

Social Media and Posting Photos

In this day and age where anyone can take a picture and post it on any of the social media sites they subscribe to, we are all faced with decisions about what to post and what not to post. We often find ourselves directly affected by what others do online. At some point all of us have probably been surprised to see photos of ourselves tagged on Facebook at events we barely remember attending, some of them way back in the past. The ease with which anybody can share photos in public raises interesting issues about privacy in both our personal and professional lives.



Kumamoto JETs come from many different countries and backgrounds. Workplace expectations and attitudes in one's home country may differ from Japan. In our roles as professionals working in the Japanese education system, however, we are expected to follow the ethical framework that informs the way information, pictures, and other private matters can be shared by educational professionals. More specifically, educational professionals in Japan such as ourselves are expected to obtain the permission of a student's parents as well as the school (preferably the principle) if we want to post pictures of that student on a social media site or anywhere online. An important issue if we do seek permission to post is the context in which the post is made. Are we posting to enhance the lives of our students and schools in our role as educators, or are we posting to enhance our personal life? As these are not our children and we are not their family members, we feel that in addition to always obtaining the permission of the students' family and school, all JETs have a responsibility to keep the pictures of students we post within the context of our role as educators. We might be friendly with our students and have a very close working relationship but it is important to remember they are minors and we have been given the responsibility (and privilege) of being their teachers. As public servants in Japan, our professional lives extend to our students, teachers and colleagues we work with; photos of our friends and family are in the personal domain of our lives and how we share these pictures is an entirely different issue.



Privacy laws in Japan are fairly recent and some boards of education are more relaxed about boundaries and the way information is shared. Recently in Kumamoto there have been a few situations where USBs containing sensitive confidential information related to students have been lost by teachers. This has resulted in a more vigilant awareness of how student information is shared. At present if a school wants to use a picture of a student to publish on the school website or create a computer list of photos of all their students, they have to obtain the permission of the student's parents. Even if your school is more relaxed about sharing information and photos, please keep in mind that can change very quickly if sensitive information is lost or something happens that compromises the privacy or safety of students or teachers. Being vigilant from the outset is a good way to avoid unwanted consequences.

Here are a couple examples/cases from other prefectures illustrating why posting pictures of students can become an issue:

- In one instance an ALT had photos of students uploaded to his Facebook account. This ALT did not teach these particular students, and though these students were underage they were not in uniform. One of the students in the photos was killed in an accident. A BOE employee was concerned about how this was being publicized and did an online search. There was a link to the ALT's Facebook page. The ALT thought he was just taking a random photo of some kids and then posting it on Facebook, so he felt there were no problems. However the Board of Education took it more seriously and it caused a huge uproar, as it was also found out that the ALT had used a school computer to upload the photos.
- Some boards of education have also expressed concern about students whose mother has left an abusive partner. If the child's photo is posted online the abusive partner may find the child.

Though it's easy to upload pictures without much thought, these examples from other prefectures really show how serious this issue can become, and help us realize the importance of reflection and restraint when posting any picture online.



This is certainly not to take a position that somehow we the PAs are above this, as these issues effect our lives, too. We are also constantly forced to consider the effects of what we decide to post or share online in both our professional and private lives. In our professional lives, we must adhere to the same standards that ALTs are held to in schools. When uploading new content to the Kumamoto JET website, for instance, we will always ask for your permission if we want to upload your name and/or picture for any reason.

We all live in a world where technology can open new worlds and make us much more connected. While this is exciting, it also poses a challenge as we consider the ethics of privacy and how we respect the privacy of others. The concept of "privacy" itself and how to protect it is changing, and the way people think about privacy can differ depending on context and whom you ask. Regardless of this uncertainty, as educational professionals we hold positions of power in relation to our students, and we have a responsibility to respect the privacy of the lives of the students we work alongside and their family's right to make decisions in relation to their privacy.

If you have any questions about this, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Kind Regards,

-The PAs