School of the Humanities and Social Sciences:

**Towards a Considerate Email Culture**

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## Rationale and aims

Through the SHSS Education Workload Project and the University Teaching Review, our staff and students have highlighted that emails are a significant source of overload that impacts the education experience through taking time away from teaching and learning. Our education community is experiencing a proliferating volume of emails that can arrive at all hours. Excessive email-work is a key contributor to ‘technostress’ and a phenomenon present across the higher education sector ([Nisafani, Kiely & Mahony 2020](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/12460125.2020.1796286?src=recsys" \l "abstract)).

This guidance document is meant to support discussions amongst staff in our departments, faculties and the School itself on how to move towards a more considerate email culture that gives us back thinking and personal time. It is also meant to be a public intervention to normalise the practices that underpin a considerate email culture.

By ‘considerate’, we mean **thoughtful and careful with respect to the workload of others**, and by ‘culture’, we mean **collective values and practices around email-work**. The overall aim of this considerate email culture is a manageable level of email workload that facilitates working together while also supporting staff and student well-being ([Russell, Jackson, Fullman & Chamakiotis 2023](https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdfdirect/10.1111/joop.12462)). We recognise many colleagues and students are already individually considerate with their email practices, but also that a **collective commitment** to a considerate email culture can make an even bigger reduction to email-work.

At the core of a considerate email culture is a **focus on protecting the inboxes of others**, displacing (or supplementing) individualistic mainstream approaches that aim for one’s own ‘inbox zero’ ([Landry & Lewiss 2021](https://hbr.org/2021/03/what-a-compassionate-email-culture-looks-like)). Another counter-current of collective considerate email culture is seeing friction not as problematic, but as productive – and conversely, seeing convenience (core to the business model of many technologies) as potentially problematic as well as potentially productive ([Powell 2011](https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cam/reader.action?docID=6531310&ppg=128)). Frictions in our email practices, such as those detailed below, give us time to pause and reflect on whether the email is necessary at all ([Lehuedé, McPherson & Srinivasan 2023](https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/2023-11/23_Provocations_Issue5.pdf)). Convenience, on the other hand, simply leads to more email in the system. If everyone takes a considerate email culture approach, we can reap what we sow by reducing overall email traffic and curating clear and concise messages.

Drawing on literatures about email-work at universities and beyond, as well as about technology more broadly, we outline below some practices that support a considerate email culture for communicating with each other. These fill a void – namely that, despite the fact that universities were among the first institutions to adopt email, they have been relatively late to develop email policies in relation to workload ([Pignata, Lushington, Sloan & Buchanan 2015](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1360080X.2015.1019121?casa_token=qbfGzgMgPYQAAAAA%3A72r5yjeF6B72YI84i8Jj7gsH6ghxodwqic8WzJkVg2mDEqgOXpVB4pavVM5Zez0DSALT5qqaHUFa4Q" \l "d1e145)).

## Considerate email culture practices

We have organised considerate email culture practices according to the main dimensions of communication: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? These questions are a friction heuristic, and we can ask ourselves them when we are engaged in email-work to move us towards a collective considerate email culture. These practices are suggestions and provocations for discussion and adoption where they work for you; as they are about thinking of others’ inboxes, they are primarily about us as senders rather than us as receivers of emails.

**Who?**

* **We often receive emails we don’t need to receive**. We should think twice about including cc’d addressees and should clearly indicate which of the addressees should respond. We should use bcc for informational emails to larger audiences (indicating in the header that this has been done for transparency’s sake). This is because bcc addressees can neither receive nor send reply-all messages ([Landry & Lewiss 2021](https://hbr.org/2021/03/what-a-compassionate-email-culture-looks-like)).
* **If a colleague’s out-of-office is on**, we should consider whether it is really necessary to email them at that time ([Landry & Lewiss 2021](https://hbr.org/2021/03/what-a-compassionate-email-culture-looks-like)). For those on annual leave, fewer emails means they may feel less obligated to check messages while on holiday, and returning to a smaller list of to-do items in their inbox can reduce technostress ([Braithwaite, Walker, Cooper & Jones 2024](https://www.researchsquare.com/article/rs-3990832/v1)). For part-time workers, emails received on non-workdays can be a driver for the common phenomenon of work spilling beyond their contracted workdays.
* This also means we all should be sure to **use automatic replies and email signatures to communicate our own email boundaries and periods of unavailability** ([Russell, Jackson, Fullman & Chamakiotis 2022](https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdfdirect/10.1111/joop.12462)). We can also use auto-replies and signatures to indicate **our communication styles and policies** as well as a link to our collective considerate email culture, for example: that we prefer phone calls or in person meetings where possible; that we save replies to student queries for supervisions when appropriate; or that it is not possible to give individualised advice to prospective applicants, but rather that they should consult relevant university webpages ([Twumasi, Cooper & Siegl 2019](https://theconversation.com/ten-rules-of-email-that-will-reduce-your-stress-levels-113670)).
* **Staff with particular identities may receive more email-work**, as they are expected to be more available, nurturing and/or sympathetic. For example, students send more emails to female professors than their male counterparts ([Poole, Johnson & Milliron 2023](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/87567555.2023.2274366?casa_token=3dYoBtZ5mrUAAAAA%3AyKItBnVd6M5vYjZk6xIccctV8Y9psVTGxgWcIv2cPh_8JSMXtenHxLzzhI2j-tuJJa83p7TBeU_EjA#abstract)). These dynamics were reflected in our SHSS education workload survey results; while colleagues stated they are happy to help students, a recognition of this additional email-work is important, and a public and collective email policy may mitigate some of this imbalance ([El-Alayli, Hansen-Brown & Ceynar 2018](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-017-0872-6)).
* **Particular roles require higher email labour**, and these should be considered in workload stints. For example, some student-facing roles such as Director of Postgraduate Education or Undergraduate Administrator require more email back-and-forth than other administrative positions.

**What?**

* Compared to face-to-face dialogue, **email reduces the contextual communication cues** **that** **facilitate interpretation**. Ambiguous emails therefore require recipients to do more interpretive work (perhaps generating more email through a clarifying back-and-forth). Misunderstandings are particularly likely around the communication of emotion, with recipients likely to underread positive emotion and overread negative emotion – with consequential implications for emotional labour ([Byron 2008](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20159399)).
* As a result, we should **prioritise specificity** where we can ([Landry & Lewiss 2021](https://hbr.org/2021/03/what-a-compassionate-email-culture-looks-like)):
	+ Use the email subject to define the purpose of the email (e.g. action required/for dissemination/for information).
	+ Ensure timeframes for responses and actions are clear (including ‘no response necessary’).
	+ Request meetings by offering a range of upcoming times that work in your calendar.
* We should consider **how best to communicate emotion** in our emails. Negative feedback may be better delivered face-to-face, and emojis, often dismissed as unprofessional, may instead support our working together through making our tones more legible.
* We can also **take advantage of email platforms’ features** to reduce the volume of messages we send. For example, using the ‘thumbs up’ affordance available in some versions of Outlook can demonstrate that you have read and understood a message ([Landry & Lewiss 2021](https://hbr.org/2021/03/what-a-compassionate-email-culture-looks-like)).

**When?**

* Several governments around the world have introduced the **‘right to disconnect’ outside of work** hours into their employment laws. This legislation is in recognition of the detrimental effects of always-on, digitally-mediated connectivity to the workplace on employee health, autonomy, rest, privacy and productivity ([Secunda 2019](https://download.ssrn.com/19/02/07/ssrn_id3330799_code403921.pdf?response-content-disposition=inline&X-Amz-Security-Token=IQoJb3JpZ2luX2VjEM3%2F%2F%2F%2F%2F%2F%2F%2F%2F%2FwEaCXVzLWVhc3QtMSJGMEQCIFlmu0q4KHplYBj0p44TbgtVNK48eAHCxOYeE6jjlQISAiAEc3OOgpchmMm6xKx%2BmTYNePsIhuvpY7JBl3Hyb84rISq9BQhlEAQaDDMwODQ3NTMwMTI1NyIMZgPfg2dPg3ZDexOqKpoFRKGwDV0HuldcwN3vqFn1E5DtKYBJR2WqRTVHEiw7dKufBt5GyI%2FktSYx9Sm0tpCH5gbtfFkKf33D6VybHNQVZhOHQBW%2FI4YDUbuzmFNyTZMMMdB12fVc9SVWAJcqzbDQTt8OIjtRmnII8NcrpI8q%2Foc%2BAFx2krJtRmYchCabRGwsTDiH8O5GftMmAPtWzUsOBPWrhe4jJTZXtHY1Sfwv8xY%2Fct6Fp3PZ4Z2TuDl3kbC%2FiJkTTQLVuuyK23XTVlU21oC%2BzBVRNEa72vg6lEB36Rz4EYfPiTMWjdzBLsDWtqdFxnG13sJhoC7YxQWEY132ZfOic6S3Oqv8x85qClfnrvG0tlJiEAsYyngUcOdEHrVs0NhKw2dxUfk1h2cRPV0KvOrB0aXb8fJdzuc4PJH%2FtXIMjxiOXQPeOYahSbHJKBbAlX0rOxHNZi%2FyTnEb81uGKIqggGz5kk0UAVQMatTymYB%2BlBwxMBxNgiq8c5L5GBOaBRI6jCxS0mzchrX21uo1gkkm1CW9u3IWTzALNOWbnSYtxn1PsvZTBDFgmyzTDDIib7em62DOWKr5ODfghD%2BBBqA7T6UxdJ88nKPSG4nGUU3FtXYPunGb8tgiekcwgfXnjPAmUDHiO2nALGnfZJ9ah3Vx7levEKU0KExsXa14l12kUI0agoxGKol7jli6ClkD%2FA2hRRmP3UVW%2FAEhlI7v%2FP4TbMIxHmlTJ8x5HUqVxCaLBTpBmHS1MVgDRsHvV0GBXSfNAb%2FdwFqBPCVx2sjvNnEyNnt3wNb50ABJWfTTuKo0hqtSxH3fugsZxJoSoPF3Ksq9Q%2B0meSZnpacFGNNjFsqXGLUEQsPyzxnw76zPR4khuo8MCayXZTZ61tifNcMFnO5U8F%2Bj4fTLMOO87rkGOrIBkJjC%2FqsYNapiGQMbvv3s4%2B9p6sxhbtLatdFP3VW%2FQSdJS1%2BPeYxP3HytXINU5gnBb4%2FD9FvRk%2BfRS6Pj3ELYnJ92uDJBaGE%2Fq%2Bt218SWYYdzeJ60sJ%2B4yg8OvT5ww0k0AL7c0dc1X1QTK6xKktg2u%2BQuCk5mGSqhH27ICH3iG97ALKKUb0Tdb9Fag7pOfC3iQ3%2FDt0lTyGCTYngRPpOEuXJLVo6AMHx04uBVbIJ%2BlqqQ9Q%3D%3D&X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Date=20241118T210316Z&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Expires=300&X-Amz-Credential=ASIAUPUUPRWE4IRQ62AV%2F20241118%2Fus-east-1%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Signature=f498475e72b22ab5df7fb4c017313b37cc498e345161a1129202c0aed8c498a2&abstractId=3116158)). The UK government is considering this, but even without legislation, institutions can adopt local policies.
* Our detachment from email can be difficult, particularly when it is available via our constant companions (our phones), unless **workplace policies publicly set expectations of unavailability** during evenings, weekends, annual leave and other leave ([Braithwaite, Walker, Cooper & Jones 2024](https://www.researchsquare.com/article/rs-3990832/v1)).
* In addition to being good for our wellbeing, **reducing emailing to work-hours will reduce the volume of email in the system, as will committing to checking our email less often** and thus spending less time writing emails ([University of York N.D](https://www.york.ac.uk/it-services/training/etiquette/)).
* That said, many of us benefit from the relative flexibility that working at a university can provide. For example, colleagues with children may be able to arrange work around after-school hours, picking back up again in the evenings. **Those of us who work flexibly can take actions so that our emailing outside of regular work-hours does not impact our colleagues**:
	+ We can include a line in our email signatures such as, ‘*I work flexibly; whilst it suits me to email now, I do not expect a response or action outside of your own working hours*’([University of York N.D](https://www.york.ac.uk/it-services/training/etiquette/)).
	+ We can use delay-send if communicating out-of-hours, perhaps indicating that the email was written earlier in case the context changes between sending and receipt ([Landry & Lewiss 2021](https://hbr.org/2021/03/what-a-compassionate-email-culture-looks-like)).
	+ We can save email drafts and send in work hours.
* As sending an email often amounts to creating work for its recipient, the timing of an email matters. Clearing one’s own desk just before the weekend can mean dropping work, via email, on another’s desk just as the weekend is about to begin. Consider adopting a ‘**no email Friday afternoon**’policy, as Griffith University did, to allow everyone predictable time not only to conclude their week’s work but also to dedicate to projects that require uninterrupted, deeper thinking ([Bennett 2023](https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/workplace/this-organisation-banned-emails-on-friday-afternoon-20230113-p5ccd3)).

**Where?**

* There ‘where’ of a considerate email policy is very simple. **Where else might this communication effectively happen?** Does this communication have to be sent now, via email, or can it be saved for running into each other in the hallway, or written down on a list to be shared at the next meeting or supervision ([Twumasi, Cooper & Siegl 2019](https://theconversation.com/ten-rules-of-email-that-will-reduce-your-stress-levels-113670))?

**Why?**

* As **email is ‘work about the work’**, lots of email traffic might be a symptom, not a cause, of a work problem ([Zukas & Malcolm 2017](https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/16603/1/Zukas%20and%20Malcolm%20Proof.PDF)). It may indicate, for example, that a procedure is unclear, that an individual or that a group needs more support. We should be sure to stop and **consider *why* we are sending or receiving a high volume of email in a particular work area**.

**How?**

* Sometimes an individualistic inbox zero approach and a collective considerate email culture are aligned, but sometimes they are at cross-purposes. For example, using generative AI to quickly write emails may reduce an individual’s time on email-work, but this reduced-friction practice can create a greater volume of emails in the system. Furthermore, these emails may create more email-work for the recipient, whether from deciphering unintended or convoluted meanings in the generative AI text or from spending time wondering if the message is indeed co-authored by ChatGPT.
* New communicative technologies add to technostress through ‘techno-uncertainty’ about how and whether to adopt them ([Nisafani, Kiely & Mahony 2020](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/12460125.2020.1796286?src=recsys" \l "abstract)). **Approach new email technologies with caution, assessing them through a considerate communication lens**.

## Implementation and next steps

This guidance is not about eliminating our use of email; email certainly brings us many benefits such as conveying information, connecting with colleagues and working asynchronously, flexibly and remotely. Rather, it is about moderating it to reduce email-work where we can. We may want to supplement considerate email culture practices about sending email with those about receiving email, such as an expectation that we do not check emails on annual leave or website statements for MPhil applicants that let them know that reaching out to potential supervisors before applying is not necessary.

Rethinking our approaches to email does have a workload implication as we collectively pause to reevaluate our usual patterns and to make decisions differently. Hopefully, this attenuates as we get used to our considerate email culture, and ideally our collective commitment will soon reduce wider email workload.

This considerate email culture guidance is a working document. We welcome feedback on the guidance as well as on your experience consulting on and implementing a considerate email culture locally and experiencing its effects on workload. Please send your thoughts to Megan.Capon@admin.cam.ac.uk (who is happy to receive emails on this!).