A quantitative and qualitative investigation into communications sent to students for selected level 1 MCT and Science modules.

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Project Report: December 2015

Executive Summary

The Open University as a distance teaching organisation uses email communication as the main method of communication with students. Emails can be sent to students studying modules from a wide variety of sources within the university, but there is little oversight or understanding of the individual student experience in terms of receiving the communications. Views differ on the effectiveness of email communication to students, but a quite widely held belief is that students can be overwhelmed and confused by the number of emails they receive which could lead to disengagement with the module.

This project investigated both the quantitative and qualitative value of the email communications sent to students on 3 first year undergraduate STEM modules:

S142; Topics in Science

SDK125 Introducing Health Sciences

U116 Environment: Journeys through a changing World

Quantitative analysis of the number and type of emails sent to students studying only one module (S142, SDK125 or U116) over 31 weeks revealed an average and maximum number of email communications per student on each module. For S142: average 38, maximum 59, SDK125: average 67, maximum 82, U116: average 45, maximum 83.

Qualitative analysis from interviews undertaken with 40 students from each module to find out how they felt about the number and type of communications they were receiving revealed that students appreciated email as the main form of communication from the university, although they underestimated quite significantly the number of emails they receive.

Although this project focused on the volume of emails, interviews with students' revealed that students value communications from their tutors most highly and there are varied attitudes to email from other sources.

Aims and scope

The aim of this project was to investigate the perception that students receive too many communications from the university, which could potentially can lead to the students feeling overwhelmed and confused.
The initial research phase collected quantative data on 9 modules from MCT and Science. 3 modules were then selected for further analysis. Students from the three selected modules were interviewed at two points during the year.

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Activities

The project was carried out in three phases:

Phase 1 - Preliminary quantative data analysis
Quantative data for the 2014B presentation was obtained from VOICE records on the number of email messages sent to 4 students each studying one of the 9 modules chosen from the MCT and Science faculties.

The criteria for selecting the 4 students were:
- Only studying one module in the 14B presentation
- Completed the 14B presentation
- Did not have a disability flag

This phase allowed us to establish the number and origin of message sent to students and informed the design of the phase 2 research.

Phase 2 – Qualitive data collection
Student volunteers were recruited from the 2015B presentations of S142, SDK125 and U116 to be interviewed about their experience of university communications. Recruitment was by email with students being asked to register their interest in the project and log their availability. A £25 Amazon voucher was offered as an incentive for participation.
Recruitment of participants via email is not ideal for a project investigating attitudes towards email communications. Unfortunately it was necessary in order to comply with the Student Survey Research Panel requirements.

The interviews were carried out by three ALs. The interview questions were designed by the project team and revised in light of feedback from the ALs. There was also a revision of the questions between the first and second interviews.

The first interviews were carried out in March 2015 and involved 20 students from each of the modules.
Second interviews were conducted in September 2015 again involving 20 students from each module. Students who had been interviewed in the first cohort were eligible to be interviewed again.

Detailed notes of each of the interviews were recorded and returned to the project team for analysis.

Phase 3 – final quantitative data analysis
The Phase 1 quantitative data analysis was repeated for S142, SDK125 and U116 on the 2015B presentation to identify if there has been any significant change in university communications between the two presentations.

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Findings

Phase 1
Quantitative analysis of the number of email communications (logged on VOICE) sent to students studying one MCT or science level 1 module in 2014B (Table 1) revealed:

1. Significant variation in the number of emails sent to individual students studying the same module. The number of messages sent varied from 32 to 145 for individual students on S142.
2. Variation in the average number of emails sent to students on different modules. (55 emails on MU123 and 124 on S142).
3. No correlation between the average number of emails sent and credit rating of the module.
4. No correlation between the 2014B retention rate and average number of emails sent.

These finding are in line with those reported by the Initial Learner Engagement Project who looked at AA100 students studying in 13J [1].
Further analysis of 4 students on each of S142, SDK125 and U116 (Table 2) showed that the majority of messages are sent by the Tutors office and eTMA system. The increase in emails sent on S142 was due to an increase in emails sent from the faculty, region and 'all other areas'.

Table 1: Level 1 MCT and science modules showing the total number of email communications logged in Voice sent to 4 students who completed their study of the module in 2014B. Messages sent from module start to result notification.

Module	Credit	Total number of emails sent (to 4 students)	Average (n=4)	Retention % completion
M140	30	43,50,64,100	64	74
MST124	30	37,54,62,90	61	42
MU123	30	30,57,60,75	55	70
S104	60	76,87,107,112	71	45
S142	30	78,114,145,160	124	58
SDK125	30	32,52,82,86	63	46
TU100	60	71,75,76,81	76	49
T174	30	44,46,49,61	50	58
U116	60	42,47,57,84	58	72

[1] Initial Learner Engagement Project (2014) Early Project Recommendations Paper

Table 2: Origin of email communications logged in VOICE sent to 4 students on 3 level 1 modules in 2014B

Origin of message	Average number of emails per student		
	U116	**SDK125**	**S142**
Tutors Office	11	20	27
eTMA system	15	14	19
Student services	6	7	9
MSD Computer centre	5	7	9
Region & SST	5	5	10
OUSA	5	6	5
Faculty	3	4	13
Exams	3	5	9
Library	4	1	3
All other areas	1	7	20

Data excludes emails sent directly to the students from private mail addresses, such as from their tutors

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Phase 2

The qualitive phase of the project was carried out at two intervention points. A sample of 20 students from each of the three modules were interviewed in March and a second sample taken in September.
Very similar responses were received from across the three modules sampled.

Table 3: Summary of interview responses

Question	March responses	September responses
Have you received communications directly to you from the Open University?	All students reported email to be the main form of communication. Some said they had received a letter at the start of the module. Some students received a phone call from their tutor at the start of the module but all other phone contact was initiated by the students.	All students reported email to be the main form of communication. Phone calls were received in response to the student contacting the university and requesting call back.
Can you tell us about one particular method of communication that has had an impact on your study?	Nearly all students cited email as the most useful form of communication, and most mentioned those from their tutor being the most useful. Some also mentioned letters and stressed how useful they can be for critical information. One student uses the welcome letter from her tutor as a bookmark. Several students mentioned forums and how they are much easier to interact with if you subscribe Many students commented that they read emails and find it useful to be able to refer back to them later on.	Not asked in September
Thinking about email do you have any comments about **a) the type of messages you receive (content)** **b) the format of our messages** *For this question we mean anything about the 'clarity, length, pictures, rtf, html etc.'* **c) and the timing of messages?**	Not asked in March	All students responded that messages were timely and useful. A number of suggestions were made: - keep messages short with links to further information - They tend to be text heavy, could make them more attractive - Some content is too generic, try to personalise - Too many messages received whilst waiting for module results
Do you have any comments to make on the number of emails sent by the university?	Not asked in March	3 students commented that there were too many generic email messages All other respondents were happy with the volume of messages

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Are you aware if any messages from the OU have gone straight into your Spam folder? (Please check students know how to access their spam folder). If so, please give an example.	Not asked in March	5 students reported that they had initially had messages go into their spam folder but they had resolved the problem early in their studies. The majority of students check their Spam folder regularly. 1 student was not aware of the spam folder and reported having only received 6 email messages during the module.
From the email communications, which do you find the most useful and why?	Overwhelmingly students stated that emails from their tutor were the most useful, often mentioning reminders for tutorials or assessment deadlines. Several students mentioned general emails making them feel part of the university community. A number of students commented on the receipts from the eTMA system being reassuring	Nearly all the students mentioned emails from their tutor being the most useful as they related directly to what they were studying at that moment. There was frequent mention of messages alerting them that TMAs had been returned. Others mentioned included library resources, degree pathways and careers advice.
From the university generated emails, which do you find the least useful and why?	Students commented that they filter which emails they read. About half the students mentioned the OUSA newsletters, but although they didn't read them they were happy to receive the messages.	The most commonly mentioned message was the OUSA newsletters with most commenting that they do not have time to read them because they are studying.
Is there anything that you can think of that you were not informed of that you would have aprechiated being informed about?	Responses to this question were wide ranging and tended to relate to the students particular circumstances. Several students had needed additional information regarding future study plans. One commented that repeated emails about DSA were useful as she did eventually apply.	Most students had received all the information they wanted. Several suggested assessment reminders would be useful a week prior to submission deadlines. Some students complained that they hadn't been given enough warning about pathway changes and end of module life which affects future studies. A number made reference to information connected to student finance.
How would you prefer to be contacted by the Open University?	Students overwhelmingly prefer communications to be sent by email, although quite a lot mentioned text messaging would be useful for alerts such as upcoming TMA deadlines.	Students overwhelmingly prefer communications to be sent by email.
Is there anything else you think we need to consider when thinking about how we communicate with you?	Not asked in March	Most students were happy with the communications. 3 students mentioned they would like a phone call mid module to discuss how they are getting on. 1 student commented that she has informed the university about a disability but it is not

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		always taken into account when communicating with her.

All the students were asked to estimate how many emails they thought they had received since the start of their module.

The March interviews showed U116 students overestimating the number of messages received by 28%, whilst S142 and SDK125 underestimated by 46% and 45% respectively.

In the September interviews all three groups underestimated the number of messages (U116 38%, S142 16% and SDK125 48%)

Table 4: Number of messages students thought they received form the OU - U116 March responses

Number of messages student thought they had received	Number of messages recorded on VOICE	% difference
unknown	19	
12	17	-29
unknown	6	
12	7	+71
unknown	26	
40	21	+90
13	0 – this student was an offender learner and should have been excluded from the research	
unknown	16	
20	9	**+122**
7	24	**-71**
30	12	**+150**
1 a week	10	
30	12	**+150**
3	19	**-84**
10	13	**-23**
17	11	**+55**
12	12	**0**
15	15	**0**
unknown	11	
6	18	**-67**
Average = 16	Average = 15	**Average difference = +28**

Table 5: Number of messages students thought they received form the OU - S142 March responses

Number of messages student thought they had received	Number of messages recorded on VOICE	% difference
5	11	-55
7	25	-72
100 including forum notifications	13	
2	28	-93
5	13	-62
30	25	+20
unknown	10	
4	19	**-79**
6	11	**-45**
9	21	**-57**
14	8	**+75**
6	26	**-77**
5	15	**-67**
10	19	**-47**
30	36	**-17**

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9	20	**-55**
10	11	**-9**
5	16	**-69**
6	14	**-57**
10	26	**-62**
Average = 10	Average = 19	**Average difference = -46%**

Table 6: Number of messages students thought they received form the OU - SDK125 March responses

Number of messages student thought they had received	Number of messages recorded on VOICE	% difference
13	25	-48
6	21	-70
13	29	-55
12	17	-29
5	28	-82
12	17	-29
40	37	**+8**
12	25	**-52**
20	16	**+25**
12	17	**-29**
6	22	**-73**
10	43	**-77**
13	25	**-48**
7	27	**-74**
10	25	**-60**
30	23	**-30**
8	20	**-60**
20	26	**-23**
3	19	**-84**
15	40	**-62**
Average = 13	Average = 26	**Average difference = -45%**

Table 7: Number of messages students thought they received form the OU - U116 September responses

Number of messages student thought they had received	Number of messages recorded on VOICE	% difference
20	47	-57
6	61	-90
15	51	-70
80	37	+116
unknown	68	
15	87	-82
10	36	**-72**
24	38	**-36**
45	82	**-45**
24	37	**-35**
30	32	**-6**
20	39	**-48**
20	49	**-59**
unknown	60	
34	37	**-8**
30	38	**-21**
20	38	**-47**
20	85	**-76**
unknown	52	
25	28	**-10**

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Average = 26	Average = 50	Average difference = -38%

Table 8: Number of messages students thought they received form the OU - S142 September responses

Number of messages student thought they had received	Number of messages recorded on VOICE	% difference
24	36	-33
40	41	-2
50	55	-9
50	72	-30
25	33	-24
24	71	-66
15	56	**-73**
100	71	**+40**
13	51	**-74**
50	73	**-31**
50	37	**+35**
50	28	**+79**
75	75	**0**
20	49	**-59**
43	35	**+22**
30	25	**+20**
50	59	**-15**
50	57	**-12**
45	54	**-16**
12	38	**-68**
Average = 41	Average = 51	**Average difference = -16%**

Table 9: Number of messages students thought they received form the OU - SDK125 September responses

Number of messages student thought they had received	Number of messages recorded on VOICE	% difference
25	65	-61
23	116	-80
50	68	-26
60	96	-38
unknown	59	
unknown	29	
25	64	**-61**
50	64	**-22**
unknown	Stopped studying	
25	122	**-80**
25	52	**-52**
50	98	**-49**
20	69	**-71**
20	73	**-73**
50	52	**-4**
30	73	**-59**
30	66	**-55**
20	82	**-76**
unknown	74	
150	111	**+35**
Average = 41	Average = 75	**Average difference = -48%**

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Phase 3

The quantative analysis of VOICE data carried out in Phase 1 was repeated in Phase 3 for the three modules studied on the 2015B presentation. This showed that there was consistency in practice between the two years, with students receiving roughly the same number of email communications from each area of the university.

Table 10: Origin of email communications logged in VOICE sent to 4 students on 3 level 1 modules in 2015B

Origin of message	Number of emails per student (a) and average (b)					
	U116		SDK125		S142	
	a	b	a	b	a	b
Tutors Office	16,2,9,9	9	11,15,8,22	14	2,0,8,9	5
eTMA system	18,6,13,14	13	10,10,9,10	10	10,12,9,16	12
Student services	4,3,4,4	4	8,10,6,10	8	7,3,4,3	4
MSD Computer centre	10,2,0,1	3	3,4,2,3	3	0,0,3,2	1
Region & SST	9,3,1,5	5	2,12,16,13	11	2,2,3,6	3
OUSA	4,4,3,2	3	2,3,5,6	4	3,2,4,2	3
Faculty	10,2,2,2	4	2,2,2,4	2	5,6,6,8	6
Exams	6,1,1,1	2	9,9,8,10	9	2,1,2,6	3
Library	1,0,1,1	1	2,2,2,1	2	1,1,1,1	1
All other areas	5,0,0,0	1	9,8,12,12	10	8,3,4,2	4

Data excludes emails sent directly to the students from private mail addresses, such as from their tutors

Summary

The initial quantative research raised some concerns that students may be being inundated with email communications from the university. Interviews indicated that students prefer email as the main form of communication and they felt the majority of communications were appropriate. Students significantly underestimate the number of messages they receive from the university. Messages sent by tutors are consistently seen as being the most useful and are most likely to be read. Some students find some messages too generic and would like more personalisation. Students are more likely to read non module specific messages at the start of the module than they are towards the end.

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Impact and recommendations

The participants in this study told us that students prefer to receive the majority of communications from the OU by email. Whilst some feel that there is a need for more personalisation in the messages we send, they are happy to filter the messages themselves and select which are relevant.

Students in all three of our sample groups underestimated the number of email communications they receive from the university, despite the majority of them checking spam filters giving a high level of confidence that messages are being received. Many students reported that they filter the messages themselves, which may account for the perception of receiving fewer messages. Despite the lack of awareness of the volume of messages being recieved, students are happy with both the mode and number of communications.

Recommendation 1: Email should continue to to be the primary mode of communication between students and the main hub of the university.

Recommendation 2: The subject field of emails to students should be used thoughtfully to assist students in filtering and searching for particular messages or information.

The scope of this study was focused on investigating student feelings regarding the volume of messages they receive. Analysis of the data has highlighted that there is significant variation in the number of messages being sent to students studying the same module. Further work needs to be carried out to investigate why there is such variation.

Recommendation 3: Further work should be carried out to investigate the variation in number of communications sent to students studying a single module.

Although participants were asked if there was any information missing from the communications they had received, this study did not carry out any evaluation on the effectiveness of messages sent.

Recommendation 4: Further work to be carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of our email communications.

Tables

Reference

[1] Initial Learner Engagement Project (2014) Early Project Recommendations Paper