Draft Guidelines for Registered Teachers about the Use of Social Media

1. Introduction

This document is aimed at providing guidelines for teachers who use social media[1], identifying potential dangers, offering guidance about how to avoid them and providing a context for responsible, professional use of electronic communication and social media.

Note for schools: These guidelines may also assist schools when developing a school's individual social media policy. However, it is important to note that these guidelines should not replace or act as a social media policy for schools.

It has been approved by the Teaching Council following consultation with relevant stakeholders and should be read in conjunction with section 3 of the Teaching Council Code of Professional Conduct.

Many teachers use social media to enhance their classroom practice, introducing their students to new tools and delivering the curriculum in innovative and engaging ways. Social media provides new ways for teachers to communicate with students, colleagues and the public. Closed professional networks are a useful way to share experiences, set up expert or learning groups, and get advice or help. Teachers using these tools do so generally without encountering any difficulty. However, registered teachers and those who may be seeking registration in the future should be aware of challenges that can be associated with the use of electronic communication and social media, particularly in a private/personal capacity.

Registered teachers may be subject to a level of public scrutiny over and above other public sector employees because of their work with children and vulnerable persons. Teachers should follow best practice in the use of social media.

Before posting anything online, ask yourself:-
• Might what I'm posting reflect poorly on me, my employer or my profession?
• Is this post for personal or professional reasons?
• Who will see this post? (Colleagues, parents, students etc.)
• Am I confident that the posting, if accessed by others (colleagues, parents, students etc.) would be considered reasonable and appropriate for a professional?

2. Electronic Communication and Social Media

Electronic communication and social media includes software applications (including those running on mobile devices), email and websites which enable users to interact, create and exchange information online. Examples include, but are not limited to, sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram. Also included is the use of SMS and messaging platforms such as Whatsapp, Facebook Messenger, Snapchat and Viber.

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[1] The term social media is used to mean web-based applications that enable users to create and exchange content. It includes blogs and micro blogs, professional and personal forum sites for sharing images and videos, and networking sites.

3.   Risks and pitfalls for registered teachers using social media

The way you use social media in your private life is a matter for your own personal judgment. However, you should still exercise caution in the content you upload to any social media site and consider whether it could compromise public confidence in you as a professional. You should always consider the possible impact on colleagues, students or the public's perception of the profession, before publishing any content on social media sites. You should treat everyone with respect and avoid abusive, unsustainable or malicious behaviour online. You should make sure your comments are not defamatory or otherwise in breach of the law.

Using social media can blur the boundary between your private and professional life. It is therefore important that you are cautious about which social media you use, and how and with whom you communicate. You should keep personal and professional use of social media separate and, as far as possible, avoid communicating with students through personal social networking sites unless it is within agreed school social media policies. You should bear in mind:

- The standards expected of you do not change because you are communicating through social media and you should still maintain the professional standards expected in other forms of communication;
- Social media communication encourages casual dialogue. Innocent comments or posts can be misconstrued or manipulated. The perception can be different;
- You can be vulnerable to unintended misuses;
- Acknowledging, liking or sharing someone else's post can imply that you endorse or support their point of view;
- You can be mentioned or identified in inappropriate posts, sometimes without your knowledge or consent;
- Your conduct online does not have to relate to students or teaching in order for it to have a bearing on your fitness to teach;
- Postings online are subject to the same laws of copyright and defamation as written/verbal communication;
- Unwise behaviour online may result in criminal or civil action.

4.   Privacy and Confidentiality

How or whether you use social media in your private life is a matter for you to decide. You should be aware that social media sites cannot guarantee confidentiality, whatever privacy settings are used. However, while settings on many platforms allow information to be shared only with a closed group of friends or family, this privacy cannot be guaranteed.

It is therefore important to familiarise yourself with the privacy provisions of any social media site you use, and bear in mind the limitations of keeping information private online.

In particular, you should be aware that:
- Your personal information may be accessed by others. Social media sites cannot guarantee privacy regardless of what settings are in place;
- Once information is published online, your control of it is lost. It can be difficult to remove it as other users may share or comment on it;
- Information uploaded anonymously can, in many cases, be traced back to its point of origin;
- Although individual pieces of information may not breach confidentiality on their own, the sum of published information online can be enough to identify a student or parent and consequently have potential for reputational damage to you, and possibly your school.

5.   Minimising Risk when using Social Media

- Adhere to the Teaching Council Code of Professional Conduct and Social Media Guidelines;
- Adhere to school policies, procedures and guidelines in relation to social media use;
- Understand any social media application before using it, and be clear about its advantages / disadvantages;
- Conduct yourself online in a way which does not call into question your position as a professional registered teacher. For example, be careful when writing profiles or establishing email addresses;
- Consider your online persona and how others may perceive you;
- Consider who or what you associate with online, and always maintain professional boundaries with students;
- Never exchange private phone numbers, personal email addresses or photographs of a personal nature with students;
- Never accept or initiate Facebook friend requests, or other such invites, with current students. Discretion should be used when dealing with friend requests from former students or parents of students;
- Review your privacy settings on a regular basis to minimise risks**;**
- Consider your settings on social media sites. You may wish to prohibit others from tagging you in any photograph or update without your permission;
- Be aware of photographs published online which include you, and where they may be posted;
- Do not discuss students, parents or colleagues online, or criticise your employer online;
- Protect yourself by always logging out of any social media site you are using at the end of a session;

6.   Awareness

- Be aware that others may try to view your online social media profiles, or even just Google your name, e.g. potential employers, students, parents;
- Appreciate that students may be curious about you and may search the internet for your personal information;
- Manage your privacy settings, especially in relation to photos;
- Use strong passwords and change them regularly. Never share passwords;
- Protect your mobile telephone, laptop or tablet. Know where they are and who has access to them;
- Bring any social media concerns to the attention of your employer or union as soon as you become aware.