

THE USE OF LAPTOPS AND OTHER MOBILE DEVICES IN CLASSES

This document establishes the University of South Wales's policy with respect to the use of laptops and other mobile devices that students may bring to, and use in, classes. The University is a multi-cultural, multi-racial community of staff and students with a wide diversity of opinions, views and life-styles. As such, we are concerned to ensure respect for all members of our community¹. The University is also keen to encourage flexible working by students and staff. Section 7 of the University's '*Regulations for the development, deployment and use of University computing and telecommunications facilities*' ensures that, when connecting personal equipment to the University's network, all such equipment and its use conforms to a 'good neighbourly' manner.

Devices such as laptops, tablet PCs, PDAs, and smart phones all have great potential as classroom learning tools: many students for example use them to take class notes, while others use them to record lectures or parts of lectures for later reference. Lecturers can take this further by encouraging students to make use of specific electronic documents during class. There are also opportunities to engender wider participation of learners, especially those who cannot be physically present at the specific time/venue of the class, via 'blended' learning, teaching and assessment techniques. As one commentator suggests, '*banning laptops won't force slackers to pay attention. It only hurts the motivated, tech-savvy students*'².

On the flip side of this argument however is the realisation that laptops and similar mobile devices also have the potential to disrupt classes. For example, some students might be distracted by the tapping noise made by some keyboards or moving imagery on screens. Wireless connections also might tempt students to check their email, post to Facebook, or watch videos on YouTube during class. Not surprisingly, many lecturers have questions about how to manage problems that can arise from students using laptops and mobile devices in classes.

The following is a guide, in the form of a list of Frequently-Asked-Questions, to these issues:

1. **Can I ban laptops or mobile devices from my classroom?**

No. Laptops and mobile devices are a required learning tool for many students and can be especially helpful for disabled students³. Even if you issued an outright ban on the use of laptop computers and mobile devices, obligations under the Equality Act, 2010 mean that reasonable adjustments would have to be made for disabled students which will mean allowing them to use a computer or other device during class. However, such a policy, when coupled with the very visible accommodation that would have to be made for a select number of students with disabilities, would be tantamount to disclosing a disability that they might not wish to be made public. This would be in direct contravention of the University's aim to "...create an environment that is an inclusive place to work and study where an individual's

¹ *Guide to the Regulations for the development, deployment and use of University computing and telecommunications facilities* available at http://css.glam.ac.uk/media/files/documents/2011-03-18/Guide_to_regs07.pdf for the full regulations see

http://academicregistry.glam.ac.uk/media/files/documents/2011-04-14/IT_Regs1.pdf

² <http://www.datamation.com/columns/article.php/3870346/Laptops-vs-Lectures-Lets-Ban-Lectures.htm> for another view of this debate see <http://blogs.swarthmore.edu/burke/2009/05/06/the-laptop-in-the-classroom/>

³ The term disabled students is used here to also include those students with specific learning difficulties

personal characteristics do not create barriers for them in any aspect of their work or study.” as outlined in its Equality Scheme⁴

2. **Can I ask students to close their laptops and mobile devices during certain class activities?**

Yes, within reason. You can require laptops and mobile devices to be closed during class tests or other forms of examinable work, just as you can require textbooks to be closed or packed away (in such circumstances, disabled students may require alternative arrangements for writing the exam/test). It's probably also reasonable to ask students to close their laptops and mobile devices for short times during other activities, such as during a small group discussion. Although laptops and mobile devices used effectively by students can also aid learning in these situations. For example gathering information on topics which is then synthesised by group members. Also, different students have different styles of learning. Thus, while some may not believe that typing everything one hears in class is conducive to learning, some students may need to engage in that sort of transcribing activity in order to process information effectively.

3. **Some of my students have complained that it's hard to concentrate in the midst of all the tapping being made by classmates who are taking notes with laptops or other devices.**

You can probably remedy this problem by designating areas of your classroom as the "laptop zone" and others as the "non laptop zone." Ask laptop users, too, to place their laptop on something soft (like a piece of clothing), so that the tapping doesn't resonate through the hard surface of their desk or table. Please do not publically discriminate against users with special needs by limiting laptop or mobile device use to them. **Individual tutors can be held personally accountable for discriminating against disabled students under the Equality Act.**

4. **What can I do about students who habitually use their laptops or mobile devices during class to check their email or to go on social networking sites like Facebook?**

Apart from appealing to their sense of courtesy, there's probably not much you can do to stop them. If students want to pay tuition fees only to spend the time surfing the web, daydreaming, or dozing, that's their prerogative - unless it becomes a distraction for other students, in which case, see below.

5. **I've had several students complain about the visual content that a classmate is accessing through their laptop or mobile device during class.**

If a student is using a laptop or mobile device to view potentially offensive or inappropriate images during class a member of staff would have the responsibility to ask a student to refrain from this activity during class. Similarly, if a student is using a laptop or mobile device in class to view material that is not offensive *per se* but merely distracting to others, for example, a video of a high-speed car-chase, it would reasonably be deemed to interfere with the study, work or working environment of other members of the class. Hence the member of staff could legitimately ask the student to stop such activity.

⁴ <http://hr.southwales.ac.uk/hr/equalitydiversity/>

6. I want to encourage my students to use these devices in my class, but what are appropriate learning, teaching and assessment practices could I deploy?

In a nutshell, some would argue that it's a matter of turning the focal point away from the lecturer⁵. Perhaps rather than telling students not to use their devices in the class, you could incorporate these devices into your learning, teaching and assessment practices and instead teach your students appropriate uses of their technology? If you need help with this, CELT and LCSS can help. See <http://celt.southwales.ac.uk/does/tel/> and <http://teach.southwales.ac.uk/>

⁵ <http://www.alex-reid.net/2011/08/the-no-laptop-policy-and-the-1990s-classroom.html>