



The University of Manchester

# **Student Communications Audit 2013**

*How we communicate with our students, and its impact on the student experience*

Executive Summary  
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# Introduction

How staff and students communicate with each other can have a big impact. Appropriate, and timely, communication can improve the student experience by providing proactive support and guidance, setting and managing expectations, and creating and maintaining the desired culture across the whole University. Conversely, irrelevant, mis-timed, or disjointed communications can have a negative impact on our relationship by confusing and even angering students. It is therefore important to understand how we communicate with one another, and to identify any areas for improvement.

This Audit has been commissioned by the Student Communications Project Steering Group, a University-wide project group set-up by Tim Westlake, Director for the Student Experience, and chaired by Rachel Brealey, Head of Faculty Administration for the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences.

Focussing on communications between non-academic staff and undergraduate students, the Audit documents how the University currently communicates with our students – the volume, the methods and channels used, the style and tone, and the effectiveness of communications – and offers recommendations for the future. It is not a report on what staff are doing wrong. Rather the Audit uses the collective experiences of staff and students to highlight examples of good practice in student communications, and to share these lessons with colleagues across the University.

## Headlines

### **What we communicate to students is useful to them...**

Most students – more than two-thirds of those questioned – agree that the majority of information sent to them by University staff is useful to them<sup>1</sup>. 85% of staff agree too.

### **...but not every message gets through.**

However, it is not true that students receive every piece of information intended for them. Students consistently complain that they have not received details about various initiatives across the University, despite clear evidence that those messages were disseminated. The main reasons for this are the use of inappropriate channels or key messages, and low student engagement with these channels or messages (see below).

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<sup>1</sup> 34 out of 50 students, and 165 of 190 staff, agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘The majority of information students receive from the University is useful to them’.

## **Communicating with students is everybody's job**

Far from being the preserve of a few specialists, student communications is a daily task for almost every member of staff at the University. For a small number this includes producing multi-channel campaigns. For most of us, however, it is in writing emails with clear messages, providing useful information by telephone, or engaging in an adult conversation face-to-face, where students encounter the majority of communications with the University. Therefore, it is so important that colleagues feel a collective responsibility for good student communications.

Fortunately, it seems that we do: 74%<sup>2</sup> of us say that they communicate with students at least once per day, and 95%<sup>3</sup> say that communicating with students is a central part of their job. Most feel confident that they can carry out the task, but just over two-fifths<sup>4</sup> said they would appreciate some extra support, predominantly a forum for sharing ideas and good practice with other student communicators.

### **We are over-reliant on email...**

Students agree, in almost every consultation, that they receive too many emails from the University. While a specific study found that, when asked to assess each email individually, the contents of these emails are usually useful, the volume of emails that students receive means that messages from the University are often ignored (and in some cases University senders are added to the 'spam' lists!)

Importantly, "email fatigue" is not *caused* by the University. (In fact, email volume appears to have gone down since 2010<sup>5</sup> - thanks to a concerted effort across the University.) Rather, email fatigue is a well-known and universal scourge of all email users.

### **...but it remains students' preferred way of hearing from us.**

Overwhelmingly, across several different consultation methods, students say that they want to receive information from the University by email. Indeed, 51% of survey respondents said that it is our most effective method of communication. In particular, students like the fact that email delivers information directly to them - that is, they do not have to go looking for it.

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<sup>2</sup> 148 out of 199 online survey respondents.

<sup>3</sup> 190 out of 200 online survey respondents.

<sup>4</sup> 65 out of 159 online survey respondents.

<sup>5</sup> A study of student emails from Oct 2012-Jan 2013 saw an average of 189 emails from non-academics, compared to 409 in a 2010-11 study.

Students were unanimous across various consultations that they did not want to receive important or personal information only through social media.

### **Students want to receive what's relevant to them, and only to them.**

The 'love/hate' relationship our students have with email stems largely from the perception that many of the emails they receive are irrelevant to them. Students complain of receiving emails advertising events for students on different courses, information about what's happening in another faculty, and even emails meant for circulation among staff. And it is not just email: students complain of similar problems among social media, posters, and digital signage too, where messages of limited or niche interest are broadcast to all students.

This scattergun, broadcast approach to communication has a very damaging cumulative effect on students' engagement with - and trust of - our communications channels. Students in a consultation about the My Manchester Newsletter (the main, weekly, all-student news and information channel) cited articles being not relevant to them<sup>6</sup> as a major reason to stop reading it altogether, even if it is just one issue that has no relevant content.

On the whole students agree that they would like all of the communications they receive to be more targeted towards them. 75%, for example, said that they would like to receive more information about their course or events related to their course<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, students are more likely to engage with communications channels which they have actively opted-in to.

### **Relationships are a key factor to successful communication...**

Along with relevance, students said they are more likely to engage with communications that come from departments or individuals with whom they have some preexisting relationship - for example the organisers of an event they have attended and found useful. In the case of email, some students said they would only open emails from a named sender that they recognised.

This bias towards relationships is not surprising: students have consistently complained that the University can be impersonal. Relationships engender trust and imply care. Students perceive that communications which come from

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<sup>6</sup> Relevance, and student identity more widely, is extraordinarily complex across the University: A consultation with students from the School of Mechanical, Aeronautical, and Civil Engineering revealed that many of them would routinely ignore anything that "students feel is related to south campus," despite the number of major support services located there.

<sup>7</sup> 39 out of 52 said chose either "Information about my course" or "Events related to my course" from a list of types of information they would like to receive more communications about.

groups or individuals they have a relationship with are more likely to contain information that will be of direct help to them.

More widely, students' engagement with University services on social media is also linked to a preexisting relationship – simply being on social platforms is not enough to increase engagement. Among those students who regularly read social media updates from University departments, course-related pages are the most popular (51%), followed by the Students' Union (39%) and careers-related (32%). Students said they would be more likely to read about other relevant events and information if they came from these pages rather than directly.

### **...and staff in Schools are the most trusted influencers.**

Of all of their relationships with University staff, students cite their course administrators as being the most trusted influencers. Students say they will open almost every email from course administrators, and are more likely to read posters and digital signage posted in their School office than elsewhere on campus.

This localism extends beyond course and academic specific messages. Students are also more likely to engage with events and initiatives that their course administrator has recommended to them – even if this is simply the tacit recommendation of forwarding an email or displaying a poster in their office.

### **Context is king.**

One of the contradictions of that has become apparent is that students have repeatedly expressed the view that events that were advertised to them were not relevant, and yet when students are asked in consultation if these events would be useful or relevant they say yes. A major frustration among staff who communicate with students is that, while students are very good at saying what they want to hear about, they do not always know what they need to hear about.

Part of the issue lies in how we define relevance. When considering communications, students rarely have the time – or choose to take the time – to consider how that event fits within the context of their whole student lifecycle. Those communications that have the greatest engagement are those which draw clear lines between an event and the context of the student lifecycle. This is often also called timeliness. By understanding how a particular piece of information – whether it is about an event, advice, or guidance – fits into their current context, we can help students to discern which information will actually benefit them most.

## **Pass the message on.**

Connected to the previous point, students complain that University staff are very bad at communicating with one another. Based on what we know about students relying on relationships for their trusted communications, this has the natural effect that students are not made aware of information because their trusted influencers are not aware. If messages are not passed between staff – whether they are local events or University-wide initiatives – how can they pass the message on?

## **Recommendations**

*The top-level recommendations of this Audit are:*

### **Seamless communication**

1. Students should expect to receive joined up, consistent, timely, and relevant communications from the whole University.
2. We should look for opportunities to improve communication with students, but never at the expense of the flow of information.

### **Appropriate communication**

1. We should consider the relevance and context of our communications, and utilise the most appropriate channels for each individual message.
2. Staff should use the student lifecycle to judge the importance and relevance of their communications, recognising that students are not always the best judges of relevance, and give priority to those that match the students context.
3. The most trustworthy channels – such as School administrators – should be reserved for key messages. Efforts should be made to rebuild students’ trust in alternative channels.

### **Targeted communication**

1. Greater care should be taken to ensure that communications are targeted to the relevant groups of students.
2. Students should be given the opportunity to “opt-in” to non-essential channels, rather than having to “opt-out”.
3. Electronic communications, such as email, should be segmented where possible to offer a greater level of personalisation, particularly in bulletins or newsletters.

## **Supportive communication**

1. Wherever possible, opportunities should be given for students' to respond to communications. Therefore;
2. The source of communications should be clear, and preferably include a named person to whom responses can be made.
3. Students should be encouraged to participate in communications projects, both through on-going consultation and co-production.

## **Supporting staff**

1. Communication with students should be seen as an element of every role in the University: a vital part of improving the student experience.
2. There should be clear guidance for staff on what is expected of our communications with students.
3. Staff at the local level - in Schools and services - should be empowered to communicate with students on those matters most relevant to them.
4. Support should be given to those members of staff who want it, through:
  - a. the creation of a student communications network to improve the flow of information, and to provide support through networking
  - b. the creation and maintenance of a suite of student communications tools, to include policies, best practice guides, and templates
  - c. access to technology and training to support the personalisation of communications