

Email and Written Online Communication Guidance

1) Introduction

Queen Mary operates in a busy, fast paced environment, in which online communications (emails and Microsoft Teams) are an essential part of work life as they are highly beneficial for speed, minimal cost and convenience. However, too many emails or messages can result in people feeling overwhelmed, and can lead to a number of possible negative outcomes such as stress, anxiety, miscommunication, indecision, poor decision making, procrastination and other counter-productive avoidance behaviours.

With many staff and students now accessing emails and messages across multiple personal and work devices, it is increasingly important to use these appropriately - in a way that fosters productivity and efficiency whilst enabling all staff to have a good work life balance.

This guidance has been produced to enable you to make smart, educated choices about what, when and how to communicate online with others.

More general information about the use of [email](#) and [Microsoft Teams](#) at Queen Mary can be found on IT Services dedicated webpages.

2) Emails and online communication out of hours

Sending emails or Teams messages outside of typical working hours¹ will sometimes be normal and necessary. This can be due to a range of factors including but not limited to:

- the nature of some roles
- an individual's working pattern as part of Queen Mary's commitment to facilitating flexible working
- our international collaborations and partnerships

However, all staff and students should be aware of the potential consequences of sending emails or messages out of typical working hours.

While emails sent outside of typical working hours can be beneficial for the sender it is important to keep possible power imbalances in mind, e.g. senior staff emailing more junior colleagues out of typical working hours with what may seem to the sender as a request or suggestion may be interpreted as a instruction requiring an immediate response or action by the recipient(s). While the sender is entitled to send an email outside typical working hours, the recipient is normally expected to deal with it within their own working hours. This conforms to accepted levels of professional behaviour and is aligned to the expectations of one's roles and responsibilities.

Recommendation: Senders may want to consider the option to delay sending an email after it has been composed so it is received during typical working time.

Recommendation: Alternatively, the sender should make clear that there is no expectation that staff will read emails out of hours, this can be communicated by adding a line to in the sender's email

¹ Typical working hours for the purposes of this guidance means 08:30-18:00 Monday to Friday

signature or Team status to that effect, i.e. *“It may suit my working patterns to send and respond to emails outside of typical working hours. There is no expectation for you to respond outside your regular working hours.”*

Senders should also be mindful of the impact on others when sending lots of emails out of hours, even if the sender does not expect a swift response. While some roles or points during the year may expect to receive greater amount of emails outside of typical working hour arriving to work with an unexpectedly full “inbox” can be stressful for recipients who may be deluged by emails both inside and outside of working hours.

Recommendation: For those who have the Microsoft Teams app on their phone or tablet consider utilising the ‘Quiet Hours’ to prevent notifications appearing outside the user’s normal working hours. Or with the Outlook app, setting up ‘Do not disturb’ for notifications for a similar effect.

3) Data Protection and Information Security

- a) Be extremely careful when sending emails or messages containing personal or confidential information, particularly in relation to any information covered under GDPR.
- b) Check the recipient’s name, especially if there is more than one person with the same name or where a person uses more than one email address – e.g. Queen Mary student email and a staff email.
- c) Remember emails and Teams messages can made public through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests – and write accordingly. FOI requests require the provision of all information held by the University relating to the subject of the request (subject to certain exemptions). This includes e-mails, even if marked as confidential, or blind copy (bcc).

4) Good Practice

- a) **Choosing an effective method of communication**
 - i) Consider whether an email is the most effective method of communicating your message. Would a private message (chats) via Teams or a post on a Teams channel be more appropriate?
 - a. Emails – for more formal processes e.g. confirming decision making, setting up an interview, sending a contract, managing disciplinary action, etc. Emails leave a solid paper trail and are easier to track and archive, which is integral for these more formal conversations.
 - b. Teams private message (chats) – for less formal conversations e.g. to ask a colleague a quick question, to check if they are free for a call, to send useful information that may not require formal archiving.
 - c. Teams group chats or channels conversation – for conversing with multiple individuals.
 - (a) Group chats are more likely to be used for one off group conversations, particularly if there is not a pre-existing Teams group and channel.
 - (b) Teams channel conversations are best used for defined groups or projects as it allows the sending of messages, documents, etc. that can be viewed by everyone in said channel. *Note: to have a Teams channel conversation a Teams group must have been established.*
 - (c) If you are adding a lot of people to a group chat or have ongoing collaborative work a Teams group with specific channel(s) may be more appropriate.

- ii) Before starting to write on a sensitive topic, consider talking confidentially in person or by phone instead. If there is a possibility that the email or message may be misconstrued, misunderstood or intercepted, it is probably best avoided.

b) Composing a Teams message

- i) Private messages (chats)
 - a. Use private messages for high-priority questions or to ask direct questions.
 - b. Pay attention to colleagues' availability status (available, busy, do not disturb, be right back, appear away and appear offline) and use your own appropriately.
 - c. Adding participants to a chat gives you the option to see prior discussions in that chat. Before adding anyone to an existing private chat, be sure about whether you want them to see what was discussed previously.
- ii) Group chats or channels messages
 - a. Try to keep messages short and concise.
 - b. *@mention individuals* to get their attention and a response or *@channel* to notify everyone in the channel. *@mention-ing* is equivalent to placing someone in the To or CC field of an email. Use *@* accordingly; do not overuse it.
 - (i) Press backspace/delete after inserting an *@mention* to remove surnames or extraneous information.
 - c. Urgency in conversations is comparable to urgency of an email. Do not expect an immediate response even if you *@mention* someone in a conversation. Expect the response time to be similar to if you had sent an email. Use the **I** button to mark a message as important.
 - (i) When marking a post as important ensure that it is not over used and truly requires an urgent response. Consider the possible negative impact such message may have on those receiving such messages, particularly when received out of typical working hours.
 - d. In channel messages use subject lines when starting new conversations.

c) Composing an email

- i) Ensure clarity of content
 - a. Write all email messages in a professional manner. Whilst the written style may sometimes differ, the general content of a work email should be consistent to other forms of written communication.
 - b. Try to minimise the use of acronyms, including Queen Mary specific ones, as these may not be well known by all recipients.
 - c. Keep emails short and to the point wherever possible. This is helpful when dealing with a high volume of messages and also assists recipients working remotely on tablets or mobiles.
 - d. Only use uppercase text where appropriate and necessary for particular emphasis (e.g., acronyms or initials of names). In most other cases, this is likely to be interpreted as "shouting".
 - e. If a response or action is required by recipient(s) be explicit about timescales.
- ii) Consider the file size of your email and try to minimise the use of graphics, different fonts, and formats stored within a document when sending it as an attachment to an email if this might be problematic to the receiver.
- iii) Where an email is sent to more than one person, give instructions at the start - e.g. 'this is just an FYI for person X', '@[insert name], action or sign-off required', 'please reply so that we can all build on each other's comments, and I will collate responses', etc. Only reply to all where necessary.

- iv) Make good use of subject lines:
 - a. Do not leave the subject line blank - it is key in enabling the recipient to locate the message sometime after receipt.
 - b. Ensure it is concise and clear
 - c. Use it to indicate if action is required and by when
- v) Try to restrict emails to one subject per message; send multiple messages if you have multiple subjects.
- vi) Compose your electronic signature with care. The University has a [recommended signature template](#) which should be the basis for all email signatures. Where appropriate add:
 - (a) alternative contact information (address, phone number, etc)
 - (b) pronouns (he/she/they, etc)
 - (c) working pattern
 - (d) *"It may suit my working patterns to send and respond to emails outside of core office hours. There is no expectation for you to respond outside your regular working hours."* – if you regularly send emails outside of normal working hours.
- vii) Consider your tone carefully. It is very easy for emails to be misinterpreted or misunderstood by the recipient.

d) Use of cc and bcc in emails

- i) In general, if an email is sent to someone, they will expect action is required, whereas if they are cc'd, they are likely to assume it is for information only unless told otherwise.
- ii) Use bcc very sparingly, and never with a view to undermining or embarrassing the direct recipient of the message.

e) Before you press send

- i) Re-read emails from the perspective of the recipient(s) before sending. Ensure your communication is clear. Whether action is required, or an email is for information, this should be noted in the subject line so the recipient is clear what the next steps are.

f) Using automated 'out of office'

- i) Use of automated 'out of office' notifications can be helpful in managing expectations for both the recipient and sender of emails (e.g., by explaining the time of return to work following a period of time off work, period of back-to-back meetings, exam times etc). Where possible, it is helpful to offer an alternative contact for times when an urgent response is required.