University Students Consultative Forum

Consultation on student communications
8–22 June 2015: Summary

The complete record of the discussion can be viewed on the forum.

Note: There were 137 posts. 22 forum members made at least 1 post and 2 students made 10 or more posts.
Question 1: Our initial research suggests that students are generally happy with the volume and content of messages from the University – would you agree?

- Twelve students responding to this discussion thought the volume was appropriate with only one who thought she would feel inundated if she accessed email by phone.
- Five students felt emails about support were sometimes patronising and ‘How are you doing’ emails could be irritating to established students.
- Flag / traffic lights for urgent / action required messages would be useful or a dashboard on StudentHome.
- Most students felt content was relevant but one pointed out that timing was not always appropriate e.g. assignment ready to collect after it had already been collected.
- It was suggested that students should be able to opt in or out of particular types of message.

I don't mind the quantity but the content can sometimes be a bit patronising.
Question 2: Do you have any other suggestions about:
- the type of messages you receive (content)
- the format of our messages
- the channel we use (email, StudentHome)
- and the timing of messages?

- Several students wanted more flexibility over the type of emails students can subscribe to receive (potentially via the dashboard).
- It is important that information is readily available and easy to find via appropriate websites.
- Reference number in email titles causes confusion and frustration.

Other suggestions:
- More content directly on StudentHome rather than on the qualification page.
- Subject-related general interest, news items and stories to inspire future study on StudentHome
- Make historical messages more accessible on StudentHome.
- Anything taking place locally should be emailed to possible attendees, and there should be more events for current students to attend.
- There should be more communication to students about the consultative process.
- Inconsistency in salutation is irritating (possibly from Alumni Office), particularly the use of letters only for OU qualifications.
- Possible use of colour coding to identify where messages are being sent from, i.e. SST, faculty, careers etc.

It would be good if you could opt in and opt out at will so if I initially opt out of careers information I may want to opt back in at a later date.

I think that as much information as possible should be on StudentHome.

Maybe a sort of subscription panel via the dashboard where students can opt in or out at different times, or types of notifications if they so wish.
Question 3: What aspects of our communications do you find most and least helpful?

Aspects mentioned by individual students are mentioned below. The overriding message was that communications were most useful when they were specifically relevant to a student’s study and when they were very clear upfront about the purpose of the message and whether action was required including any deadlines.

Suggestions for opting in and out of particular emails and traffic lighting messages were mentioned here although covered elsewhere.

**Most**
- Decent notice of relevant events
- Messages highlighting urgent changes
- Notes from tutor pointing out things that may have been missed
- Digests of forum material
- Module related material
- Early information about exam centre allocation and exam date
- Information that directly impacts on study

**Least**
- Messages where the reason for sending, nature of content and whether action is required are not obvious
- Generic info about studying and revising (although some students find these helpful)
- Repetitive information-giving emails (although for important bits of information this may be necessary)
- Having to look at module news on the module page itself – would be easier to have everything together but colour-coded.
- Open News
- Study skills mailings
- Lengthy mailings - language could be simplified.

I would rather receive something that isn't of direct relevance than miss out on anything.

Sometimes I've had emails where it isn't always obvious whether I need to take action.
Question 4: We have some evidence that students would like more clarity when we send out messages in terms of the purpose of the message, how important/urgent a message is and what action is required from the student. Do you agree that this would be helpful?

Most students agreed with this approach with no-one disagreeing. About half of those responding said they already found it relatively straightforward to decide whether a message was urgent or relevant or not.

General points made:

- Purpose of messages not always clear and also not obvious if a general or specific reminder
- Possibility of traffic light or coding system to show urgency and whether action is required (particularly when studying more than one module). One student disagreed with this approach as it may be better to leave it to the student’s judgement as to how relevant it was for them and messages could be mis-labelled.
- Need useful subject line and one line ‘why have you been sent this message’ type intro
- OU emails can get ‘lost’ amongst other emails if high volume mailbox traffic
- Particular emphasis needed on whether the student needs to take action and possible consequences
- Reminder emails about things you have already done (or think you have done but can’t confirm) are a concern
- Several students found the reference number at the start of the subject line unhelpful.
- Deadline dates can be lost in midst of text and even omitted totally
- Suggestion to list the what/why/when at the top of the message

Frankly most of what I get sent appears self evident.

I would like to see a short summary at the top with why this is important, what you need to do and when you need to do it by.
Question 5: Can you give us any examples of when you’ve received inappropriate or conflicting information from us?

Eleven students reported occasions when they had received inappropriate information; two respondents had not. Issues raised included:

- Some messages received appear to have been intended for others – experienced students may recognise and disregard such messages but others may not, creating confusion e.g. receiving an invitation for a tutorial, exam or resit for a module you are not studying.
- Some messages may promote an unfavourable course of action e.g. taking a study break which would impact transitional arrangements, registering for a module that was not eligible for your main qualification.
- Some messages are reminders for action which are received by some people who have already completed the necessary action e.g. enrolling for their next module when they have already done so, or have already completed their qualification.
- Some messages are duplicated.
- Sometimes, when phoning to check about information or possible action requested by email, information received over the phone conflicts with information received by email.
- The potential consequences of mis-messaging vary from simply needing to be deleted to possibly costing time and money in wasted endeavours e.g. driving to a non-existent face-to-face tutorial or implications on transitional arrangements, loans and fees.
- Some messaging does not appear to be ‘joined-up’.
- Lack of information about why assessment results were delayed.
- Confusing messaging about paying for residential schools.
Question 6: Are you aware if any messages from the OU have gone straight into your Spam folder? If so, please give an example.

- Most students reported that they had not experienced emails disappearing into spam and junk folders (although it is possible that people who responded to the email inviting participation in the student consultative forum are those who don’t suffer from email messages being dumped in spam or junk folders).
- One student reported ‘introductory message from tutor often ends up in spam’ and another reported ‘if they came from the Director Students, with some shortened name including hyphens, then they always went directly in junk mail’. Messages from properly named sources seem less at risk.
- Some people put the OU in their contacts list which means messages would not be junked.
- Most people are using web mail rather than applications such as Outlook, which might make a difference.

Question 7: Do you have any automated rules set up for messages from the University, i.e. to put them directly into a particular folder or delete them automatically? If so, please can you tell us what rules you use?

- There does not appear to be widespread use of automated rules for managing email from the OU, although some people have OU contacts in their contact list.
- Most students reported that they didn’t use rules because they didn’t find it necessary with the volume of traffic rather than lack of awareness or ability to set them up.
- There is, however, some use of rules to organise OU emails even if not by the majority of people.
- One student has mail routed through his OU box to his ‘normal mailbox’.
- Two students use folders to catch any OU mails (ending open.ac.uk plus tutor’s email address), to catch them amongst the multitudes of junk emails and for ease of referring back.
Anything else…Is there anything else you think we need to consider when thinking about how we communicate with you?

- Filtering should be used so messages are more appropriate to the recipients e.g. new students need different messaging to experienced students.
- Some notification type emails could have an opt-in available where appropriate e.g. subject areas, careers.
- Timing of messaging is an issue, and only essential messages should be sent out during times of high student workload or focus such as exam periods.
- Emails triggered by data analysis/monitoring/student behaviour (e.g. to students who haven't been on module website) might have more impact if they are from the tutor rather than a generic address.
- Clear information available and easily findable via websites may avoid the need for some emails completely and is better than ‘ask your SST’.
- More information about modules at Levels 2 and 3 on qualifications is required.
- For new students especially some induction information would be useful a month ahead of module start – the time between registration and module start is a good time for messages generally. A printed induction pack would be great.
- Messages should be more precisely targeted – no reminders sent to someone who has already done whatever the message is about.

Next steps

Your views will be considered by the Student Communications Project Team and will be used in conjunction with other evidence being gathered to improve how the OU communicates with students. We will report back on how your views have been taken into account.