THE UNIVERSITY OF
NOTRE DAME
AUSTRALIA

GUIDELINES:
EMAIL COMMUNICATIONS

Background

The University is committed to creating and maintaining a 'communication environment' which is positive, productive and supportive for staff, students and the wider University community. Whilst email can be, and is for the most part, an effective and timely way of communicating, it must still be used with care and caution. The ease of email use, together with its instantaneous nature, can lead to communications problems between staff and/or students, if certain guidelines are not adhered to. This document sets out guidelines which will help to ensure email communications remain positive, professional and productive.

1. **Reflect - should I send this email?** - While the electronic world is changing the way people interact with each other, as a Catholic community we strongly believe that speaking with people and meeting face to face with people is a superior way of building community and strengthening ties between people. Before drafting and sending an email, consider first whether it would be more effective or appropriate to speak with a person face to face, by phone, by video conference or 'lync'. Sometimes an issue can be resolved more effectively through one quick call, rather than a series of emails back and forth.

2. **Rude and demanding emails are never acceptable –** nor will they lead to a better outcome or result for the sender. It can be tempting to think that because communication is not face to face, things can be expressed by email that would not otherwise be said in a direct face to face communication with another person. This is not the case. Care should be taken to ensure email communications are measured, courteous and professional. Rude and demanding emails may also be in breach of the Staff Code of Conduct.

   From time to time issues will arise that are greatly frustrating or challenging. Before tackling the matter or responding by email, take some time to consider your response. Don't respond immediately. Come back to it later, preferably the next day. In most cases, people who wait a day, usually re-write what was originally composed and the result is often be a more measured, calm and professional communication.

3. **Take care with 'tone'** - Because written communication is not accompanied by more subtle forms of communication (eye contact, body language, facial communication) it has a higher likelihood of being misinterpreted and causing conflict between people. As a result, it is important to take care in expressing the right 'tone' in an email - to replace the tone of voice you would otherwise have used in verbal communication. This can take time and effort, but it is worth it – it can mean the difference between a good and effective response and a negative one.

4. **One size does not fit all**. Your team know you – the wider university doesn't necessarily. Until they do, be careful about what you say and how you say it. What is appropriate for your team or your close working colleagues, who do know you, may not be appropriate or the best way to communicate with other staff. Assume the highest level of formality with new email contacts until the relationship dictates otherwise and refrain from getting too informal too soon in your email communications. Think of your work emails as though they were on University letterhead.

5. **Reduce the volume** - All staff need to think about the amount of emails we send and the amount we send to particular people. Consider first whether it necessary to provide this information to the intended recipient and, in addition, whether it is appropriate to provide the information by email.

   Consider whether it would be better to raise the information in a face to face conversation at your next catch up with the intended recipient.

We recognize that email is a way to share the work you are doing and your commitment and enthusiasm for the matters you are working on. This is a positive. However, bear a thought for the recipient. Ensure the volume of emails is not excessive. Receiving a number of 'update' emails, even if the intention is good, can feel harassing to the recipient and is less likely to achieve a timely and positive response to the information provided.

Consider if it is better to hold off on sending an email until a number of events or developments have occurred.

6. **Indicate the purpose of the email up front** - Some staff receive up to 120 emails a day or more. Remember that an email you send is just one of a number of emails a person may receive in any one day. Therefore, be clear if action is required and state the purpose of your email at the beginning. For example, write "for your consideration and approval", if you need direction. If you are sending an email just to keep someone informed – include "Just for your information" at the beginning of your email.

7. **Subject line** - Use the subject line. Be concise and clear about the subject of the email. If you are advising someone of the date of an upcoming meeting – include the date in the subject line. Feel free to modify the Subject field to more accurately reflect a conversation's direction. Use a new email for a new subject – not an old email. Never use an old email to hit reply and start typing about an entirely new topic.

8. **Copying people in (cc)** – When, or when not to include someone in an email communication can be a difficult call to make. The basic guideline is:

   - Include addresses in the 'To' field for those who you would like a response from; and
   - Include addresses in the cc field – for those who you are just including "for their information".

   Beyond those guidelines, think about your motives when adding addresses to the 'cc' and 'bcc' lines and use your discretion appropriately. Use the 'cc' function when it is important to keep people in the loop – for example, when you are working on something jointly or when the email is relevant to a number of people in your team to ensure everyone is on the same page.

   Sometimes the use of the 'cc' function is misguided and it generally should not be used as a way of highlighting someone's performance deficiencies to a third party. Performance concerns are always best dealt with in person.

9. **If you already anticipate a certain reaction** – for example, if you think to yourself "this email will set the cat among the pigeons" or if you know your email communication is likely to ruffle feathers or cause unrest – ask yourself – "'do I really want that response?" and "will it really help the matter to be resolved?". If not, re-write the email.

10. **Being a bother** – try not to send an email to find something out that you can find out yourself. There is a tendency to think that just because we aren't disturbing someone immediately by phone, we aren't diverting that person from their work when we ask for help. We are. Conduct your own search for the information you need and contact someone else for it only as a last resort.

11. **Subjects not for email** – There are some subjects that should be dealt with face to face. These include performance criticism (which should generally be provided in person) and where a difficult

decision has been made on a matter and is likely to disappoint the recipient. If you have concerns about a matter or about the way something has been handled, talking with someone directly can alleviate concerns much more quickly that email communications backwards and forwards.

When there is a misunderstanding created by email correspondence, the best way to achieve a resolution is to pick up the telephone and work things out.

12. **Forwarding** – Always double check the email trail and consider whether it is appropriate to forward an email on. Take care to edit out other email addresses, headers and commentary, that should not be forwarded on. Remember that the emails you send can be forwarded to others and once sent, who the email is forwarded to is beyond your control.

   If you must forward an email to more than one person – but it is important to protect people's privacy – i.e. not widely disseminate their email address – put *your* email address in the 'to' field (i.e. send the email back to yourself) and put all the other addresses in the 'bcc' field. This protects email address from being published to unknown people.

   Do not forward emails on from the Legal Office to external recipients or 'cc' recipients not originally included into a response. Correspondence from lawyers is protected by legal professional privilege, which can in some circumstances be lost or waived (see below).

13. **Reply All** - When replying to an email with multiple recipients noted in the 'to' and 'cc' fields, remove the addresses of those who your reply does not apply to. Refrain from using the 'reply all' feature to give your opinion to those who may not be interested. In most cases, replying to the sender alone is your best course of action.

   If the Reply All function is useful for a particular matter, ask each recipient to Reply All when they respond.

14. **Acknowledge receipt** - If you are unable to respond to an email within a fairly short timeframe, email the sender confirming receipt and, if possible, provide a timeframe within which the sender can expect your response.

15. **Emails to and from the Legal Office – Legal Professional Privilege** – Correspondence to a lawyer requesting legal advice or from a lawyer providing legal advice is subject to legal professional privilege which means that it can be protected from being disclosed in litigation. In order to protect the legal professional privilege in a document it must be treated in a certain way. When emailing the Legal Office to request legal advice or in relation to a legal matter, mark your email as 'Confidential' and send it only to the Legal Office and the relevant manager/director. Check with the Legal Office before forwarding your email or any response from the Legal Office to a third party who has not been involved in the initial request for advice. Parties external to the University should **never** be copied in on requests for legal advice, nor should you forward them any advice from the Legal Office unless the Legal Office has advised you that you may do so.

16. **And finally…**

- Ensure that messages are addressed to the appropriate recipient.
- Include a courteous greeting and closing.
- Spell names correctly and use spell check.
- Try to use proper sentence structure.
- Don't use patterned backgrounds and fancy fonts.
- Don't be afraid to break down your email into 'parts'. Use headings if it helps to sort out the information provided – e.g. "Background", "Proposed Action", "For Your Approval…"
- Refrain from using the "Return Receipt" function unless absolutely necessary. Most recipients will answer 'no' to a request for a return receipt to be issued. Instead, in your email, politely ask if the recipient could acknowledge receipt.
- Attach any attachments before you compose the text - "he who attaches first, sends only one email!" (author unknown).
- Group emails to "allstaff", "fremantlestaff", "sydneystaff" and "broomestaff" are only to be used by the Vice Chancellor, the Deputy Vice Chancellors, the Pro Vice Chancellors, the Executive Deans, the Executive Directors and the Deans of Schools or by persons authorised by one of the aforementioned staff members.
- Do not subscribe to list servers and distribution lists unless they are directly relevant to your job, or are of special interest to you. If in doubt, seek permission from your supervisor. Such lists tend to overload and affect the performance of the email system.
- Cover periods of absence by adopting an appropriate functional accounts, forward or vacation message strategy.