Etiquette Policy for Email and other Online Communication Tools

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1. Introduction

1.1.   The School operates in a fast paced and, at times, highly pressured environment, in which technology and email are used as essential methods of communication on a daily basis. With many staff working remotely and accessing technology across multiple personal and work devices, the good practice use of email and other online communication tools should enhance, rather than hinder, working practices and relationships with others, improving the quality of the working environment and culture in the School. When managed well, these tools also play an important role in enabling staff to achieve a positive work-life balance.

1.2.   The etiquette expectations set out in this policy in respect of email and other online collaborative tools apply both to formal written communications and less formal messages (e.g. chat function in Teams). The wide applicability of the principles set out here, across different online tools and platforms, is especially important in the context of the School's move to more blended ways of working where many staff will combine on-campus and remote working on a long-term basis.

1.3.   This policy is accompanied by, and should be read alongside, Appendix A which provides further good practice guidance for staff. The content here should be read in conjunction with other School guidance concerning online communications, such as guidance from Data and Technology Services (DTS) on the use of collaborative working tools. Microsoft Teams (hereafter Teams) is the officially approved online collaboration tool for the School community; Zoom is an appropriate alternative for certain online events, e.g. online teaching seminars or meetings where a large number of people are taking part.

2. Policy aims

2.1.   This policy covers all staff at the School and sets out what is considered acceptable behaviour in relation to the use of email and online communication tools (such as Teams). This includes internal contacts, i.e. colleagues, team members, students or volunteers, and those external to the School, such as contractors or service providers. Expectations set out here complement the

School's Ethics Code and Dignity at Work Statement which apply to all aspects of work undertaken by staff.

2.2.   This policy focuses on behaviours and etiquette and does not attempt to outline the technical requirements of the technology in question. Details about the School's legislative obligations on how emails are handled in relation to being viewed as 'data' or 'information' can be found in the Data Technology Services (DTS) Division's Electronic Messaging Policy.

3. Policy responsibilities

3.1.   Employees are responsible for:

      3.1.1. Adhering to the principles set out in this policy when using email and other online communication tools for work purposes.

      3.1.2. Using appropriate channels to escalate any concerns, as set out here.

3.2.   Managers are responsible for:

      3.2.1. Ensuring that staff have access to the appropriate electronic tools that they require for their roles.

      3.2.2. Responding appropriately where staff raise concerns related to the use of online communication tools or an online interaction while working for LSE.

4. Policy principles

4.1.   The use of Outlook and other online communication platforms are highly beneficial for speed, minimal cost, convenience and collaboration when working remotely. Any written forms of communication (including emails and Teams chat) are covered by a number of laws in the UK and can therefore be used for legal purposes (e.g. an employment tribunal or court of law as evidence where it is deemed necessary). Individuals should also be mindful of the data protection implications of how they share and store such communications.

4.2.   Although email is often regarded as informal, and whilst the Teams or Zoom 'chat' functions may be used to communicate in a less formal way, written correspondence in the workplace are still LSE communications and, therefore, all staff are responsible for ensuring that these interactions are professional and respectful at all times. Staff should also recognise that intensive or overuse of email can negatively impact recipients in several ways.

4.3.   The excessive or inappropriate use of email, or emails containing unnecessary content, can result in 'information overload'. This may lead to an individual feeling overwhelmed by the volume of emails received or by the extensive content that needs to be digested and responded to. This can negatively impact staff wellbeing and mental health, leading to outcomes that may include stress, anxiety, miscommunication, indecision or poor decision making, procrastination and other counter-productive avoidance behaviours.

4.4.   Similarly, an over-reliance on, or inappropriate use of, Teams, or a similar online communication tool, can be counterproductive. Examples include: not allowing reasonable breaks in the day between online meetings; squeezing calls and/or meetings in without checking with the individual; calling individuals when they are already 'in a meeting' or 'busy'; expecting staff to reply to emails and/or Teams chats when they are on a call; continuing to work/e-mail to the detriment of participation in virtual meetings.

5. Fostering good working relationships

5.1.   When sending emails or Teams chats, senders should always be aware of their audience. In doing so it is important to keep any relevant dynamics in mind, e.g. where a senior member of staff emails a more junior colleague, what may seem to the sender as a request or suggestion may be interpreted as a directive by the recipient(s).

5.2.   Equally, what one person may consider a reasonable tone may easily cause offence to another. Staff should ensure that care and attention is taken with email correspondence, just as it would be with a written letter, to reduce the potential for misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

5.3.   Using the right form of communication at the right time can support effective and productive working relationships. However, sending the same message multiple times via different communication methods only serves to increase individuals' workloads and potential frustration. Staff should take care to use the most appropriate method of communication in the circumstances and ensure that, for example, they are not tempted to immediately follow up an e-mail with a Teams chat.

5.4.   The 'cc' option should be used only for its intended purpose – for information only, not for action. Care should be taken to not cc senior colleagues into an email in an attempt to show others up or passively escalate an issue.

5.5.   The 'bcc' (blind copy) option should generally not be used in emails in the interest of disclosure and full transparency of communications to all parties.

5.6.   When using Teams video conferencing (or a similar function), individuals should aim to replicate the usual office etiquette when contacting people – do not expect that somebody will always be 'at their desk', make sure that they are available to take a call and turn on your video camera whenever possible.

5.7.   Whilst immediate responses should not be expected, individuals should aim to respond to all messages within a reasonable timescale and, where a full response is not possible, ensure that a courtesy response is provided. What is considered 'reasonable' will vary depending on the nature and urgency of the original message, and individuals should exercise their professional judgment when prioritising replies. Equally, if an expected response time is known, senders should be mindful of sending 'chase up' emails that may inadvertently cause additional pressure for the respondent.

5.8.   Consideration should be exercised in the management of diaries and scheduling of meetings. In particular, staff should avoid placing appointments in other people's diaries without due care and attention, causing stress, too many meetings and additional work for other individuals.

6. Wellbeing and online communications

6.1.   In the same way as for work which is not screen-based, lunch times and other appropriate breaks are key to ensuring that staff have reasonable time to recharge and revitalise during the working day. Lunchtimes and other breaks also allow staff working online time away from screens and an opportunity to be more mobile.

6.2.   The timing of breaks should be discussed and agreed locally. A break of 60 minutes for lunch is considered good practice, although this may vary depending on fluctuations in workload and length of shift. Staff should update their Teams status during any breaks to indicate whether or not they are contactable.

7. Out of hours communications

7.1. One way of fostering good working relationships is being conscious of email use and Teams communications out of hours. The normal School working day for full-time staff is 9.30am to 5.30pm and, for the purposes of this policy, "out of hours" communications are those before 9.00am and after 6.00pm.

7.2. Owing to the nature of some roles at the School, and the range of locations these may be undertaken, communications outside working hours will sometimes be both normal and necessary. For many other roles across the School, out of hours communications should be the exception rather than the rule.

7.3. Emails sent outside working hours can alleviate the sender's workload, particularly as teaching loads and/or other intensive periods of meetings and commitments are predominantly set within working hours or can be convenient where travel is required. With technology allowing staff to access emails/take Teams calls via mobiles, tablet and laptops while on the move, the boundary between professional and personal arenas can also become increasingly blurred.

7.4. Whilst it is the prerogative of the sender to send an email whenever they choose, it is also the recipient's prerogative to choose when to read their incoming emails (i.e. normally within working hours), provided this is in line with the accepted levels of professional behaviour and aligned with the expectations of their role responsibilities. There should be no general expectation that staff will read emails out of hours. It is also advised that, where an urgent response is needed during working hours, a follow up call may be more appropriate than a "chaser" email.

7.5. 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. Arriving to work to a full "inbox" unexpectedly can be a stressor to recipients who may be deluged by emails both inside and outside working hours.

7.6. It is also important to remember that some departments within the School will have pre-agreed Service Level Agreements (SLAs) regarding response times to emails. It is expected that all SLAs should be reasonable, reviewed regularly by management within its own area, communicated clearly to all of its users and be respectfully accepted and adhered to by others.

8. Personal usage of collaborative tools and email

8.1. Teams and email functionality is provided to staff for work purposes; however, it is recognised that in a more flexible work-life environment, limited usage of work email for personal reasons is unlikely to cause a significant adverse impact on work productivity. Nonetheless, staff should ensure that personal use of collaborative tools and emails does not affect work performance or take precedence over work that requires urgent attention. Where possible, personal use should be limited to lunch breaks and other non-work times.

8.2. Staff should also be aware that any material containing inappropriate content is not acceptable at any time. Staff should also be made aware that, 'deleting or 'permanently deleting' emails does not mean they are unrecoverable at a later date. Further details relating to privacy of personal emails can be found in the Electronic Messaging Policy.

9. Problem solving and escalation

9.1. Unless they have a serious and legitimate concern about the intent and/or content of an online communication or interaction, staff are encouraged to apply a degree of professional empathy. For example, staff could consider whether the matter is typical in their experience of the individual concerned, which may help to separate a 'one-off' from a more serious or persistent concern.

9.2. Where an employee reasonably feels that further action is merited, they may:

9.2.1. Speak with the person - ideally in person or by phone - reminding them about the principles within this policy and encouraging them to follow its advice. All staff should aim to support and remind each other of the importance of respecting boundaries and working in a professional and efficient manner. However, entering into email discussion about appropriateness of communications is rarely to be encouraged.

9.2.2. Where speaking with the person directly does not resolve the matter or is felt to be inappropriate (for example where the matter is more serious), speak with their line manager or their HR Partner in the first instance.

9.2.3. Escalate concerns about persistent behaviour which goes against the principles and spirit of this policy. Escalation should typically be through the line management chain and should be proportionate to the nature and seriousness of the matter concerned.

9.2.4. Where behaviour potentially falls within the remit of another School policy, raise a concern under that policy, i.e.:

- Discrimination, bullying or harassment incidents (including those of a sexual nature) may be raised under the School's Report It. Stop It. tool and addressed under the appropriate procedure.
- Unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature should be addressed under the Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence Policy.
- The Dignity at Work Statement which clarifies conduct expectations as well as providing a means by which inappropriate behaviour which falls short of bullying or harassment be identified, addressed and resolved.
- The Grievance Procedure provides staff with a formal mechanism for raising concerns, problems or complaints at work.

Appendix A: Good practice guidance for the use of email, online collaborative tools and online meetings

This section provides good practice guidance that staff and managers should refer to so that online communications and interactions are inclusive and foster good working relationships.

General

- Consider which communication method is the most effective tool to use for the nature and urgency of the interaction you wish to have. The following principles should be taken into account:

  o Use email as a more formal means of communication, e.g. to relay information, make a request for advice or a decision or provide a summary of a discussion or meeting.
  o Email may not be the most effective tool where an urgent response is needed. In such cases, alternatives should be considered such as the Teams chat function, where a query is less likely to get 'lost' in a long list of emails. The chat function can also be useful for asking quick, simple questions that are not urgent and can be responded to easily.
  o As well as facilitating meetings, video-conferencing calls are an effective way of having a discussion that might otherwise take place 'across the desk' or by telephone.

- Whatever the means of communication, always act respectfully and treat others with dignity at all times, in line with the School's Dignity at Work Statement.

- Understanding how to use collaborative tools to enhance productivity and proactively protect the wellbeing of themselves and others is essential to its successful use and staff are encouraged to familiarise themselves by reviewing support and training offered by DTS and Microsoft generally.

Written communications (Emails and Teams chat)

- Write all messages in a professional and courteous manner. Whilst the written style may sometimes differ, the general content of a work communication should be consistent with other forms of written communication.

- Keep all messages and emails short and to the point wherever possible. This will be beneficial for all dealing with large numbers of emails and assist with recipients working remotely on tablets or mobiles. At the same time, try to avoid being abrupt. Emails that are initiating a discussion (i.e. not part of an existing email chain) should typically include a salutation (e.g. 'Dear…', 'Hi…') and an email signature, except where the individuals involved are well-known to each other.

- Re-read messages and emails before sending from the perspective of the recipient(s). Ensure your communication is clear, in particular, the positioning of instructions within the body of the message, highlighting clearly required actions. Where 'no action' is necessary and where the email is for only for information, this should be stated.

- Do not leave the subject line blank in e-mails. It is also helpful, where possible, to make sure that the subject line relates to the content.

- Ensure appropriate use of cc. and whether all participants of an email need to continue to be cc.ed or included in an email trail when the topic deviates to another issue.

- Be extremely cautious in the use of bcc. ensuring that decisions to do so would meet the standards of the [Ethics Code](#), particularly with regard to integrity and transparency.

- Consider minimising the use of graphics, different fonts, and formats stored within a document when sending it as an attachment to an email.

- If sending a document internally, consider sending it as a link rather than an attachment – LSE tools allow online cloud storage, making it easier to share a link. Sending a link reduces electronically stored copies and therefore carbon consumption, as well as allowing for greater collaboration.

- Be extremely careful when sending any communications or emails containing personal or confidential information or attachments.

- Always 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. LSE work email and a personal email.

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

- Where the content of an extended email trail has changed direction or purpose be mindful of continuing to forward excessively long email trails to others or continuing to include others as either 'to' or 'cc' recipients unnecessarily. When forwarding emails or including new recipients, the sender should also be careful that there is nothing further down the email trail that should be kept confidential and/or not forwarded to others.

- Avoid using uppercase text unless completely appropriate and necessary for particular emphasis (e.g. acronyms or initials of names), as this is often interpreted as electronic "shouting".

- Be careful when using humour or sarcasm within an email or Teams chat as this can be easily misinterpreted. Similarly, whilst using emojis or gifs can help to support the intended meaning of a particular message, the communication should still be professional and respectful.

- If an email is sent outside normal School working hours and a reply is not expected before the next working day, it can be reassuring to recipients to explicitly state this in the email itself.

- Automated 'out of office' notifications can be used to manage 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 ensure an appropriate signposted alternative is suggested.

- An informative email signature is an important part of using email well. In particular, you should include an email signature if you are writing to someone for the first time, whether within the School or external. Your email signature should typically include your name, job title, and department, as well as your hours of work if you are working a non-standard pattern (e.g. part-time). Staff are also encouraged to include their preferred pronouns in their email signature, in support of a diverse and openly inclusive workplace.

- When using or responding via a generic email address (e.g. a shared mailbox), the sender should include their own name to sign off emails.

- Once documents are finalised and unchanging (e.g. committee papers), do not use multiple attachments where possible. If such are necessary, it may be helpful to house all documents in a prescribed order, using a pdf format.

Teams

- Use, and respect, the flagging system in Teams (e.g. 'available', 'busy', 'be right back', 'appear away' and 'appear offline'). These can help to manage colleagues' expectations and ensure that you are able to protect break times or concentrated work time. Meetings and calls will be automatically reflected, and the status will change to 'away' following a five minute period of inactivity. Take care, however, to ensure that your status does not always suggest unavailability, particularly if you are a manager.

- Check an individual's status prior to calling them. If they are 'in a meeting', 'busy' or 'away', consider sending a Teams message in the 'chat' function to agree a convenient time to make contact and to mutually agree a video call via Teams.

- Managers should not expect staff to be available whenever they call; at the same time, managers and staff can agree local arrangements for when they are available to speak, without the need for sending a message or email first.

- The use of the 'quiet hours' functionality is useful to support wellbeing and protect work-home boundaries when using personal devices for work purposes. This can also help to protect time for uninterrupted, focused tasks.

Meetings using video-conferencing

- Turn the camera function on when interacting with colleagues on a video-conferencing call or participating in meetings. This helps to promote positive social interactions and build/maintain working relationships. If you are unable to use the camera function, e.g. due to internet connection, explain this at the start of the meeting/call so that people are aware.

- Teams backgrounds can be used during video-conference calls. The appropriateness of the background image selected should be considered according to circumstances, e.g. formal meetings, committees and external appointments may require a more formal background than team meetings or social events. There are a number of preselected options on Teams; in addition, the Design Unit have created a number of LSE-specific backgrounds that staff are welcome to use.

- Present yourself during a video-conferencing meeting as you would if you were attending a meeting in person.

- Use the 'mute' button in meetings when you are not speaking, particularly in larger meetings or if you have background noise. Using headsets can also be an effective means of ensuring a better sound quality by blocking out external noise for those in the meeting.

- The use of 'private chat' functionality is not encouraged during group meetings (i.e. separate conversations that do not involve everyone attending) and you should be mindful that such discussions can be misconstrued or shared, inadvertently or intentionally, with others.

- Take care not to speak over people when in meetings. Use the 'Raise your Hand' function in meetings or include a message in the meeting chat to make it clear to the Chair that you wish to

make a point.

- If you are chairing a new or irregular meeting, set out the required etiquette at the start so that everybody is aware of what is expected.

- Video-conferencing meetings increases the screen time for participants and, therefore, the following principles should be followed to manage this as far as possible:
    - As a good practice approach, ensure a break of at least five minutes at the end of all meetings. If this is not possible, consider having a five-minute break halfway through.
    - Do not hold meetings between 1pm and 2pm to ensure that everybody has the opportunity to take a lunchbreak and have a break from the screen.
    - Keep meetings focused and on track, sharing an agenda in advance where appropriate.

- Use relevant Teams functions to ensure that accessibility and inclusivity considerations are taken into account. Captioning functions and note-taking/recording functionality are available through Teams. It is courteous to ensure all colleagues consent to being recorded in advance of commencing, or before continuing meetings. All participants in a recorded meeting will be able to access the recording for a limited period of time following the meeting.

Review schedule

Review interval	Next review due by	Next review start
Three yearly	November 2024	August 2024

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Communications and Training

Will this document be publicised through Internal Communications?	**No**
Will training needs arise from this policy	**No**
If Yes, please give details	