

THE CHALLENGE

Social media has increasingly become a business tool used to promote Higher Education institutions. It means that many universities are increasing their focus on monitoring for reputational risk on social media. Our research has found that institutions use third-party software to alert them whenever their institution is tagged or mentioned in posts. Most institutions have social media policies in place for their staff to follow, but not all.

Some have digital systems in place which mean that students have no real privacy when connected to their on-campus systems. Other universities scan students' social media under the Prevent programme for signs of radicalisation or extremism or for signs of mental health concerns like depression or anxiety. In addition, the Student Loans Company (SLC) scans students' social media accounts for signs of fraud. In 2018 MPs called it "KGB tactics". Charity Stand Alone called for an urgent review and the reinstatement of funding to students where it had been cut off after social media surveillance but without any proof of fraud.

Students are being surveilled constantly and this is only increasing with universities directly monitoring the social media of students to use in disciplinary actions.

In 2021 it was revealed that a university had been monitoring the social media posts of a student believed to be involved in university rent strikes – it had created 190 pages recording his thoughts and movements shared in social media posts, which goes far beyond the monitoring universities claim to be doing² and seems neither necessary nor proportionate.

Students are rarely fully informed about the extent of social media monitoring and how it may be used, and due to the power imbalance, any "consent" can rarely be freely given.

See part 4 of our 2020 State of Data report for more detailed background information:
<https://defenddigitalme.org/research/the-state-of-data-2020/report/#h.lqynv53drjk9>

¹ The Guardian (2018) Student Loans Company 'spied on vulnerable students' social media'
<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/aug/02/student-loans-company-spied-on-vulnerable-students-social-media>

² The Express (2021) Universities accused of monitoring students' social media accounts - 'Sinister!'
<https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1535579/Universities-social-media-accounts>

YOUR RIGHTS

Students must be informed about how personal data will be processed and this includes any monitoring.

- Institutions need to be very careful that they have a legal basis and set out clearly what it is, alongside the students' rights when explaining it.

Students and staff have a right to access the records and information held about them by their educational institution, this includes information collected from monitoring their social media accounts.

Oxford Brookes University policy states, "although the University respects and appreciates the value of personal privacy, its IT systems are provided for academic and business purposes and users should have no expectation of privacy when using the University's IT facilities."

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TAKE ACTION

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