



TUS

Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta na Sionainne:
Lár Tíre, An tIarthar Láir

Technological University of the Shannon:
Midlands Midwest

Right to Disconnect Guide



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1. Introduction

The nature of work has changed in recent years. With an increase in the prevalence of flexible and remote working, coupled with continued technological advancements, staff enjoy new opportunities in fostering a positive work/life balance. However, these changes have not come without challenges, particularly in relation to the blurring of boundaries between work and home.

In April 2021, the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) published a Code of Practice for Employers and Employees on the Right to Disconnect. The Code of Practice is designed to guide organisations and their employees on best practice in relation to the Right to Disconnect. The Code of Practice is not legally binding.

The health and wellbeing of staff is of utmost importance to TUS, and the University actively supports staff to put wellbeing first. Disconnecting from work is essential for maintaining a healthy work-life balance. TUS recognises every employee's right to switch off outside normal working hours and enjoy their free time without work-related disturbance. There may be occasions where contact occurs, for example, where business and operations reasons require contact outside of normal working hours and depending on the nature of an employee's role. This, however, should be rare and not the norm.

Within this context, TUS has prepared this Guide.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to support healthy working relationships, to support staff in fostering a positive work/life balance, and to act as a guide for TUS staff on best practice pertaining to the Right to Disconnect. This Guide is applicable to all employees of TUS .

3. Definitions

What is the Right to Disconnect?

WRC Code of Practice for Employers and Employees on the Right to Disconnect provides the following definition:

The Right to Disconnect refers to an employee's right to be able to disengage from work and refrain from engaging in work-related electronic communications such as emails, telephone calls or other messages, outside of normal working hours. The Right to Disconnect has three main elements:

- *the right of an employee to not routinely perform work outside their normal working hours*
- *the right not to be penalised for refusing to attend to work matters outside of normal working hours*
- *the duty to respect another person's right to disconnect (for example: by not routinely emailing or calling outside normal working hours)*

What are Normal Working Hours?

An employee's normal working hours are outlined in their TUS terms of employment, in line with the Employment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2018. For the purposes of this Guidance Document, "out of hours" refers to the period before and after a staff member's normal working hours as per their contract of employment.

It is acknowledged that, occasionally, legitimate situations arise where it becomes necessary to contact staff members outside of normal contracted working hours. This includes but not limited to requesting a staff member to fill in at short notice for a colleague due to unforeseeable circumstances, or an emergency may arise, and/or where genuine business or operational reasons require contact outside normal working hours.

The university also recognises that business and operational needs may require some out-of-hours working by some employees depending on the service being provided, the employee's role, the needs of students, the unique requirement of critical services and an employee's terms of employment

4. Related Documents

This guide should be read and considered in conjunction with several other policies and guides in TUS which are related to an employee's ability to disconnect from work outside of normal working hours. Relevant documents include the following:

- *TUS Guide to Inclusive Committees and Meetings*
- *TUS Guide to Promoting Professional Written Communication*

5. Guiding Principles

TUS acknowledges that all employees have the right to disconnect outside of normal working hours (including rest days, annual leave, sick leave or any form of statutory leave) and enjoy their personal time without interruption, in line with institutional commitment to supporting staff wellbeing. On this basis, the following guiding principles aim to support staff wellbeing:

1. Acknowledging Diverse Working Patterns

- Staff across the university work in varied ways, often with flexible schedules. While this flexibility is valued, it's helpful to be mindful that others may not be working at the same time.

2. Leading by Example

- Those in leadership roles play an important part in shaping culture. Demonstrating healthy boundaries and supporting others to do the same sends a strong message.

3. Wellbeing and Work-Life balance

- Taking time away from work is important for wellbeing and productivity. Disconnecting outside of contracted working hours can help maintain balance and prevent burnout.
- While there may be instances where out of hours contact is necessary, such as for business or operational reasons, or depending on the nature of an employee's responsibilities, these instances should not be a frequent occurrence, and steps should be taken to address the substantive issue if there is a frequent occurrence.

6. Guiding Practice

In implementing the above principles, the following guidance is encouraged:

6.1 Guidance for Managers

Managers should consider

- being role models for best practice on the Right to Disconnect.
- treating the Right to Disconnect as a mutual right and maintaining open channels of communication with staff on issues of workload and time management.
- refraining from contacting colleagues outside of normal working hours, except in exceptional or urgent situations.
- being mindful of screen time and associated fatigue in relation to themselves and their teams. Reduce use, if possible, by organising periodic in-person sessions, having tech free hours, using technology mindfully, and/or encouraging a total switch-off at weekends and out of hours.
- scheduling group meetings at appropriate times within normal working hours, between 9:30am and 4.30pm where possible.

6.2 Guidance for Employees

6.2a Communications & Email

The University respects the personal time of all employees and expects them to disconnect from work e-mails and communications outside of normal working hours.

In relation to the timing of emails and other work-based communications, this document has the following guidance.

TUS staff should

- only check and send work emails or messages during normal working hours unless there are genuine extenuating circumstances, eg. emergency, cover for sick colleague, or other unavoidable circumstances.
- give due consideration to the timing of emails or messages to other staff members and potential for disturbance, and the recipient should understand that they will not be expected to respond until their working time recommences.

- be mindful of potentially different working hours when sending emails to staff in other departments.
- Include an email signature disclaimer if sending emails outside of the normal hours of the working day: The following are some examples that could be included in an email signature:
 - *Please do not feel obliged to reply to this email outside of your normal working hours*
 - *I work flexibly and may send emails outside of normal office hours. Please do not feel obliged to reply to this email outside of your normal working hours*
- Consider using the delay send feature on Outlook to schedule an email to send within normal working hours or simply drafting an email and not sending until normal working hours resume.
- set an out of office notification when on leave. The notification should advise the sender of the return date (if known) and advise that a response will be provided on return, as required. In addition, staff should consider directing to a colleague in the out of office message, to ensure the query can be addressed without the staff member having to reconnect while on leave. Recipients should respect out-of-office notifications when they received from others.
- respect boundaries. Some teams may be in contact with one another outside of work hours in relation to non-work matters or social events, which may involve communications outside of work-based platforms. Each team's preferred dynamic will be different, and teams should discuss and decide on the boundaries they are comfortable with.
- turn off or pausing notifications on the MS Outlook and Teams phone apps outside of normal working hours.

6.2b Meetings & Time Management

While meetings (in-person or online/virtual) are an important element in connections between individuals and teams, staff are encouraged to review the frequency and timing of meetings they hold to ensure optimum use of time and allow colleagues time to work outside of meetings.

In relation to the scheduling of meetings and its relationship with a staff member's ability to disconnect, this document has the following guidance.

- schedule meetings in a way that allows five to ten minutes of buffer for staff members moving directly from one meeting to another, to allow for a break and/or the gathering of materials when back-to-back meetings are scheduled.
- avoid scheduling meetings out of hours or during lunch break, unless absolutely necessary.
- While one-to-one meetings may be useful to both parties on a case-by-case basis, meeting organisers should consider avoiding group or departmental meetings before 9:30am or after 4pm.

In relation to wider time management, TUS staff should consider

- setting timeslots in their calendar during which they are disconnected from technology, perhaps to do paper-based work, travel between campuses, or hold in-person meetings.
- making use of the status features on MS Teams, for example the “do not disturb” option when travelling between campuses, engaged in an in-person meeting, etc.

6.2c Wellbeing

TUS aims to embed *The Right to Disconnect* as a core element of the university’s wider health and wellbeing strategy and framework.

On an individual level, TUS staff should consider

- familiarising themselves with their break entitlements as per their contracts and ensure they are availing of these.
- managing screen time where possible. Given the nature of work that most university staff partake in, it is unfeasible to eliminate screen use entirely, but it may be worth being tech-free during scheduled breaks and lunch breaks, as well as avoiding excessive use of screen-based devices after work. Blue screens suppress melatonin, which negatively impacts sleep, and therefore should be avoided at night.
- increasing physical activity and presence in the outdoors as much as possible, firstly to counteract screen time and the sedentary nature of work, and also to support overall wellbeing. This will be even more beneficial if practiced in a social context.
- availing of free *Spectrum Life* resources, available through the My Apps portal. The *Digital Detox* section and *Hybrid Family Life* sections are particularly relevant to the Right to Disconnect.

All TUS staff can avail of the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) to assist with any work or personal issues they may be facing. The service is available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. See contact info below:

- Freephone: 1800 814 243
- WhatsApp/SMS: Text 'Hi' to 087 369 0010
- Email: eap@spectrum.life

7. Raising Concerns

- Should an employee have any concerns around their Right to Disconnect, they should raise the issue with their line manager and an informal resolution should be sought.
- Where the issue is unresolved or an agreement cannot be reached, the matter can be raised under the *TUS Procedures for the Resolution of Grievances/Disputes*.