'Views expressed here are my own and not those of the University': Social media policies in UK Higher Education institutions

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While academics are now expected to engage with the use of social media as part of their professional roles – to support teaching and learning, research activities and scholarly communication beyond the academy, for example - it is typically done through the use of personal accounts. As an increasing number of studies show, this places individual academics in a position of personal risk, being potentially exposed to threats of online abuse, trolling and harassment. This raises a question of institutional responsibility and duty of care. In this paper, we present a systematic survey of the availability of social media policy documents in the context of the UK higher education sector. Furthermore, we examine the content and features of policies to explore how personal and professional identities are navigated, and the extent to which policies address risks to staff. The analysis shows that institutional social media policies are heavily skewed towards protecting the institution, rather than staff. As social media use is increasingly considered to be part of academic roles, this highlights a real need for a reframing of such policies to extend the duty of care of institutions.

Keywords: higher education; online identity; policy; social media

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Introduction

The use of social media has become an established part of academic labour. While still not essential, academics' use of social media has shifted from a fringe activity or personal choice to expected use, fuelled by institutional pressures such as the impact agenda. While institutions increasingly expect - and in the case of research impact, benefit from - academics to use social media, it is not risk-free. This raises a question of to what extent institutions help protect their employees; or whether academics, whose personal identities are exposed through social media, are left to shoulder the risks themselves. Academic identity online consists of multiple 'acceptable identity fragments' (Kimmons and Veletsianos 2014), from personal to professional, which are further refracted across the range of platforms which an individual chooses to use (or not) (Jordan 2019; Tusting et al. 2019; Veletsianos and Shaw 2018). Social media is also a notably vague term, encompassing a very wide range of platforms and services – and the ways in which it is used and the extent of personal or professional identity exposure may vary.

In the United Kingdom the impact agenda has played a crucial role in mainstreaming the use of social media through the expectation that these platforms can make a significant contribution to research impact. Social media is perceived to provide immediate, multimodal communication with vast potential audiences outside the academy, even if the realisation of this potential with identifiable end users of research is more difficult to establish in practice (Carrigan and Fatsis 2021). Social media is now commonly referred to in Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact case studies (Carrigan and Jordan 2021); as such, we must analyse the institutional factors driving the uptake of social media within higher education.

There has been a tendency to see the use of social media by academics in terms of individual choice, reflecting a wider tendency to approach social media in terms of the role of the individual user. The problem with this approach is that it neglects how those choices are shaped by the context in which they are made, and expectations as part of the role. Sectoral imperatives, such as the need to demonstrate research impact and build an impactful culture, are likely driving the sustained adoption of social media to an extent. When individual expectations and institutional priorities are linked through formal and informal assessment procedures in this way, the question of how institutions can adequately support academic staff in their use becomes critical. In this respect social media practice can be understood through the dynamics of structure and agency (Archer 1995; Carrigan 2025). The choices individual academics make are significant, reflecting what Archer (2007) describes as reflexivity, but these choices are always made within contexts that both constrain and enable action. Furthermore, their action within the context depends on what Archer (1995 p.275) describes as the "resources and rules" such as "teaching materials, premises or buildings, expert knowledge, attendance and curriculum" which enables staff, students and other actors to fulfil their obligations to each other. Institutional social media policies are an example of such resources and rules, as contextual factors which signal institutional priorities, values and risk perceptions. This raises the question of the extent to which they support responsible and effective practice, or constrain it to serve other imperatives within the institution.

The need for the nature of support provided by institutions toward academics in their use of social media to extend to cover legal protections is growing, as academics are increasingly subjected to trolling online (Pritchard 2022). A prominent example is the #gamergate hashtag, where games researchers were subjected to harassment from the far right (Massanari 2018), while individual academics may also be targeted as part

of far-right strategy on social media (Durrani 2021; Kamola 2019). Online harassment in general is intersectional in nature, and as such disproportionately affects different groups of scholars. Female academics and people of colour are more likely to experience harassment through social media, for example (Dej and Kilty 2024; Gosse et al. 2021; Veletsianos et al. 2018). The nature of online harassment for scholars is itself under-studied, but it is likely that additional factors may also play a role as well as race and gender (such as class, disability, for example). However, even if sympathetic, institutions may view online abuse as simply being something which is beyond their purview to manage (O'Meara et al. 2024). A recent study suggested that only a quarter of a sample of academics (the majority of the sample being female) would report online harassment to their institution, or ask for help (Eslen-Ziya et al. 2023). How institutions frame social media activity by staff becomes extremely significant as a labour issue in this context.

While institutions stand to benefit from the positive impacts of academics' use of social media, it is only fitting that they also strive to protect their employees from the harms that can come with public scholarship. As such, there is a need to examine institutional social media policies as key mediating documents between academics and their use of social media - whether explicitly for work-based purposes or not - with potentially career-threatening consequences if contravened and enforced. It is crucial we understand this role because of the increasing centrality which institutions play in how academics approach their use of social media. This emerging regulatory role is an empirically complex matter, cutting across multiple domains and involving workplace interactions which, by their nature, will be difficult for researchers to access. However, examining the policies themselves is a crucial foundation for this wider project. The obvious concern is the possible disconnect between the *stated purposes* of policies and

their *practical effects,* given how they are drawn upon in organisational processes relating to social media activity by staff. This is what we explore by examining whether social media policies, as "resources and rules" in Archer's (1995) sense, might carry unintended and counterproductive consequences for academic practice in a rapidly developing field (Carrigan 2024).

Literature review

A small but growing body of empirical studies have been carried out to-date with a focus on higher education institutions' social media policy documents. One of the earliest examples focused on the UK higher education sector. McNeill (2012a; 2012b) applied critical discourse analysis to a sample of 14 policy documents. A principal driver for use of social media was identified to be part of building university brands online, and consequently the policies at this early stage were aligned with reputation management. Also focusing on the UK higher education sector, with an aim to be more fully representative, Lees (2018) identified that 110 (of 169) UK Higher Education institutions had social media policy documents. The documents were sampled and analysed according to readability and content, which suggested that the documents perform well in terms of readability, but the content may be of limited practical use; "whilst higher education institutions are providing guidance for use of social media at work, little direction is provided for the use of social media for work." (Lees 2018 p.71).

While no further studies were found in the UK context, institutional social media policies have also been examined in other countries. Erskine et al. (2014) applied a grounded theory approach to analyse policy documents from a sample of 50 US universities, identifying eight themes common to the content of documents: accounts, branding, content, disclosure, monitoring, promotion, safety/security, and timeliness.

Pomerantz et al. (2015) considered the US sector, reporting that public documents could only be found for fewer than 25% of institutions. Kwestel and Milano (2020) analysed policies from 82 institutions in the US, reporting that policies tended to prioritise managing risk to institutional reputation rather than academic free speech, suggesting that the issues identified by McNeill (2012) operate in this context too. Similar to Lees (2018), Alharthy et al. (2020) focused upon readability and content of policies, but within the Saudi Arabian higher education sector. Notably few - only three of 68 universities - were found to have a policy in this context. In the largest-scale study to-date, Pasquini and Evangelopoulos (2015; 2017) applied latent semantic analysis to a sample of 250 institutional policies spanning ten countries, identifying a comprehensive range of 36 topics covered by policies, highlighting the variation in content and differences according to country contexts.

In this study, we focus upon the relationship between institutional policy and university staff, but it is also important to note that the relationship between institutions and students' use of social media is also a critical topic. O'Connor et al. (2016) surveyed students' opinions regarding university social media policies, which suggested that students' awareness of the issues is low. Assumptions about digital competencies of students in relation to social media hark back to debunked notions of 'digital natives' and obscure the need for institutions to support students' development in this regard (Purvis and Beckingham 2024). It may be important to consider disciplinary differences in professional practices and ethical standards, depending on the subjects being taught (Augustine et al. 2015; Mistry et al. 2018). While out-of-scope for the current study, exploring the issues from the institution-student perspective would also be timely for further examination for similar reasons.

Objectives and research questions

The primary focus of this study is to examine the prevalence of social media policies within UK Higher Education, as documents that act as formal mediators between academics and their use of social media (Prior 2008).

As discussed in the literature review, some time has passed since previous studies were undertaken in relation to social media policies at UK Higher Education Institutions, and the social media landscape for academics has shifted since then. Incidences of trolling and online abuse of academics have become more frequent (Kamola 2019; Massanari 2018; Pritchard 2022; Veletsianos et al. 2018). Risks are likely to increase further, for example following the neglect of community standards and safeguards at X (formerly known as Twitter) – which underscores the need for institutions to provide a duty of care to their staff, which could be included at the policy level.

Conversely, there have also been concerns raised about academic freedom and the potential for institutional social media policies to act as a form of censorship (Veletsianos 2016). This reflects the need for careful consideration of the blurring of boundaries between personal and professional aspects of academic identity online. As shown by the use of social media in the context of the UK Research Excellence Framework, it is often academics' personal accounts and identities which are used for institutional gain as a mechanism to demonstrate research impact (Carrigan and Jordan 2021). This means that institutionally-valued outcomes can be more easily linked to the activity of individual staff. But it also means that negative outcomes will tend to be personalized in a similar fashion.

For these reasons, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of social media policies at UK Higher Education institutions?
2. Which platforms do institutions include in their definition of social media in this context?
3. How are the concepts of 'personal' and 'professional' online identities utilised in this context?
4. To what extent do institutional staff social media policies address abuse and trolling of staff?

Methods

To address the research questions, the study adopted a documentary analysis of social media policy documents sourced from UK higher education institutions. Social media policy documents were collected by systematic searching across institutional websites. Analysis was undertaken using a combination of descriptive statistics, corpus linguistics tools, and close reading of documents.

Sampling

We chose to focus upon the UK Higher Education sector for the study. This choice was a pragmatic one, primarily due to the authors' familiarity with the sector, being employed as faculty members at UK universities and having several years' experience working within the sector. To an extent, the UK higher education sector represents a case study in this sense. While it would be valuable to examine the higher education sector in other countries and undertake comparative work, this was beyond the practical scope of this project and would be potential follow-up research.

The potential sample was therefore bounded by the institutions within the UK Higher Education sector, and all could potentially have been included in the final

sample if a social media policy document could be found. As a first step, a comprehensive list of UK Higher Education institutions was compiled, including their primary website domain address. The list was compiled by drawing upon the lists of institutions involved in university ranking exercises, those which submitted to the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and also seeking out names of private institutions which may not be included in these sources. In instances where institutions had constituent colleges, such as Oxford and Cambridge, only the primary university web domain was included. The list comprised a total of 160 Higher Education Institutions potentially eligible to be included in the study.

Data collection

The sample was further defined by those UK Higher Education institutions which had social media policies. To source documents, a series of Google searches were undertaken, restricted to each domain in turn, for the terms '"social media" policy'. If no results were found, the website was also visited and queried using its own search facility. Policies were only included if they were explicitly relevant to staff; those which were aimed at students were excluded. Less formal documents, such as social media guidelines, tips or advice, were also excluded, as while policies are typically mandatory, guidelines are not (e.g. University of Cambridge 2024). If a social media policy was found, the web address was noted and a text document version saved offline for further analysis. Data collection took place during November 2022.

Data analysis

A combination of approaches were used in order to analyse the documents and address the research questions. The approaches included the use of descriptive statistics, corpus linguistics, and thematic analysis from close reading of texts. Descriptive statistics were

used to address the first research question. For each of the policy documents, the title, length in terms of number of words, and date last updated (if applicable) were recorded, to gain an overview of the field.

The remaining research questions were addressed by drawing upon both corpus linguistic analysis and close reading of documents. Corpus linguistics was used to allow the body of policy documents to be queried in relation to particular concepts relevant to the questions (such as different platforms, personal/professional identities, and trolling/harassment for the remaining research questions respectively). Corpus linguistics is appropriate as it offers a systematic, computational approach to analyzing the relationships between words and components of large-scale texts (McEnery and Hardie 2012). The collected documents were mainly PDF documents, with a minority being Word documents or web pages. To prepare the documents for analysis, all were saved as plain text documents and checked for consistency.

The collection of plain text documents was then imported into the corpus linguistics package 'Lancsbox' for analysis (Brezina et al. 2020). Lancsbox is a freely-available specialist software package which has been developed by academics at Lancaster University. It is designed to support research in corpus linguistics, and enables the user to easily query and visualise elements of large-scale text-based datasets. The choice to take a corpus linguistics-type approach and use Lancsbox - rather than using a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) package to thematically code the data for example – was made primarily due to the size of dataset of policy texts, as Lancsbox provided a way to easily query and draw comparisons across the corpus in relation to specific features of the text related to addressing the research questions.

When imported into Lancsbox, the corpus of social media policies comprised 60 files, 129,420 tokens (total words), 6,172 types (unique words) and 5,433 lemmas (the base form of a word). Using Lancsbox, the corpus of texts was examined by looking at the incidence of particular terms of relevance to the research questions ('personal' and 'professional', 'risk' and 'harassment', and particular platform names, for example).

While the use of Lancsbox facilitated systematic search and queries across the corpus of policy documents as a whole, it could be used to identify trends very effectively. However, this approach is also limited in the extent to which deeper insights can be drawn. As such, once overall trends had been identified, the texts were then examined in further detail by close reading and manual identification of themes with a particular focus on the issues underpinning the research questions.

Results and discussion

In this section, the results are presented and discussed in relation to each of the four research questions in turn.

What are the characteristics of social media policies at UK Higher Education institutions?

The first research question was a fundamental one, simply to establish a baseline of the prevalence of policies within the sector. Of the 160 institutional websites searched, a social media policy could be located and accessed for 60 institutions (37.5%). Of the remaining 100 institutions, 18 (11.3%) appeared to have a policy but it was not accessible (typically behind an institutional log-in), while no policy or reference to a policy could be located for the remaining 82 (51.3%). The proportion of UK higher education institutions in each category is shown in Figure 1.

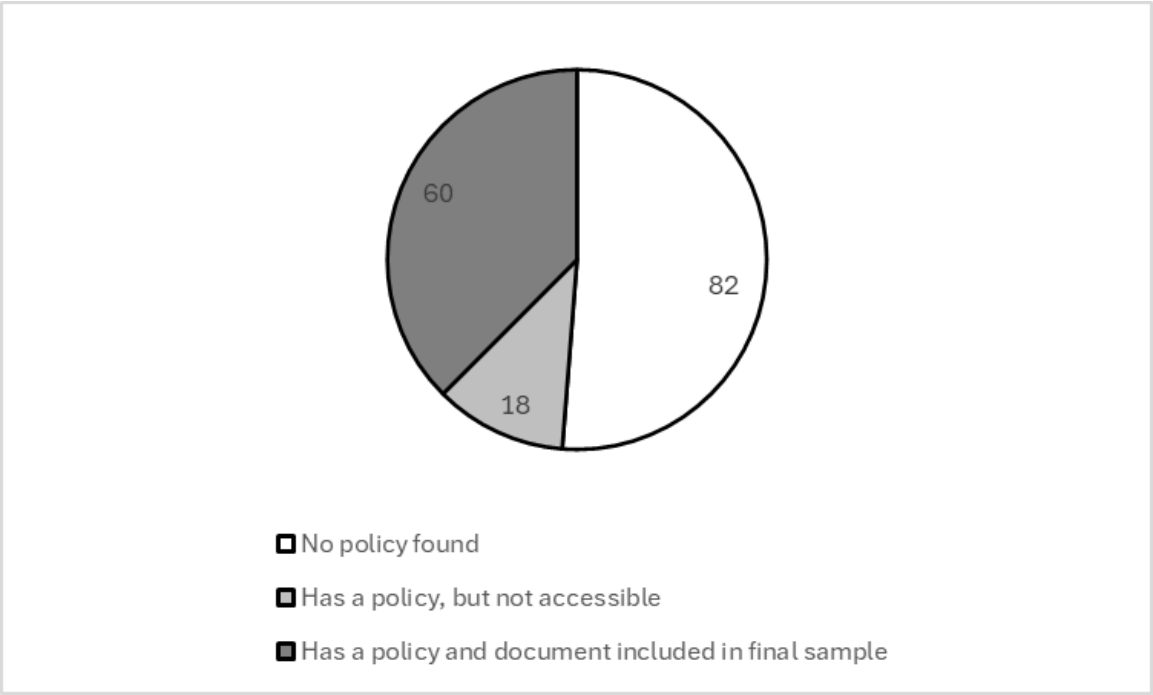

Figure 1: Pie chart illustrating the proportion of UK Higher Education institutions, from a total potential sample of 160, for which either (i) no social media policy could be found (white), (ii) a document was referred to on their website but not available to the public (light grey), or (iii) a social media policy could be located and added to the sample for analysis (dark grey).

Of the 60 documents in the sample, 46 were dated, and 14 were undated. Dates ranged from 2011 to 2023, with a median average of 2018 (Figure 2). Document length ranged from 498 to 5119 words, and the mean average was 2,142 words (n=60).

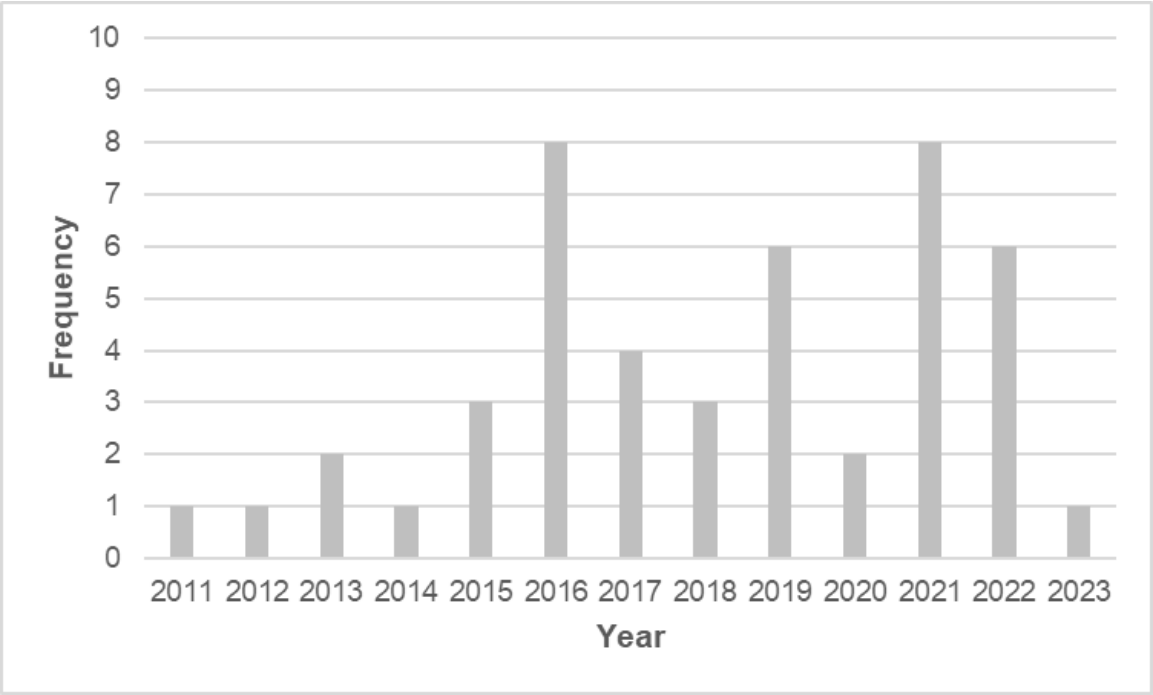

Figure 2: Bar chart illustrating the distribution of dates according to year, in cases where policy documents were dated (n = 46).

This is a greater proportion of institutions having no policy than reported in earlier work (Lees 2018), which found no documents for 39% of the UK HE sector. However, it is not clear whether this represents a decrease, as Lees (2018) included a wider range of documents related to guidance for staff in relation to social media, whereas the present study focused specifically on policy documents. Nonetheless, the figures do not suggest that there has been a substantial change in recent years.

Which platforms do institutions include in their definition of social media in this context?

Through the second research question, we sought to understand the definition of 'social media' used in policy documents. 'Social media' is a wide-ranging term, with points in common (but not synonymous) with definitions of social networking sites (e.g. boyd & Ellison 2007). For example, DeNardis (2014) builds on this and succinctly articulates

the challenge of defining social media:

> *"social media [is defined] as possessing three characteristics: the affordance of user-generated content, the ability for individuals to directly engage with other individuals and content, and the ability to select and/or articulate network connections with other individuals. With this capacious definition, social media encompasses social networking platforms, content aggregation sites, and various forms of interactive media and journalism." (DeNardis 2014 p.348).*

First, the corpus of policies was explored in terms of how sentences are structured in relation to setting out a definition of social media. Using Lancsbox, we queried the corpus for key sentence fragments around articulating a definition of social media. Just under one third (17) of the policies provided clear definition statements. In instances where an explicit definition was provided, some recurring patterns were identified (Figure 3). Core concepts which underpin the definitions - where provided - are notably broad, including 'websites and applications' or 'any online communication tool', which facilitates instant sharing of any form of message or information. This could be argued to extend beyond social media, to any communication online.

	Social media is defined	as "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking" [n=1]
	Social media is defined	as websites and online applications that enable users to create and share content, and/or participate in social networking. These social media tools enable users to share ideas, opinions, knowledge and interests and use of them includes posting, commenting, instant messaging and sharing links, images and files. [n=1]

	Social media is defined	as any online interactive communication tool which encourages participation and exchanges. [n=3]
	Social media is defined	as any online interactive communication tool which encourages participation, engagement or exchanges, including liking, sharing and commenting on other people's content and posts which may be interpreted as a form of endorsement. [n=1]
	Social media is defined	as any online interactive communication tool or platform that encourages participation and exchanges. [n=1]
	Social media is defined	as any type of interactive online media that allows you to communicate instantly in a public forum. [n=1]
	Social media is defined	as a type of interactive online media that allows parties to communicate instantly with each other or to share data in a public forum. [n=2]
	Social media is defined	as a type of interactive online media that allows parties to communicate instantly with each other; or to share messaging in a public forum. [n=1]
	Social media is defined	as any online interactive tool that encourages participation, interaction and exchanges. [n=1]
	Social media is defined	any online interactive tool which encourages participation, interaction and exchanges whether in writing, by video or through other means. [n=1]
The chartered institute of public relations (CIRP)	definition of social	medial is "the term commonly given to internet and mobile based channels and tools that allow the users to interact with each other and chare opinions and content. It involved the building of communities or networks and encourages participation and engagement". [n=1]
For the purpose of this policy, the	definition of social	media is any web or mobile technology based services that allow individuals to: - Construct a public or semi-public profile within an online system or programme; - Compile and share a list of other users with whom they

		are connected; and/or - View and network between their list of connections and those made by others within the system. [n=1]
	Definition of social	media: For the purpose of this policy, social media is any type of interactive online forum that allows parties to communicate with each other, instantly or otherwise, or to share data in a publicly viewable environment. [n=1]
	Definition of social	media: Social media is a form of interactive online media that allows parties to communicate instantly with each other or to share data in a public forum. [n=1]

Figure 3: Lancsbox Whelk output showing sentence fragments located to the right of the phrase 'Social media is defined' or 'definition of social' within the corpus of policy documents.

The definition of social media was further explored by considering the platforms referred to in policy documents. A core of five main platforms were consistently referred to and mentioned in at least half of the policies: Twitter (52), Facebook (49), LinkedIn (45), YouTube (42), and Instagram (34). Thirty-eight other platforms were used to a lesser extent, including a range of social networking services, image and video content-sharing sites, and some review-sharing sites. There were some instances of including internal communications platforms (such as Teams and Yammer) but these were rare. The full list of platforms and their frequencies is shown in Figure 4. Like the overall definitions, this is a far-reaching range of platforms, sites and services, which may stretch the definition of 'social media' and allow institutions to exercise control over far more online activities by their staff.

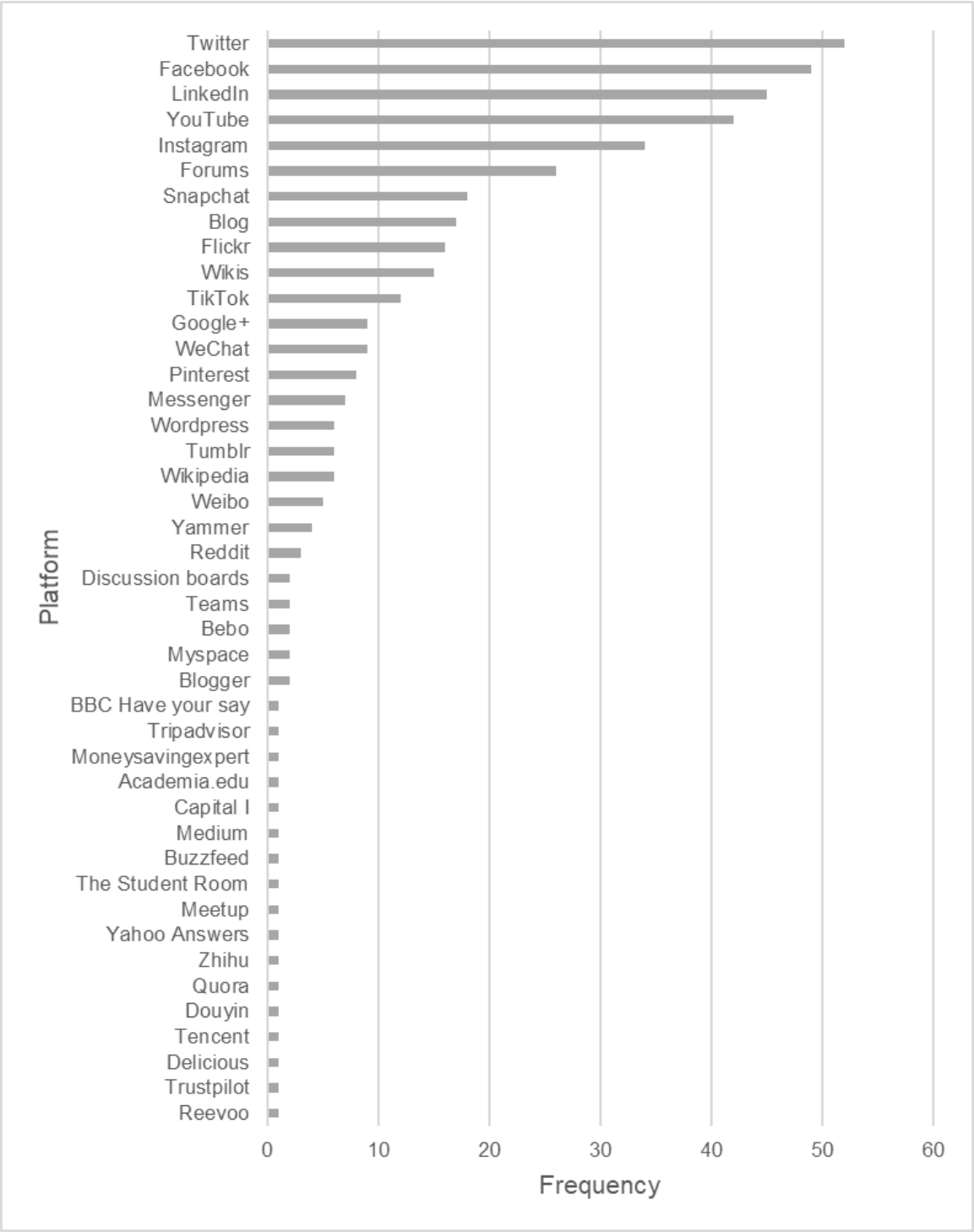

Figure 4: Bar chart showing the number of policy documents which included references to particular social media platforms or sites.

Further insight was gained through visualisation of co-located terms which revealed assumptions linked to how different platforms are referred to within the

policies. The main co-located words associated with the top five most frequently mentioned platforms are shown in Figure 4. These visualisations show that different platform names are not typically associated with different types of discourse, but rather the names were mainly collocated with other social media platform names. This suggests that social media platform names typically feature as a list of examples, rather than offering platform-specific information.

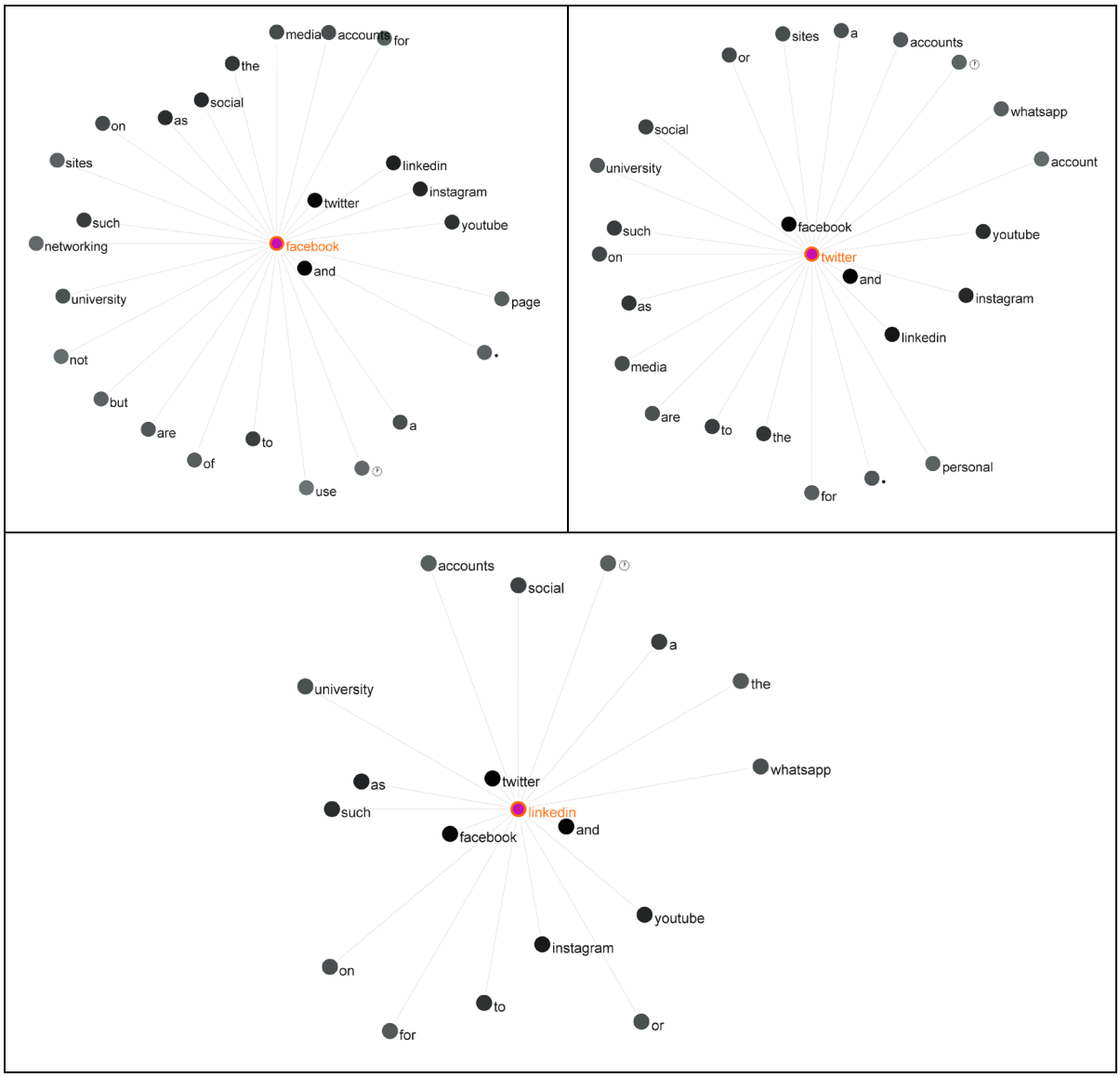

Figure 4: Collocated words associated with the keywords ‘Facebook’ (top left), ‘Twitter’ (top right), ‘LinkedIn’ (middle), ‘YouTube’ (bottom left) and ‘Instagram’ (bottom right).

It is clear from the vibrant field of platform studies that we cannot treat social media interchangeably. Burgess and Baym (2020 p.15) identify a common tendency to regard each service as “a single ‘technology’—a static object that can be cast as a causal agent of societal change” which obscures “a more emergent, dynamic truth, one in which platform companies, their technologies, and their cultures of use co-evolve over time”. For example, core features of Twitter such as the retweet and the hashtag were innovations by users which were incorporated into the platform in response to their popularity as grassroot trends spread through users imitating each other (Burgess and Baym 2020). Burgess and Greene (2018) trace out a comparable process of co-construction on YouTube as the platform developed through a reciprocal engagement between developers and users. Each platform is an evolving system rather than a technological tool with a singular identity. It follows from this that issues confronted by users are liable to be specific to the platform, reflecting underlying features of its design (how popularity is measured, types of content which can be shared, how they are

filtered, etc.) as well as how these are expressed as a particular point in its development. Twitter's shift to a 280 character limit in 2017 for example generated a significant shift in the platform's culture with regards to practices such as threading. This illustrates how the issues encountered by users will tend to change over the lifecycle of a platform, with their responses to these issues being one of the drivers of future change in the platform.

Insisting on the specific character of platforms isn't just a pedantic observation by social scientists and technologists who are overly concerned with detail. It's a practical matter of the issues which users are likely to encounter through their engagement on the platform. The distinct character of professional experience complicates this further through the interaction between occupationally specific imperatives (e.g. building a readership for scholarly publications, being seen to be publicly engaged) and the unfolding character of the platform itself. In other words, the issues faced by academics on Twitter will be different from the issues they face on Facebook or LinkedIn. These issues will also be distinctive from those faced by other professional groups on each platform, even if there might be overlaps. For this reason it is deeply mistaken to treat platforms interchangeably, as if what 'social media' have in common is more important than the differences between them. This doesn't mean that discussion at a more general level is impossible but it does mean we need to proceed carefully, particularly if we're trying to support, analyse or regulate the professional users of these platforms. It would clearly be impractical for policies to account for the full range of (popular) social media platforms. Nonetheless, there are patterns in their affordances and constraints - such as how open the network structure is or the centrality of multimedia content - which could be leveraged to provide a framework which recognizes the variety of platforms.

How are the concepts of 'personal' and 'professional' online identities utilised in this context?

The third and fourth research questions shift the focus from gaining an overview of the characteristics of policy documents overall, to the relationship between staff and the content of policies. The third research question asked how the concepts of 'personal' and 'professional' identities are utilised in this context. This was addressed by examining the frequency of the words 'personal' and 'professional', and the words that they are typically associated with within this corpus ('collocation'; Brezina et al. 2015). 'MI' was used as a measure of collocation, as it accounts for a wider range of relationships between words and is less affected by frequency (Gablasova et al. 2017).

Collocation between terms can be illustrated visually as a network, with individual words as nodes and edges representing the collocation relationship between the two. The network of most frequently collocated terms in relation to the queries of 'personal' and 'professional' are shown in Figure 5. Note that the labels for nodes representing prepositions, pronouns, articles, and conjunctions have been removed. The term 'personal' features in almost all social media policies (59 out of 60), while 'professional' is included in a majority but not ubiquitous (48).

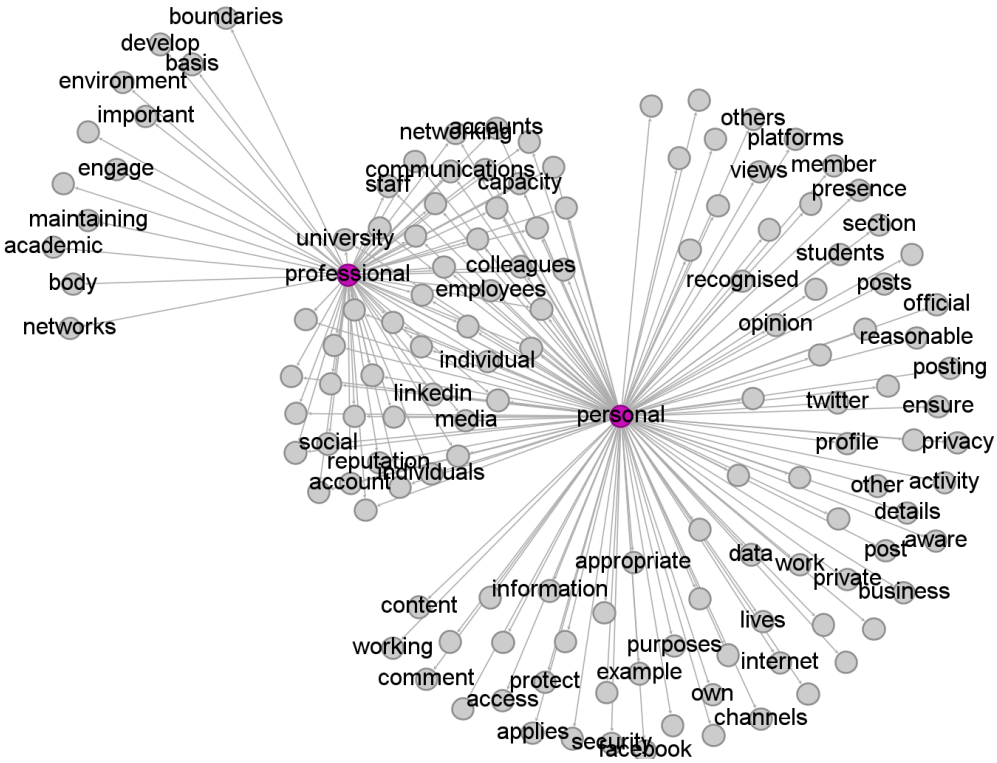

Figure 5: Collocated words associated with the keywords ‘professional’ (left) and ‘personal’ (right). Words in common are shown in the middle.

The collocation network in Figure 5 demonstrates that the words collocated with ‘professional’ are more limited and illustrate a cautious approach to identity expression – maintaining *boundaries,* to *engage* with *academic networks*, upholding *reputation*. ‘Personal’ is collocated with a wider range of terms. It is also subject to caution: the need to be *reasonable*, noting what is *appropriate* and issues of *privacy* and *security*. Facebook and Twitter sit firmly in the ‘personal’ sphere, but we know that they are often used for professional purposes (Jordan 2019). The network gives a sense of separateness and with defined boundaries, which may be at odds with academics’ actual use.

To what extent do institutional staff social media policies address abuse and trolling of staff?

Finally, the fourth question explored to what extent do the policies address abuse and trolling of staff. This was examined through querying the corpus for two key terms: risk, and harassment. Risk was selected as a key term in order to examine how risk is positioned - risk for the institution, or risks to the academics. Harassment was also selected as it was the most frequent way in which a range of other terms - including trolling, bullying and cyberstalking - were framed. Both reflect a bias in stance towards protecting the institution.

The term 'risk' was included in approximately half (29) of the policy documents. The most frequently collated words are shown in Figure 6.

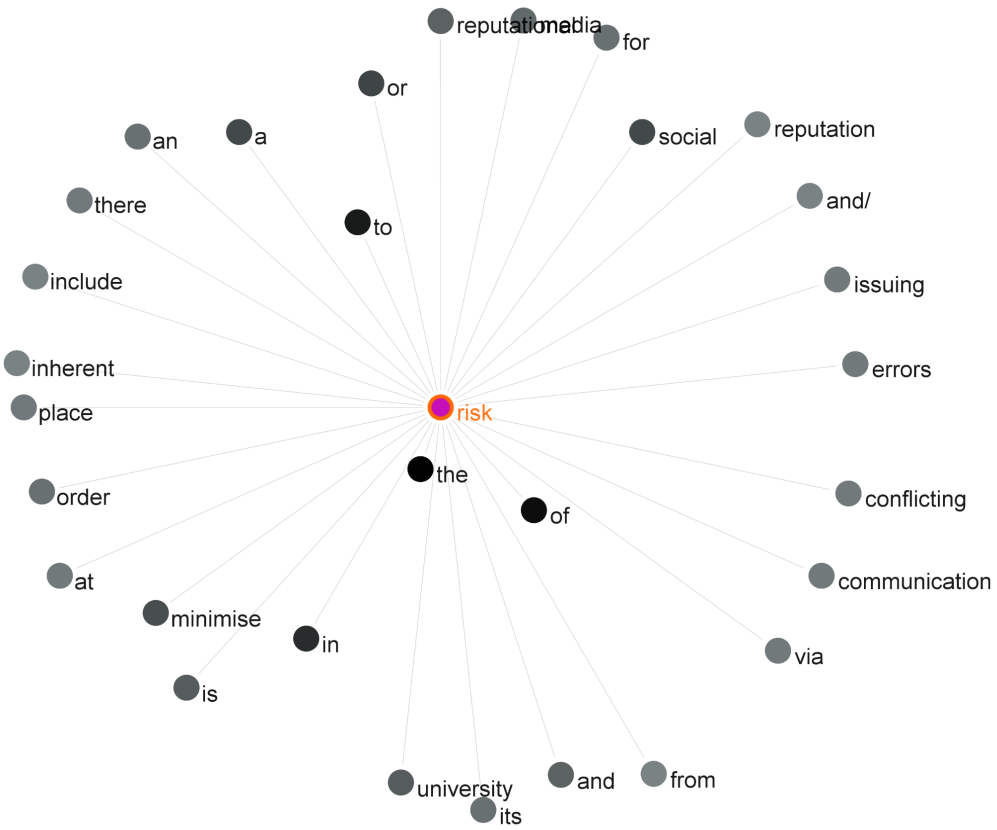

Figure 6: Collocated words most frequently associated with the keywords ‘risk’.

From a combination of visualising the collocated words in Figure 6 and reading of the texts, three main ways in which risk was discussed were identified: control of information and message, reputational risk and productivity, and protection and disciplinary issues. For example:

> “*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 [University] social media accounts (e.g. for departments, subject areas etc). Any questions or enquiries received on other University social media channels during a crisis must be signposted to the main channel.* ” - control of information and message
>
> *“However, along with benefits come the risks inherent in managing something that is fast-paced and unlimited in scale. These include the risk of reputational damage arising from improper use by staff, students or third parties, threats to security of sensitive or confidential information, exposure to viruses and a negative impact on productivity.”* - reputational risk and productivity
>
> *“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”* - protection and disciplinary issues

Risk is also closely related to potential issues of defamation – a risk which universities actively protect against, through defamation insurance, to cover risks to individuals while undertaking their professional work and protecting academic freedom (Jacobsen et al. 2025). Only nine of the policies referred to defamation, and it was not

clear whether such insurance would cover social media activity, with the policies tending to emphasise individual academics' legal liability. This is further obscured by a lack of available information about the extent and use of such insurance within the UK higher education sector more generally.

Similarly, the most frequent words to be collocated with harassment are shown in Figure 7. Harassment was chosen as a focus, as it featured more consistently within the documents (being used in 38 of the 60 policies, compared to 10 instances of trolling, or nine of stalking, for example).

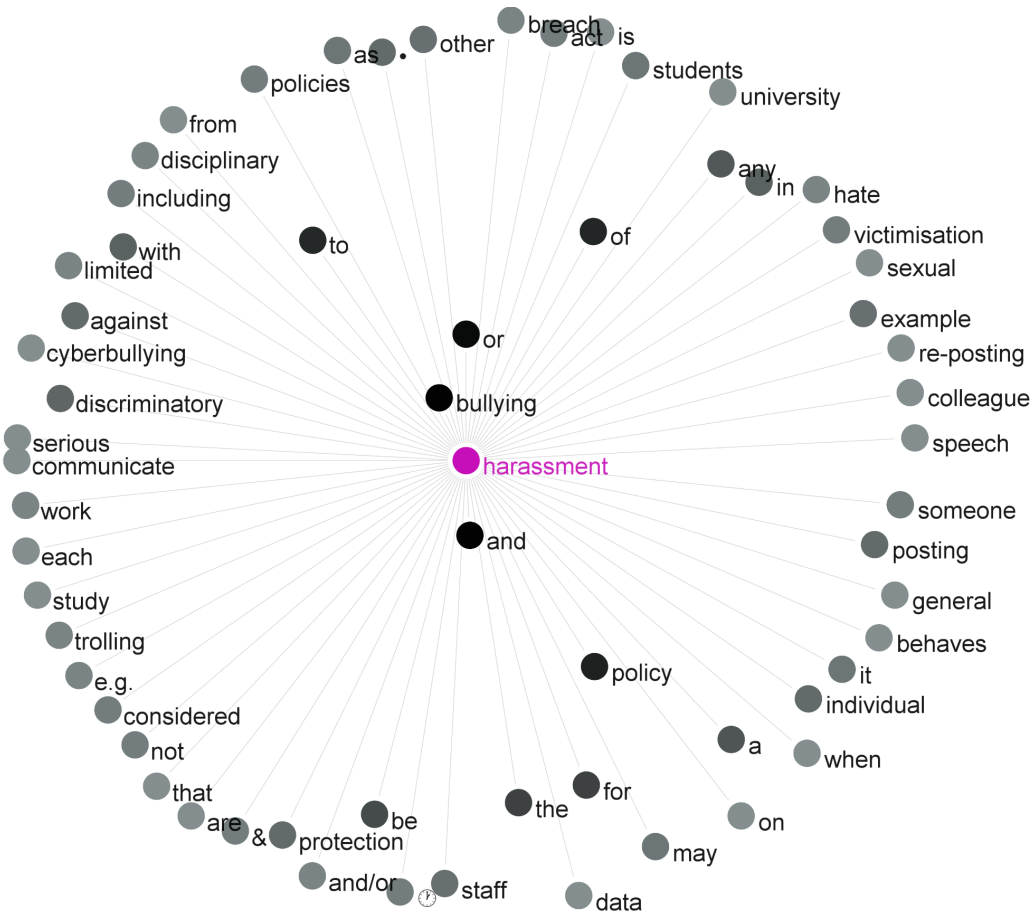

Figure 7: Collocated words most frequently associated with the keyword 'harassment'.

In addition to the overview provided in Figure 7, each example was read and categorised according to whether it positioned academic staff as perpetrators or as victims (or both). In the majority of policies (51 of the 60 sampled), harassment is positioned in terms of the academic staff member as perpetrator, typically linked to breach of dignity at work policies and disciplinary action, often assuming that the academic is the perpetrator or that an academic may suffer abuse but only being applicable if it is between colleagues, not external actors, which is a significant gap and leaves staff extremely vulnerable to trolling by members of the general public online: exactly the people who engagement with in other circumstances might be institutionally recognized as a successful outcome. This is an illustrative example, typical of the content overall:

> *If a concern is raised regarding content posted on a staff member's social media account and the post is considered to be misconduct (as defined in the University's Disciplinary Procedure), the University has the right to request the removal of content. In addition, the matter may be addressed through the University's Disciplinary Procedure. Serious breaches including, but not limited to, harassment or bullying of colleagues and the misuse of confidential information may constitute gross misconduct and may lead to action including dismissal.*

In only nine instances did the policies mention supporting colleagues who were suffering harassment via social media, or how to report abuse from external sources. There was notable variation in terms of who individuals were advised to report this to. Some referred to specialist support, or communications teams, or simply advised to

contact the police, but the point of contact most frequently referred to was the line manager – which raises questions of whether line managers are trained, and whether this is appropriate. There is an obvious potential here for vastly uneven outcomes in what might otherwise be similar situations, with potential EDI implications depending on the academics involved and the impact to their careers. In some instances, practical advice was included - such as to screenshot evidence - but this was rare.

The stark contrasts in frequencies here show that there is a strong bias towards risk in terms of protecting the institution rather than the individual. Harassment was much more frequently addressed in terms of academic staff as perpetrators and the disciplinary consequences of this, or only considering abuse between staff, rather than protecting staff from external harassment. This asymmetry reflects findings from Gosse et al. (2024) in the Canadian higher education sector, who identified three ways in which institutional social media policies fall short in protecting staff from harassment: "first, they focus on physical safety over non-contact harms; second, they envision perpetrators to be named, local, and part of the campus community; and third, the reporting process is cumbersome and outpaced by the speed and frequency with which [abuse via social media] occurs." (Gosse et al. 2024 p.923).

Conclusions

The study revealed that a substantial proportion of UK HE institutions still appear to lack social media policies; policies were located publicly for 37.5% of institutions, while a further 11.3% referred or linked to having a social media policy (non-public). No policy, or references to a policy, could be found for the remaining 51.3%. The first main implication from the study is that there is a gap here and a need for policies to be put in place, to protect both institutions and their staff.

The range of dates suggests that a substantial proportion of policies are quite dated and may not reflect the current social media or legislative landscape (e.g. the Higher Education Freedom of Speech Act 2023). When reading the policies, it became apparent that there is a degree of overlap and commonality across many of the texts (see for example, the verbatim quotes in Figure 3). The similarity may suggest a generic 'tick box' approach to the issue. A social media policy template provided by the organisation JISC Legal was referred to and may have formed a starting point in many cases, however the JISC Legal website is now defunct. Many of the issues in social media policies – such as harassment – may be covered by other university policies, such as dignity at work, however this tends to focus upon internal organisational issues. Staff remain highly exposed to external risks and trolling.

A period of intensified digital transformation has coincided with sustained institutional crisis in the sector, converging most dramatically during the Covid-19 pandemic (Carrigan et al. 2023). This environment has amplified the convergence of legal liabilities, reputational concerns and compliance risks which have social media as a focal point. However rather than addressing these issues in a comprehensive and adaptive manner, universities appear to have followed an isomorphic path of least resistance, prioritising immediate imperatives of self-protection (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Carrigan and Jordan 2021). Fully substantiating this claim however is not possible within the constraints of the present article.

The analysis suggests that social media policies make a clear distinction between personal and professional identities. However, in practice this is blurred and the platforms which are arguably most helpful to academics in order to communicate their research and enhance impact sit at the intersection of both (Jordan 2019). The analysis also suggests that the policies do not address platform-specific issues in detail, but refer

to social media as an umbrella term, so there is a question of whether policies are helpful, or unworkable. There is a practical limit to how platform-specific such a policy could or should be, but the ubiquitous failure to engage with this complexity in any way suggests universities are still operating within a model in which social media platforms are a novel externality rather than deeply embedded features of social life (Carrigan and Fatsis 2021).

There is also a question of for whom the policies do 'work'; the theme of legal issues and disclaimers strongly suggests their purpose is to protect the institution, rather than academics. Policies are presented as "rules and resources" which productively serve the functions of the institution whereas in reality they operate in a profoundly asymmetric way, protecting the institution's interests while doing little to protect or support individual academics. Archer's (2003; 2007) approach helps us to consider how policies can serve institutional imperatives while also operating as contextual factors which constrain and enable individual activity. In most cases, we suggest, being more likely to do the former than the latter. This also aligns with reports of institutional surveillance of academics' social media (Reidy 2020). Academics are increasingly encouraged to promote their work through social media as part of the so-called 'impact agenda' (Carrigan and Jordan 2021); institutions stand to benefit from academics' social media use, while individuals are exposed to risks of online abuse (Moriarty 2018). The examination of keywords 'risk' and 'harassment' clear illustrate a bias toward protecting institutions and positioning staff as liabilities. Institutional social media policies may therefore require reframing in terms of how institutions protect not just their reputations, but their staff.

There are two main practical recommendations which can be made as a result of this study. First, the study highlights a substantial gap in provision of policy support,

with no policy or reference to a policy in half of the institutions. Given the increasingly divisive and hostile nature of social media more broadly, if its use is to be expected as part of academic work, this is a gap which needs to be addressed for institutions to enact a duty of care to staff. Second, in the development of new policies or revision of existing policies, there is a need to redress the balance between protecting the institution, but also protecting staff. This is an area which could potentially benefit from co-construction activities, to give voice to academics' experiences of these issues, and ensuring that a range of perspectives are included, given the often-intersectional nature of online harassment.

While the study has shed some light on an under-studied area of higher education policy and practice, there are limitations to this initial work that must be acknowledged. The sampling approach used relied upon universities having made documents publicly available online. The lack of available documents for approximately half the sector may either be due to not having policies, or institutions having opted to protect that information and resulting in a sample which favours institutions which are more open and transparent. Without specifically approaching institutions, which would be out of the scope of the current study, it is not possible to know this. It is notable however that there were a number of instances (18 institutions, 11.3%) which refer to a policy on their public website, but the text itself was behind an institutional log-in. For the institutions which did not appear to have a policy, it is not simply that it could not be accessed, but that there were no references or links to a policy in the public-facing website, which would suggest a lack is more likely.

In terms of the analytical approach, using corpus linguistics has provided an overview of the nature of the documents, which is a useful starting point but is limited in terms of understanding the impact of the policies in practice. Follow-up work to build

on this would be valuable, to understand if and how institutional policies are enacted in practice. Further qualitative research would be valuable to understand the perspectives of social media officers and others involved in constructing and maintaining such policies, and the extent to which the documents accurately reflect institutional behaviour and attitudes. It would also be valuable to carry out research in relation to staff experiences of these issues in cases where social media policies are put to the test. The analysis here focuses on policies as a product but does not shed light on the processes that shaped them, such as legal rationales or organisational incentives, and this would also be an area which would benefit from further study and understanding.

It would be easy to conceive of social media regulation as a fringe issue in higher education policy. It is far from being central to academic practice even if we reach the point where the majority of staff use social media in some professional capacity. This would accord with the widespread tendency to marginalise the role of social media within higher education which has been visible from the earliest point at which these platforms were used by academics. The cynic who once poured scorn on the idea of scholarly uses of mass commercial social media can easily pivot towards a begrudging recognition of their place within research communication while insisting they remain marginal to the important business of knowledge production (Carrigan 2022).

The problem with such a view stems from the third mission of the university. The drive towards recognising external engagement alongside teaching and research has unfolded in different ways across national systems but it has come to be a widely recognised aspect of what universities do, particularly significant given a broader context of political populism in which higher education increasingly finds itself a target (Robertson and Nestore 2022). The range of activities which can be encompassed

within the category of the third mission seem impossibly diverse, reflecting the role of this agenda in negotiating the shifting relationship between universities and the socio-political contexts in which they operate. Gulbrandsen and Slipersaeter (2007) highlight the role of dissemination and outreach in defining the character of the third mission, contrasting it to the more inwardly focused character of teaching and researcher, even if we recognise with Fuller (2009 p.164) that "academia's teaching imperative democratises its complementary research imperative by redistributing the advantage that new knowledge initially accrues to its producers". For this reason it would be too simplistic to describe the third mission as outward facing in comparison to the inward facing nature of teaching and research.

However we can nonetheless see the explicit focus upon external engagement in it which contrasts to the secondary or indirect character of external impacts which has tended to define teaching and research. In this sense we might say that the third mission is inherently concerned with the relationship between the higher education and its socio-political context, manifesting in activities ranging from the commercialisation of research through to policy advising and public intellectualism. It relates, as Bacevic (2017) has insightfully explored, to the interface between university and society as it is imagined and encountered by a whole range of stakeholders. Bastow et al. (2014) have analysed what they term the ‘impact interface’ in terms of the mediating organisations through which disciplinary processes of knowledge are able to exercise an influence in wider society.

There is a narrow sense in which the role of social media in the third mission has been accepted, namely with regards to the dissemination of research outputs beyond the institutional boundaries of higher education. We have previously documented the role attributed to social media within the first Impact assessment exercise in the United

Kingdom and argued this mechanism will drive the further normalisation of social media within this system (Carrigan and Jordan 2021). Social media platforms have been widely constructed as powerful devices through research can be made available to stakeholders outside the university such as policy makers, journalists, charities and activists (Carrigan and Fatsis 2021). Their networking functions are understood to make new connections possible, as well as to more easily managing existing connections in a manner which lends itself to research dissemination. The focus is on getting material from 'in here' to 'out there' with social media imagined as communication engines which can disseminate more broadly and at lower cost, with less need to rely on gatekeepers who mediate these interactions.

If we classify social media narrowly as communications tools then we lose sight of this broader role in facilitating the negotiation of the impact interface. Rather than seeing social platforms as tools for a narrow set of tasks related to the third mission, we can helpfully conceive of them as a general purpose set of tools for negotiating the impact interface. This can be defined as an ontological rather than functional classification of social media which identifies it in terms of the institutional relationships it exists within rather than the purposes to which it can be put by individual users within those institutions (Carrigan and Fatsis 2021). This could provide a foundation for the challenging work of building a more nuanced and effective regulatory culture around social media in higher education.

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