2AA: Solent University communicating with students policy
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1. Purpose

The University communicates with its students across a range of issues, via a variety of mediums and at varying levels within the institutional structure. This makes effective communication both complex and challenging. This policy sets out the main channels available for communicating with students, provides guidance to staff on how and when to use them, and outlines the University’s expectations of students and staff regarding communications with/from the University.

The policy is designed to ensure that students receive the right information at the right time. The purpose of the policy is to ensure that students are clear about how and when they can expect to receive information and that messages are timely.

2. Principles

The guiding principles of this policy proposal are:

- to support access by students to essential information in the most appropriate and effective format;
- as far as possible, to avoid confusion for students regarding the variety of communication mechanisms and reduce the potential burden of maintaining multiple channels;
- to provide effective two-way channels of communication, encouraging student feedback;
- to provide guidelines to students about what is expected from them regarding communications with/from the University;
- to ensure equality in communications and that messages are relayed in a way that is accessible to all;
- to communicate effectively with students during a serious incident;
- to provide staff with guidelines on the official medium for communication with/from students on specific issues.

3. Data Protection

The University complies with the General Data Protection Regulation and other Data Protection Law and Solent University’s Data Protection policy safeguards students’ personal data being released to third parties, except where it is a legal requirement to do so, where the student is a sponsored employee and it is appropriate to release data, where students have given their consent, or for the purpose of the University’s debt recovery.

When communicating with students staff must be mindful that personal data, including mobile phone numbers, are not compromised.

4. Responsibilities

4.1 Internal communications

Internal communications, within the External Relations (ER) service, is responsible for:

- management of all non-academic broadcast communications through central channels;
- serious incident communications, where instructed by a member of Senior Management Team.
4.2 **The Policy, Governance and Information service**
The Policy, Governance and Information service is responsible for:

- management of all academic related broadcast communications through central channels.

4.3 **Student services**
Student Services is responsible for:

- maintenance of this policy and associated advice and guidance on policy matters relating to student communications.

4.4 **Academic schools**
Schools are responsible for:

- teaching and learning communications with their students;
- operational communications related to students and the administration of their course;
- serious incident communications, where instructed by internal communications or Senior Management Team.

4.5 **Services departments**
The University’s professional services are responsible for:

- communicating with large groups of students (broadcast communications) through PGI or ER (internal communications);
- communicating with small groups or individual students who are engaged with their service;
- serious incident communications, where instructed by internal communications or Senior Management Team.

4.6 **Students**
Students are responsible for:

- ensuring that they check their primary channels of communication regularly and respond in a timely manner where necessary, particularly in relation to their University email account;
- informing the Student Hub if messages or information are not reaching them in an appropriate or satisfactory manner;
- Updating any changes to their personal details.

5. **Message categories at the University**

Communications to the student population are broadly categorised as below and require approval where indicated:

5.1 **Broadcast communications (to all students or to large groups of students)**
These include all communications to be sent to all students or large groups of students across the University. It can cover subjects such as publicising services to support students, promoting major University news or events, promoting campaigns (National Student Survey, community relations, and so on) or providing information relating to tuition fees or regulation changes.
Such messages may originate within individual services or academic schools, but agreement of their content, and approval to broadcast to the full student body must be sought from:

5.1.1 **The Policy, Governance and Information service** for all messages to students that involve their course and associated study, for example assessment issues, general financial matters. Such messages may need to be tailored for delivery to particular groups of students and this will be addressed via the Student Records System (email: Quercus.project@solent.ac.uk);

5.1.2 **ER (internal communications)** for all general messages that are not related to students’ academic study.

5.2 **Individual services’ communications**
Some services providing support to students may need to contact students individually or in small groups via email, phone call, text message or live chat. Students must have given specific permission to be contacted in this manner and must be given a clear method of opting out of any communication.

Such messages are sent by the individual service, who may need to seek editorial advice from PGI or ER (internal communications) depending on the subject matter.

5.3 **Operational communications**
These include operational messages related to the students’ learning experience and working environment. This may include issues relating to assessment, field trips, curriculum choice, or other course related details and will be sent out by academic staff on behalf of academic schools.

Operational messages relating to the cancellation of scheduled morning classes will be sent to students via SMS text message by TAR only.

5.4 **Teaching and Learning communications**
These include all formal or informal communications between teaching staff and students, on an individual basis or in groups, related to their teaching and learning experience.

Such messages are sent by schools.

5.5 **Serious incident communications**
These include all communications to students related to a serious incident, potentially disrupting study.

Such messages are sent by ER (internal communications).

6. **Communication channels at the University**
This is a summary of the primary and secondary channels available with which to communicate with students, and the people responsible for them:

6.1 **Primary channels**
The three primary channels listed here are email, the student portal and the yellow and red alerts (text banners displayed across the top of the portal). SMS Text messaging is used for immediate issues in particular circumstances:
6.1.1. Email
Email is the University’s prime method of communication to students. All students have a University email account for the duration of their studies at Solent University. Formal notifications from the University should be sent to students’ University email accounts; it may be supplemented by additional means of communication.

Staff will not collect and/or use personal student email accounts for correspondence purposes and at all times will use their staff email when contacting students, colleagues and external partners on University business.

Students must always use staff University email accounts when emailing staff; students should not use or have access to individual staff personal email accounts.

The Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Solent Online Learning (SOL), has its own email facility for all SOL users, which should be used by academic staff to communicate with students enrolled to a course or module. Students can also use SOL to communicate with classmates and lecturers.

Schools and services must ensure that students are not subject to ‘email pollution’. Emails to students must be relevant to them individually; consideration must therefore be given to targeting emails to the relevant identified groupings of the student body. This can be facilitated via student systems in PGI.

Staff and students are reminded that email correspondence forms a legal document and is undertaken on behalf of the University; it is therefore subject to the University’s Email and Instant Messaging Usage Policy (IT04). Staff and students should be mindful about sending non-business messages via email (whether using their University or personal account).

6.1.2. Solent Online Learning (SOL)
The VLE, SOL, is the principle medium for communicating with students about academic matters relating to the delivery of their individual modules and course. The University expects all Module Leaders to ensure that all credit based modules have a presence on SOL detailing the current pattern of delivery and nature of assessment. SOL includes email, chat, fora, and webinar tools, which support effective teaching and learning and Module Leaders are encouraged to make use of these facilities to engage students’ interest. Please note that whilst SOL has an SMS text message facility, this is only used to advise students of short notice class cancellations and is managed by PGI (see 6.1.4 below).

6.1.3 Portal
The portal comprises the default webpages for all students using University-networked computers.

The portal is an essential resource area for student information and contains the applications and links that students will use regularly. It will normally replicate important information that students have been alerted to via email. Students should therefore visit the portal on a regular basis, both on and off campus, to ensure they keep up-to-date with University notifications.

The portal will also publicise items of general interest to students via the Calendar of Events, the ‘Around the University’ section and Channel news. In order to ensure information remains of current interest schools and services should pass details to ER
(internal communications) at the earliest opportunity (email: internal.comms@solent.ac.uk).

6.1.4. ‘Phone/text message
The University utilises SMS messages primarily to advise students of class cancellations where the University receives less than 90 minutes of notice of the cancellation. These messages are sent out by PGI staff.

Other Services may occasionally use SMS text where it is important that the student is provided with urgent information.

Individual staff should not use ‘phone and/or SMS text messaging to communicate with individual students. Staff should not provide students with their personal telephone numbers and students should not contact staff via personal mobile ‘phones.

Students or staff who have any concerns regarding appropriate use of student mobile ‘phone numbers should contact the University’s Information Rights Officer (freedom.information@solent.ac.uk).

6.1.5. Yellow/Red alert
Yellow and red alerts are text banners that can be quickly prepared and displayed across the top of the portal, giving a choice of displaying on: portal pre-login, portal for staff, portal for students, and mobile portal.

Yellow alerts are used to inform students and staff about potential disruption to study or work due to planned works or unplanned short-term disruptions (disruptions to ICT, portal, attendance monitoring system, provisional closure of building/entrance).

Red alerts are exclusively dedicated to communicating serious incidents severely affecting study or work to staff and students for example adverse weather, ICT/electrical shutdown, unexpected closure of building(s).

Staff needing to make a broadcast via yellow/red alert should contact internal communications, ext. 3650 or email internal.comms@solent.ac.uk. The Learning Technologies staff have access to the system and can also place a yellow/red alert if necessary.

In the event of an incident or a situation which occurs out of hours such as adverse weather or a power outage which is likely to deny access to University property or resources, the Duty Director will contact the Communications Manager who will activate a red alert on the portal to inform staff and students of the situation.

6.2 Secondary channels
The secondary channels listed below are a supplementary means of contacting students. These channels have varying degrees of popularity and effectiveness as they may not be referred to consistently across the University. They should not be relied upon as a sole means of relaying important information. Rather they should be used to complement and/or as a back up to the primary channels and for raising awareness only.

6.2.1. Plasma screens
There are many plasma screens across campus, managed jointly by the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) service (operational, upload/download) plus internal communications, within ER, (content) and individual schools/services (content). The screens display a range of messages from operational level items such as library opening
hours to global messages such as promoting the National Student Survey. Screens can also be used during a serious incident to reinforce messages.

6.2.2. Printed material (letter, newsletter, form, poster, leaflet, noticeboard)
This includes printed material, other than teaching and learning materials, that schools/services need to produce for use by students such as posters, leaflets and flyers. Staff should ensure they comply with the University’s branding and visual identity guidelines; staff wishing to produce any printed materials should seek guidance from ER.

There are many noticeboards across campus displaying information for students. Staff with responsibility for maintenance of course noticeboards in their school or service should ensure that information is advertised in a timely manner and, more importantly, is removed when out of date.

6.2.3. Social media
Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and many other websites external to the University portal are not within the preferred list of channels with which to communicate with students; they are not used for messages concerning academic or business matters of the University. Solent University has official Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Live Chat accounts for all audiences. The accommodation office, within Estates and Facilities, University Library, Student Services and Solent Sport also maintain social media accounts in various networking sites.

Social media is to be used as a secondary channel only. It cannot be relied upon to reach a majority of students. The University will use social media primarily to promote general activities across the University.

6.2.4. Other channels: Live Chat, Survey, External/Own website
Live chat: The University Library and Student Services organise live chats with students to obtain feedback and to discuss with students issues affecting student welfare. External Relations participate in live chats for recruitment and public relations purposes. However, this is a secondary channel and cannot be relied upon to reach a majority of students.

Survey: The University undertakes a limited number of surveys in order to prioritise student attention to major national/University campaigns such as the National Student Survey, Your Unit Survey and the Welcome Week survey. The Policy, Governance and Information service (PGI) conducts a graduate survey to ascertain the destinations of leavers from higher education. Surveys are to be used sparingly by staff as they are not a recommended communication channel.

University website: Communication with current students is not usually conducted via the www.solent.ac.uk website, which is used for recruitment and reputation purposes. The exception is Solent Sport, which maintains a dedicated website used as its main channel of communication with students and staff. Selected messages from Solent Sport can also be deployed on the portal/Channel news after they are agreed with internal communications.
6. Feedback channels
The University provides a range of mechanisms to allow formal and informal non-academic feedback to and from students. The following channels are available for formal feedback:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff/Student Consultative Committees/other fora (Course Reps)</td>
<td>Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Hub &amp; Student Achievement Officers (SAOs)</td>
<td>Student Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ Union</td>
<td>Students’ Union</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On an informal basis, staff are reminded that face-to-face communication is the most effective means to raise awareness and reinforce messages sent using the primary channels. Staff engaging in daily conversations with students encourages early mutual feedback that will foster good communications.

7. Professionalism in communications
Staff are reminded that they have a responsibility to serve the best interests of the University and to ensure appropriate content in all communications at all times.

Communications are undertaken on behalf of the University, therefore are subject to the University’s Email and Instant Messaging Usage Policy (IT04). The principles of respect and dignity should be observed in all correspondence.

Staff should ensure appropriate response times when communicating with students. A fair judgement should be made regarding the nature of the issue at hand. Students should not expect individual staff to respond during the University leave periods and during these times should refer any query to School administrative staff for guidance in the first instance.

During absence or when staff will not be able to respond in a reasonable time, staff should provide an autoreply to their emails with details of an alternative contact.

8. Related policies and documents
- Email and Instant Messaging Usage Policy (IT04)
- Student Handbook
Summary of student communications channels and responsibilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MESSAGE CATEGORY</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
<th>ORIGINATOR</th>
<th>PRIMARY CHANNELS</th>
<th>SECONDARY CHANNELS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>PORTAL</td>
<td>EMAIL</td>
<td>Y/R ALERT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcast communications (all students or large groups)</td>
<td>Campaigns, major news and events, student services, student experience, tuition fees, regulations, request to complete major surveys.</td>
<td>Schools / services</td>
<td>Discuss with PGI or ER (IC) (see 4.1 - 4.2)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific services’ communications</td>
<td>Advice, welfare, return of books, moving rooms in halls, payment of fees, debt sanctions, Solent Sport.</td>
<td>Services</td>
<td>Discuss with ER (IC)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational communications</td>
<td>Lecture theatre/room changes, timetable changes, lecture cancellations, reminders, deadlines</td>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and learning communications</td>
<td>Coursework, learning and teaching advice, course/module discussions.</td>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious incident communications</td>
<td>Snow, flood, ICT / portal disruption, closure of buildings, power outage.</td>
<td>ER (IC)</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key

YES: Recommended channel
NO: Channel not recommended for this message
DISCUSS WITH... Academic Services or ER Internal Communications/PR Officer may need to review and approve the content of the message for that channel.