

Electronic communications policy and guidelines

1 Policy

The electronic communications policy and guidelines cover internal and external electronic communications. They apply to all resources provided for employees and consultants/contractors including, but not limited to:

- telephone or videophone
- mobile phones
- voicemail
- email
- fax
- scanners
- photocopiers
- printers
- internet/intranet
- instant messaging (although use of this is restricted – see below).

The policy and guidelines apply to both business and personal use.

2 Access

You have access to electronic communication resources to help you communicate effectively and efficiently within QAA, with our consultants and contractors, and with other outside contacts.

3 Acceptable use and misuse

You are expected to use these electronic communication resources in the best interests of QAA and our stakeholders, and to further your understanding of higher education. However, QAA understands that employees may need to use these resources for personal reasons.

If you misuse any QAA electronic communication tool or violate the guidelines, you may face disciplinary action, under QAA's Disciplinary procedure. This may include action up to and including dismissal.

Unacceptable use of electronic communications includes the following activities, but is not limited to them:

- retaining, intentionally viewing or sending offensive or illegal material, including jokes, such as that containing racist terminology, violence, pornography, or any material that might constitute harassment, as set out in QAA's Dignity at work policy and procedure (although QAA understands that it is possible for employees inadvertently to receive such material and they will have the opportunity to explain if this is the case)
- personal use of electronic communications during normal business hours, except in the case of an emergency or if this is unavoidable. It is acceptable to make personal use before or after normal business hours, or during the lunch break
- sending communications detrimental to the organisation.

If you are in any doubt about what use is acceptable you should consult your line manager or Human Resources.

4 Internet and email

Employees are permitted to use the internet and email for personal use before or after normal business hours, or during the lunch break, as long as they do not misuse it. This applies equally to sending email from a QAA email address or from a personal email address.

You may not use your QAA email address for personal use to order goods or services or as a contact address for selling goods or services.

If you use your work email address to send personal emails, do not include a QAA official signature in them.

5 Instant messaging

Instant messaging will not normally be available. Access must be approved by the Director of Administration. Use of instant messaging is permitted only for business reasons and not for personal use.

6 Mobile phones

Employees are permitted to use QAA mobile phones for personal calls, however, they will adhere to the charging structure for these calls, and reimburse the QAA accordingly. For more details see <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/policy/mobileUsePolicy.asp>

7 Privacy and monitoring of electronic data

QAA respects your personal privacy. However, electronic communication tools are provided for business purposes. If a business need arises, it may be necessary to check any information transmitted or stored, whether business related or personal.

QAA has the right to monitor and record electronic communications. If any employee is suspected of misusing any electronic communications then QAA will check records on their use. A request to authorise the investigation of an employee's use of QAA's electronic communications tools should be passed to the Director of Administration for authorisation. The email archive retains copies of all email sent and received, including all deleted items.

If you have concerns about privacy it may be in your best interests not to use QAA's electronic communications resources for personal use.

QAA's systems keep an audit log of each request for access to and from the internet, including exact times and dates. Because all systems have a unique address, QAA is able to identify precisely how much use you have made of the internet, and could use the system logs to identify which pages you have been viewing on a particular website.

Routine systems monitoring by Information Systems (IS) may identify possible misuse. It is a requirement by the Executive that IS should report such possible misuse to the Director of Administration.

8 Email use

In addition to suspected misuse, there are other reasons why an employee's email may be checked. For example, when an employee is absent for any reason or has left. This is to maintain communications and the smooth running of the business. All employees are required to give another employee access to their email, as set out in QAA's Records management procedures.

When monitoring emails QAA will, except in exceptional circumstances, confine itself to looking at the address and heading of emails. Employees should head any personal emails as such and encourage those who send them to do the same. This includes emails relating to trade union business. QAA will avoid, where possible opening emails clearly marked as private or personal.

It is essential that employees are aware that **any** email using a QAA address may be disclosed to an enquirer under QAA's commitment to adhere to the spirit of the Freedom of Information Act.

9 Data protection and information security issues

In using electronic communications resources employees must comply with QAA's Data protection policy. You have a responsibility to ensure you understand and adhere to this.

You also need to comply with QAA's Information Security Policy when using electronic communications resources.

10 Guidelines

The following guidelines apply to both business and personal use.

- a **Always use the most efficient and appropriate way of communicating.** Email, telephone, fax, memoranda, letters, and face to face discussion all have their place, but think about which one fits the purpose and which one the recipient would prefer.
- b **Exercise care when using email.** Be aware that the person you send the email to may not be the only person to see it either inside or outside QAA. For operational reasons, other employees may routinely, or in the case of absence, view colleagues' emails to ensure business continuity. Email can also be forwarded by the recipient, inside or outside QAA.
- c **Email should be treated as a formal business communications tool.** Emails comprise formal company records and legal, binding documents. You should always include your contact details in QAA house style in external emails.
- d **Be security conscious.** The Data Protection Act requires you to maintain adequate security to protect personal information when using electronic communications resources. Please refer to the QAA's Data protection policy.
- e **Under the Data Protection Act, people can ask for access to their personal information.** If in doubt, do not say it.
- f **If you plan to copy or forward an email that contains personal data to anyone outside QAA, obtain the consent of the data subject first.** If the email contains sensitive personal data, you will need to get explicit consent from the data subject. If you contravene the Data Protection Act, a criminal offence will have been committed,

by you or by QAA. This may lead to disciplinary action under QAA's Disciplinary procedure, up to and including dismissal.

- g **To protect yourself, limit access to your computer.** You should lock your screen if you have to leave any computer for any length of time, whether working inside or outside QAA offices. If colleagues or visitors come to your work station or office, you should lock your screen to prevent others viewing confidential material.
- h **Any email which is part of QAA business is a company record and must be managed accordingly.** See Records management policy for further details, available on Q-nection.
- i **Email and trivia do not always mix.** Everyone uses email for casual chat, but recipients do not normally welcome unwanted, useless or foolish email.
- j **It is unacceptable to create or send messages that could be construed as harassment or criticism of others** based on their sex, marital status, age, colour, racial origin, religion, disability, sexual orientation, personal characteristics or religious or political beliefs.
- k **Contributions to external discussion groups via the internet.** If you are commenting on a matter in which QAA has a direct interest and as a QAA representative, your comments should be in line with QAA policy. If you do not have expertise in an area, please refer to someone who has. If your comments are of a personal or academic interest, you must make this clear. You may wish to use a disclaimer saying that your personal views do not necessarily reflect those of QAA. However, readers may still associate such messages with QAA.
- l **Use caution when you register your name and details on websites.** Registration and subscription using a personal email address means that your details will be logged as coming from QAA.
- m **Personal messages, such as advertising events or items for sale, should be posted on Q-nection, rather than using email.**
- n **Observe copyright.** Make sure you get written permission from the copyright holder before you transmit or scan copyright material for use in an electronic or printed document.

It is illegal to use email to create or transmit offensive, obscene or indecent images, data or other material.