



University Communications: Lived Experiences of First Year Life Science Students

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STUDENTS AS CO-CREATORS



INTRODUCTION

With new waves of technology, certain forms of communication have begun to dominate in Higher Education (HE) environments. Emails are accepted as one of the leading methods for the exchange of ideas (Whittaker and Sidner, 1996). Continual growth in email volume has been documented to increase email users' likelihood of experiencing 'information overload' (Edmunds and Morris, 2000). Increasingly, 'email overload' is being reported in student populations (Hole, 2008; Waddington, 2010; Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) 2019). More work needs to be carried out to explore 'email overload' or 'information overload' in student populations. Anecdotal evidence points to a possibility of first year students feeling overloaded and overwhelmed to the extent that students may become desensitised to emails, in turn missing important events and notices.

AIMS

This students as co-creators (SCC) project aimed to answer the following questions:

- Q1.** How many emails and/or blackboard communications do first year students receive in the initial few weeks of University?
- Q2.** Do first year students experience 'information overload' via email and/or Blackboard communications?
- Q3.** What is the lived experience of first year students when it comes to email and Blackboard communications?

METHOD

Phase I

During semester 1, SCC student members recorded the following:

- where/who emails came from (source),
- what it was regarding (content),
- when emails were received (timing) and
- whether emails were relevant (relevance).

Friday		
Thursday		
Wednesday		
Tuesday		
Monday		

Phase II

Study Design and Participants

Using a cross-sectional design, with a combination of opportunistic and snowball sampling first year Life Sciences students (cohort of 2018/19) were approached (~491 students) in semester 2.

Questionnaire

Following phase I findings, a questionnaire exploring students' experience of communications and emails at the University was constructed. Questions consisted closed and open-ended responses (mixed-method questionnaire). An online version was via Google forms was used.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via word of mouth and via a poster with a quick response (QR) code to online questionnaire. An incentive (entering Amazon voucher competition) was in place to recognise students' time and effort.



Data Analysis

Phase I

Data was tabulated and semester 1 email counts and details documented.



Phase II

Experience of emails and communications are reported as frequency and percentages. Open-ended questions have been analysed by coding key responses and identifying themes. Word clouds and quotes are used to highlight particular aspects.

RESULTS

Phase I

Table 1. Email summary for semester 1.

Key Aspect	Findings
Source of emails	Modules, Blackboard, Students Union, Library, University
Number of emails	Over the course of semester 1, particularly within the Biomedical Sciences (BMS) pathway, the total number of emails were ~164. Weekly emails ranged from 9-19 per week with average being ~14 emails.
Time of emails	Around 32% of emails were received between 9:00pm and 10:00pm. Library notices appeared to be received between 2:00am and 5:00am.



Phase II

Table 2. Participants in study.

Students	Frequency	%
Female	38	84.4
Male	7	15.6
Total	45	100

Table 3. Age of Cohort.

Age category (yrs)	Frequency	%
18-21	33	73.3
22-24	5	11.1
25-27	3	6.7
28-30	2	4.4
37-39	1	2.2
40 and above	1	2.2
Total	45	100



Table 4. Key findings from closed questions on emails.

Key Aspect	Findings
Perception on number of emails	Approximately 38% felt emails were between 1-5/week with a further 38% feeling it was more 6-10/week. Only 11% stated that emails were between 11-15/week.
Feelings about email load during first month of university	On a scale of 1(not at all) to 10 (extremely) most stated being between 5-6 on scale (~51%)
Usefulness of emails	Student responses were rather mixed, though many felt it was more towards useful end 6-7 on scale between 1 (not at all) and 10 (extremely).
Relevance of emails	Again mixed responses with ~27% thinking emails were not that relevant.
Preferred method of communication	Approximately 55% of the first year students felt like more personalised emails would be best. This was followed by Blackboard announcements (36%). Around 7% said they would like fact-to-face communication.

Table 5. Key findings from open-ended questions on emails.

Key Aspect	Example Student Quotes
What types of emails would you like to receive less of?	Student: "Daily notification dashboard summary, it's utterly useless" Student: "Emails irrelevant to course and scope of course" Student: "Promotion emails and emails that are not related to our study contents at all"
What types of emails would you like to receive more often?	Student: "Placements, internships and events. As well drop in sessions. And society. Weekly news feed" Student: "Work and voluntary opportunities and different events that could improve my CV." Student: "The ones that about employment and opportunities"
A small % felt communications via lecturers would be useful.	Student: "Too much is by mail, could be more useful if lecturers talked to people to present them information at the end of lecture for example." Student: "Not much face to face communication. The lecturers just give the lecture most times then leave. I feel it's a bit hard to communicate with them when wanting to ask for help."
Overall experience with emails and communications.	Student: "good experience with blackboard and it is easy to use." Student: "Good - they are useful and informative, as all the information is made clear, with resources easily accessible"

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Use this pilot data as a basis to further explore area using a larger sample size (~9% of 2018/19 Life Sciences cohort took part).
2. Responses indicated that a lot of communication was not directed to the students' level of study. If emails continue to go across all levels and are not directed, students may become desensitized to the information coming through.
3. Exploration of training on email management may be beneficial for students and staff; possibly leading to productive working environments and better physical and mental health.
4. As Blackboard Ultra comes into play, use this opportunity to include a well informed strategy around emails and communications as a whole

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