisers. They can also guide you to other sources of support. This service is available to both staff and students. Please see: <http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/study/support/sca/harassment.shtml>

What do I do if I think I've written something defamatory?

It's probably better to take down the text involved rather than risk legal action or University disciplinary action. For impartial advice contact the ARC based in the Guild of Students (thearc@guild.bham.ac.uk)

I have a problem with my course – what should I do?

Get in touch with your student reps (studentreps@guild.bham.ac.uk). If you need advice or representation then please get in touch with the ARC based in the Guild of Students. You can drop in for advice or email thearc@guild.bham.ac.uk

What are student reps?

Student Reps are students' voices within the University, elected by students to make students' perspectives heard when important decisions are made. The Student Representation System is in place primarily so that every student is given the chance to have their say on their education. The Guild and the University work very closely together to make this happen. We offer guidance and support as well as publicity and training to ensure that the reps are able to do the very best for students. Previous examples of Student Reps successfully bringing about change within the University include amendments to timetables and increased contact with tutors/lecturers. To get in touch please email studentreps@guild.bham.ac.uk

Can my entries in Facebook be used to gather evidence against me regarding other matters?

Yes, under certain circumstances. This has already happened at Oxford. Have a look at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6902333.stm>

Do other Universities have concerns about social network sites?

Yes. This is what happened, for example, at Keele: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/staffordshire/6686619.stm>

Does the University want to stifle free speech and fair comment?

No. The University understands that students will want to exchange views and opinions about University life. However, it has a legal duty to ensure that members of the University are not subject to harassment or bullying. It also wishes to protect its students from being subject to legal action as this would inevitably distract from their academic work.

What is the Guild of Students?

The University of Birmingham Guild of Students is the recognised students' union for over 28,000 students. The Guild represents and involves all students, undergraduate or postgraduate, home or international, on all campuses. The Guild brings students together on issues they care about to create positive change and achieve equality for and within its membership, through taking collective action.

For further information Visit the Student Conduct and Appeals Section web pages at <http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/study/support/sca> or email Conduct@contacts.bham.ac.uk