Student Communications: Our Plan (SCoOP)

A Student Communications Framework

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

2021 - 2023

Vision - what do we want to achieve?

"A cross-institutional, collaborative framework which positions current students as a priority audience at the University of Birmingham, delivering a consistent standard of communications whilst recognising the diversity of our student body. Creating an audience-led approach which provides the right type of communications, on the right channel, at the right time so that students have clarity and feel supported. Ensuring the student voice is at the heart of the communications themselves, as well as their development and evaluation, in order to achieve a truly two-way dialogue and creative communications which engage successfully."

1. Introduction and background

a) Context – why do we need a student comms framework?

- Historically, communications to current students have not always been prioritised and there is a mixed picture of how, or whether, student communications are delivered across the University. Whilst there have been some excellent outputs as a result of communications by design in the recruitment and alumni aspects of the University, current student communications has not received the same investment as these of the student journey (and clear results have been achieved in these other areas as a result of this). This framework seeks to 'close the gap'. This lack of investment has been further compounded by the fact priorities and resources of External Relations are mainly centred around 'recruitment, reputation and research', which means current student comms are often neglected, despite having a clear impact on the first two objectives if done successfully.

- In early 2020, a UEB paper outlined various internal research and proposed a Student Communications Action Plan, which recommended a Student Communications Framework and the creation of the role of Head of Student Communications to deliver it. This was agreed by UEB.

- Over the past year the new role of Head of Student Communications has been reviewing the student communications cycle, gathering feedback internally and externally (with other universities) and making some initial key changes to improve our learning.

- One of the key successes has been a new collaborative approach to our Welcome communications campaign. This pilot 'mini' framework has shown what can be achieved when we work together at institutional and college level, and had very positive student feedback through a formal post-campaign survey, which showed that the majority of students (83.6%) were very or quite satisfied with the welcome email campaign and overwhelmingly in support of the language and tone (93.4% were satisfied).

- Various research exercises have been conducted with students over the past year and existing surveys have also been analysed to inform the framework, recent NSS feedback also highlighted the issues (see section b below).
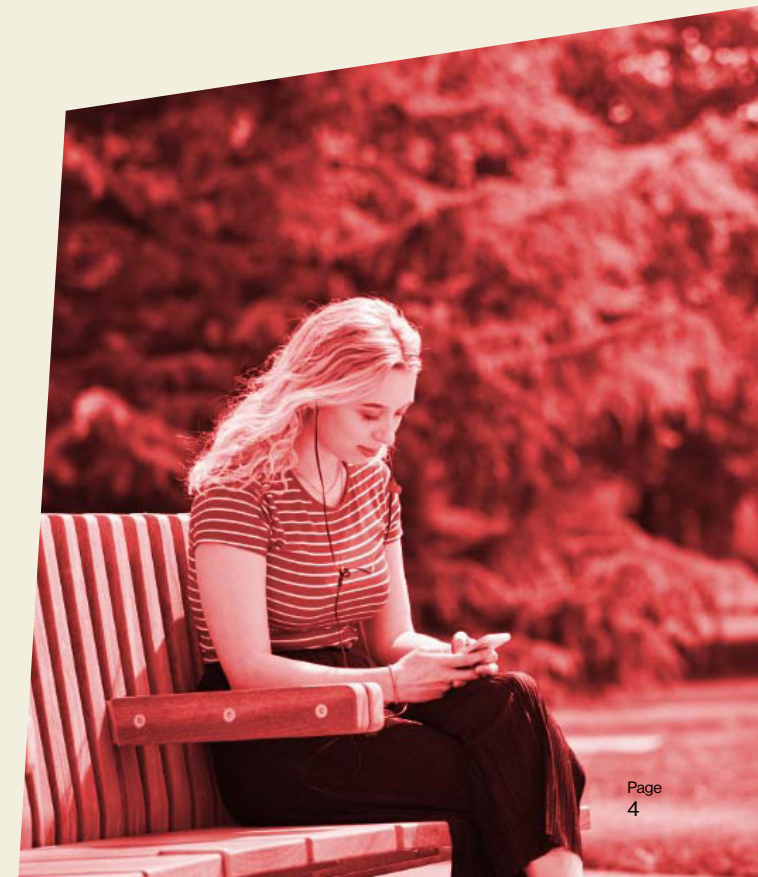
- As part of the framework development, we have consulted with key stakeholders (see appendix) and surveyed how student comms are delivered within colleges and professional services, and what support they might need to do this more successfully. Top level findings suggest practitioners, channels and frequency vary, with social media the preferred channel followed by email, audio visual content is not regularly used, over 94% would benefit from shared communications tolls and over 80% said they would benefit from comms training. (See Appendix for more detailed survey results.)

- In terms of scope, the framework initially focuses on the Edgbaston campus, applies to the whole institution, and is less focused on pure academic communications (such as course/programme communications to students) though obviously there are overlaps into this area as a student doesn't distinguish between internal silos. When we refer to 'communications' we mean anything that broadly falls under the professional area of marketing communications, e.g. email campaigns, websites, social media, audio-visual content, newsletters etc.

All of these factors support the conclusion that we need to fundamentally review the way we deliver and invest in student comms, this equates to cultural change, which will take time. The framework covers two years of the student life cycle as it will take that timeframe to see full impact, though there are many quick wins and outputs for year one 21-22. It is also vital that there is senior support across the institution for the framework, otherwise individual areas will continue to take their own approach and the framework will fail.

b) Student research - how do we know this?

Putting students at the heart of student communications is critical to successful communications, with student feedback a key element of understanding needs. Findings from the Student Insight Panel, focus groups and recent national surveys (internal and external) confirm there is still a long way to go in getting student communications right. Headlines include:

- Review of the international student experience, Feb 2020 - "Students felt the current volume of communications is too high and that this can be overwhelming, and that it also makes it difficult for students to prioritise and understand the information being provided. When looking for specific information, it is not always clear where to find it or what is meant by particular terminology, especially for international students. A preference for more visual communications was suggested. International students have also expressed a desire not to be treated as 'other' which is why user-friendly communications for all students is proposed."

- Student Insight Panel – need for improvements to current channels and a request to be more creative and visual in our comms to engage.

- Student email audit and follow up focus group – too many emails, not always clear why they are being sent to them or who they are from, too much repetition and hard to prioritise.

- Student focus groups – prioritised email and MyUoB app as channels, more social media content and academic support and socialisation as topics.

- PTES – a noticeable theme related to the pandemic response was emails – many felt that they had been bombarded by emails over the past year and that emails had been too long and unclear. This created confusion and a sense of disorganisation.

- PRES - feedback that information was passed on by word of mouth (i.e. from other students rather than official channels – adding to confusion) and also comments about a lack of tailored/relevant content.

- NSS – majority of communications comments seem to be related to problems with academic-related comms, particularly about the lack of two-way dialogue and getting clear information in a timely manner. Lots of references to the need for better mental health and wellbeing, assessment and careers support.

c) Key issues – what are we trying to address?

In summary research has highlighted the following key issues;

- High volume of emails, also leading to difficulties in prioritisation for student audience

- Over reliance of email/copy-driven comms

- Lack of uniformity across a range of communications: including language, formatting, jargon and use of acronyms

- Lack of coordination in timing of communications;

- Lack of centralised/local coordination of communications and events

- Lack of clarity/coordination of who does student comms and lack of comms skills/training for many of those that are expected to deliver comms

- Lack of clarity in comms, especially for international students

- Lack of visual, video and audio content

- Lack of resource and budget

- Lack of trust from students in comms at institutional level – too corporate and not buying into the UoB 'community'

- Lack of identity /authenticity of student comms at central and college level

- Lack of student input/voice in developing, delivering and feeding back on comms

- Lack of clarity on what constitutes a student comms channel and who owns them, e.g. intranet, social media, canvas.

2. The Framework – what we are doing and how we'll be doing it

a) Summary – the case for support

Effective, timely, accurate, relevant and engaging communication to our students is vital in ensuring an overall positive student experience where students are put first. This is particularly important at key points in the student journey such as commencing students, transitioning to the next year and for final year students worrying about their next step, as recent NSS results highlighted. The aspiration is a cycle of listening to, acting and supporting students in line with wider University ambitions. We must create communications that put students first and are not led by internal staff teams, silos and ways of working.

It is in all of our interest to get it right. Improving our current student 'brand' improves our overall reputation and recruitment, and by creating better student comms our staff are more likely to get their message heard.

It is important that student communications at the University of Birmingham are strategically planned and communicated as a comprehensive and coordinated whole, in a timely fashion. It is understandable that students would see the University as one entity and have an expectation that information provided to them would be coherent, consistent and coordinated across that institution. Communications must be written in Plain English, with minimal use of acronyms. We must also use visual comms wherever possible.

We want our communications to recognise the diversity of the student body but also support them in feeling part of a community, with the student voice front and centre for authenticity. Communications must be unambiguous and accessible to meet the diverse needs of students. Students can experience comms at three different levels: institutional/college/programme. However, it is important we align these where possible on key areas, whilst keeping own local nuances. By working together we can improve the 'identities' of our communications and develop an authentic voice.

It must also be recognised that student communications can't 'fix' bigger issues that need to be tackled centrally, e.g. timetable, though they can mitigate impact. To do this successfully communications need to be considered from the inception of strategic projects, and key comms colleagues involved at the correct point.

This process is about cultural change, it will take time and staff will need the right tools and training if we want them to communicate more effectively. This means we need the necessary investment – both staff/student resource and budget - and we need to effectively and regularly measure how we are doing so that we can continually progress. Collating student feedback and effective impact measurement will keep informing student communications planning for the institution, and we must also make sure we respond to their feedback.

The following principles underpin the framework and the innovations that will help get us there.

b) Guiding principles – what underpins our framework?

Through internal consultation with key stakeholders we have agreed five key principles which underpin the framework:

1. We put students first
We communicate with students as a valued and engaged community. Communications are shaped by students' needs, and the student voice is embedded at development, implementation and feedback stages.

2. We deliver communications collaboratively
A strong communications framework depends on an internal collaborative approach to ensure students receive the right communications, and staff are able to deliver messaging efficiently. This includes the way student comms is governed and delivered operationally.

3. We commit to a common standard
We commit to a common standard for communications so that, wherever possible, we speak with a consistent voice across the University whilst recognising this will need to become more tailored for our diverse student audience.

4. We have access to the right tools and resources

High quality communications depend on access to appropriate tools and resources to deliver them, and the training and guidance to enable staff to use these effectively.

5. We strive for clarity, consistency and creativity

Our approach to student communications is underpinned by the three Cs - clarity, consistency, and creativity. Delivering relevant comms to students on the right channel at the right time.

c) Recommendations – innovations to create change

In order to deliver effective student communications across the organisation the framework recommends a number of changes. The Guiding Principles, research and consultations have been shaped into outputs with ten innovations. These have been split into two key areas:

- What we do

- How we do it

Each innovation has been given a short term (semester one)/medium term (semester two)/long term delivery period (year two onwards).

What we do

Innovation 1 – Review existing channels

The new framework will only work if we get core communication platforms and channels right. So **EXISTING** student communications channels will be reviewed, refreshed and developed as required. These include student intranet, email, e-newsletters, MyUoB app, digital signage and events. Best practice guidelines will be produced to support staff delivering communications across these channels.

GUIDELINES DELIVERED SEMESTER ONE, REVIEW AND DEVELOPMENT ONGOING/ LONG TERM
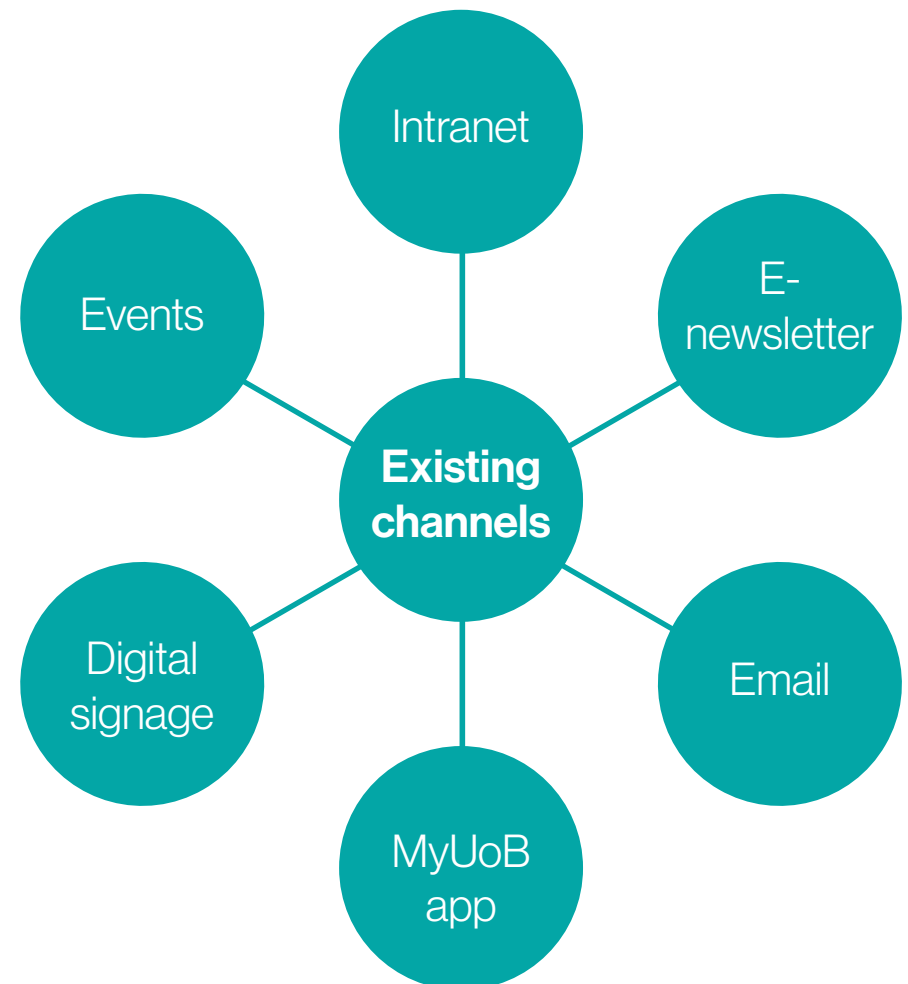
Innovation 2 – Develop new channels

As well as existing channels we also need to develop an approach to **NEW** student comms channels, primarily social media and Canvas development. Traditionally social media and Canvas are not seen as core channels for student 'comms' nor is it something the central student comms team have any real control over. The social media approach is particularly driven by the student feedback to make comms more visual, consumable and engaging. Student research encourages us to consider using video and audio/podcasts for regular updates and exploring text messaging as a core tool. There is also an opportunity to utilise more traditionally academic routes like lecture screens and face to face briefings in lectures/tutorials.

DELIVERED SEMESTER TWO ONWARDS

Social media

Canvas

Lecture screens and F2F

New channels

Text messaging

Audio visual

Peer to peer
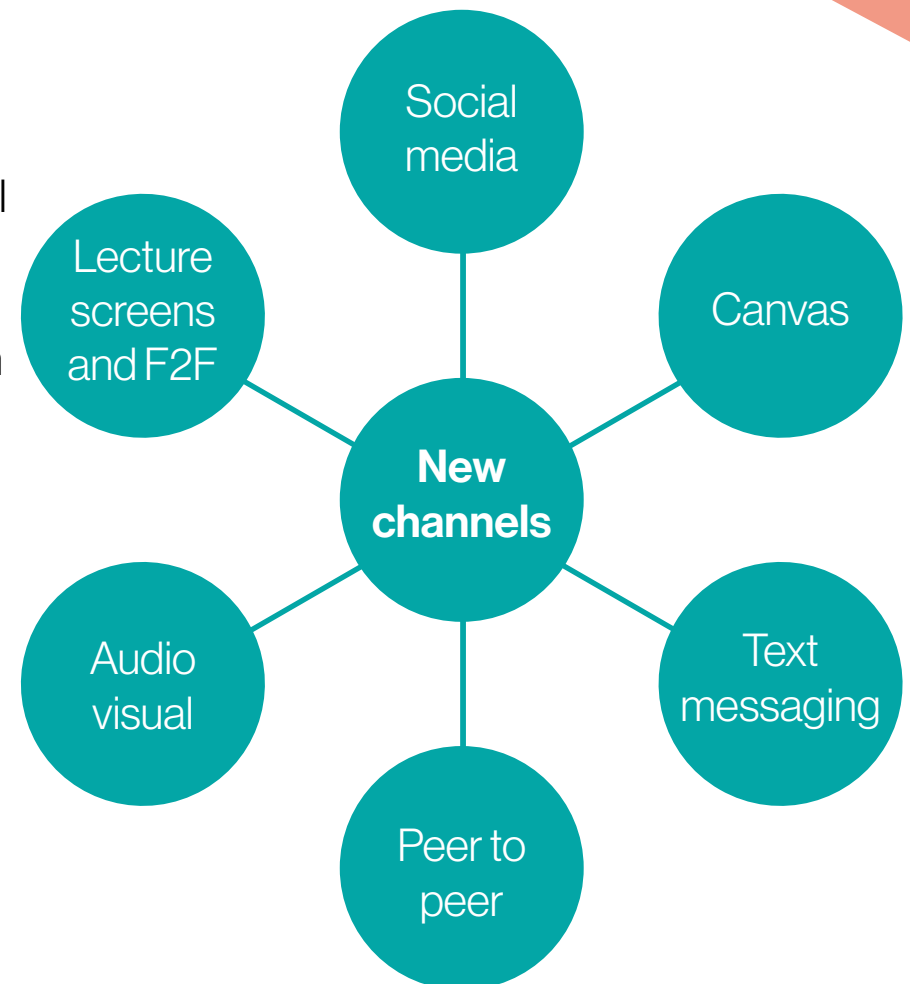
Innovation 3 – Develop an organisational student communications calendar, annual plan and best practice guidance

An organisational calendar for student communications with key dates and campaigns, an annual plan with processes, key themes and messages for each month, and best practice guidance for channel usage (see innovations 1 and 2) to be launched across the student communications network (hosted within a Teams site for the Student Editorial Board). Themes and messaging will also build on feedback gathered from students formally and informally e.g. support with assessments, mental health and wellbeing and careers.

DELIVERED SEMESTER ONE

Innovation 4 – Develop an organisation level student communications identity and launch campaign

An organisational-level student comms visual identity and tone and style guide, with key assets and templates for staff to utilise. Further identity development for any key sub-themes within student communications, e.g. wellbeing, that can be shared at local level. Once identity is complete it will be launched with a high profile student campaign to really showcase the new identity.

IDENTITY DELIVERED SEMESTER TWO ONWARDS, LAUNCH CAMPAIGN YEAR TWO

Innovation 5 – Agree an approvals process for student communications

An agreed approvals and sign-off process for student communications with senior staff (at central and local levels) covering responsibilities and timeframes. This will ensure student audiences get accurate information in the right tone in a timely fashion.

DELIVERED SEMESTER ONE/TWO

How we do it

Innovation 6 – Set up effective Governance and Community of Practice

Create a Student Communications Steering Board with key influencers/decision makers and a Student Editorial Board to coordinate those that deliver student comms at operational level. Using Teams as a platform to manage the Student Editorial Board effectively and share key tools and good practice.

DELIVERED SEMESTER ONE

Innovation 7 – Invest in a new structure and budget for delivering cross-institutional comms

Analysis of who delivers student comms at local and central level and where that resourcing landscape needs some adjustment. Developing a true 'hub and spoke' mechanism for student comms staffing (also see innovation 6). Increased budget at central and local level for delivering student comms and campaigns.

DELIVERED SEMESTER TWO ONWARDS

Innovation 8 – Put students front and centre of our comms and create a group of 'Student Shapers'

Set up a group of 'student shapers' to inform, present and evaluate our comms. Deliver comms created by students wherever possible and employ skilled student workers where appropriate, e.g. welcome, audio-visual development and graphic design. Also utilise the new graduate interns effectively who, though not current students, bring a wealth of recent experience and new ideas.

DELIVERED SEMESTER TWO ONWARDS

Innovation 9 – Develop a programme of comms training for staff

A training programme for staff delivering student communications. Supported by the necessary toolkit and templates/assets to aid staff in delivering student comms (link to innovations 4/6)
Run an annual staff conference for those delivering student communications to build networks and share knowledge and best practice.

DELIVERED SEMESTER TWO ONWARDS

Innovation 10 – Develop an evaluation and insight programme for student comms

An evaluation and feedback mechanism for student comms from the macro to the micro level. Developing an annual programme to evaluate specific campaigns and communications more generally. Use the findings to develop future innovations in the student communications landscape.

BASELINE SURVEY DELIVERED SEMESTER ONE, FULL PROGRAMME SEMESTER TWO ONWARDS

Appendix

- Overview of stakeholders
- Student communications survey with staff – top level findings
- Guiding Principles
- Annual Plan
- Best Practice Guidance

(see separate doc)