

**UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF
FIRST YEAR LIFE SCIENCE STUDENTS**

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the academic year of 2018 – 2019 we completed a project that looked into the current state of email communications from university to students with Life Sciences department. The purpose of this project was to obtain a clearer understanding of how first year students felt about receiving emails within their first year at university, and if they truly did receive a great quantity of emails and notifications, which in turn rendered them unable to decipher between key and unnecessary messages.

In order to collate some concrete evidence, we surveyed the current first year students in the Life Sciences department to explore their experiences of email and blackboard communications. The outcome of our research showed that the average number of emails per week for students was 14 emails. Most thought it was less than this number. From the total number of participants, most participants gave an average rating with regards to the relevance of the emails (28.9%). We had mixed responses from participants when it came to being asked about how they felt about emails within the first month of starting university. Some saying it has been a good and informative experience overall and others saying that more face-to-face communication is needed with the lecturers rather than just constant repetitive notifications on Blackboard. Furthermore, ~55% of the students wanted to receive personalised emails as their preferred method of university communications.

The pilot data herein should be explored further given some of the mixed responses. On one hand, some students found the emails to be useful and relevant to their courses. On the other hand, nearly half of the students who took part in the survey did not find the emails to be useful. This could be for several reasons and one that was frequently referred to by the students was that much of the information was not directed to their level of study.

Whether an organisation has email/information overload or not, it is important to train all within an organisation how to manage such situations. This could include email management techniques for staff and students, organisational strategies with respect to emails (or better knowledge of such strategies among those in institution) and inbox usability improvements (with relevant training). It is suggested, that the university could look into this for productive working environments and one which will work towards minimising stress and maintaining mental well-being.

2. BACKGROUND AND AIMS

2.1 Background

All organisations regard effective communication as vital for existence (Fielding, 2006). Organisations with effective communication processes tend to have positive working environments and appear to have more success in achieving their aims (Morley et al., 2002). Effective communication has also been reported to enhance job satisfaction and motivation for employees, resulting in overall improved benefits for the organisation (Zwijze-Koning and De Jong, 2005; Hargie, 2016). Furthermore, according to Tjosvold (1991), effective communication within and between groups is vital for innovation in organisations.

In Higher Education (HE), the main forms of communication are; person-to-person, email, phone conversations and hand written documents (Howard, 2014). Over the past few decades, with new waves of technology, certain forms of communication have begun to dominate in HE environments. These include, but are not limited to, emails, virtual learning environments (VLEs) such as Blackboard/Moodle and University web pages; internal (intranet) and external (internet) facing (Howard, 2014).

When it comes to emails, it is not just Universities which have seen an increase in use. Worldwide, the growth in volumes of emails reflect its increased importance as a channel of communication (The Radicati Group, Inc., 2015). In fact, within the workplace (University or otherwise), emails are accepted as a leading method for the exchange of ideas, and has become, more and more, critical in the lives of professionals (Whittaker and Sidner, 1996). However, this continual growth in email volumes has been documented to increase email users' likelihood of experiencing 'information overload' (Edmunds and Morris, 2000).

According to Edmunds and Morris (2000), 'information overload' is having more relevant material than one can process or absorb. Large information volumes can often lead to receivers being unable to process the information without interruption, causing errors and/or omission of key aspects (Klapp, 1986). Similarly, 'email overload' is referred to as a state when users are unable to manage their incoming messages and in turn aspects of their regular work (Vacek, 2014).

Situations with 'email overload' have been widely explored and discussed in many papers and conference proceedings. However, much has been with respect to occupations and academic experiences (Dawley and Anthony, 2003; Dabbish and Kraut, 2006; Span, 2007; Pignata et al., 2015; Haskin, 2016). Increasingly, we are seeing 'email overload' being reported in the student population (Hole, 2008; Waddington, 2010). A recent Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)-funded project, focusing on postgraduate students at the Institute of Education, found that students mentioned frequent feelings of being overloaded and overwhelmed with digital and course related information (JISC, 2019).

Since starting the University of Westminster (UOW) in September 2018, the student members (first year Life Sciences students, Level 4) in this co-creators project experienced what felt like an enormous number of email and VLE (i.e. Blackboard) communications. At times, many of these communications seemed unnecessary. The student members were progressively feeling a form of desensitisation (i.e. reduced reaction) to the information being received on a daily basis. For example, some of the information sent, such as deadlines for projects, actually related to other levels (i.e. Level 5 and 6 students). Furthermore, information relating to placement year deadlines, appeared once again, to be more directed to students in other years. Not only were there feeling of disconnect with the messages/communications, some communications appeared to be "pinging" on mobile devices (such as ipads and phones) late into the evening.

To the best knowledge of this students as co-creators (SCC) group, the issue of 'email overload' or 'information overload', has been mentioned (i.e. via course committee meetings) and possibly explored (in the past) at the University of Westminster. However, there appears to be little documentation/evidence (or trail) of what changes occurred to better student experience.

2.2 Aim/s

The current SCC project aimed to carry out a pilot study exploring 'email overload'/'information overload' within the student population at the University of Westminster, in particular focusing on first year Life Sciences students. Whilst the student members of this SCC group were experiencing feelings of 'overload' – was this being experienced among other first year students?

This SCC project aimed to answer the following questions:

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

3. METHOD

3.1 Phase I

Phase one of this study involved the student members (two members) in this SCC project to investigate some key points with respect to the emails they had received over the first 12 weeks of university (semester 1). Emails were recorded with respect to where/who the emails had come from (source), what it was regarding (content), when they received the email (timing) and whether the email was relevant to them or not (relevance). The gathering of this information was an important step to creating the online questionnaire for all Life Sciences students.

3.2 Phase II

3.2.1 Participants

This study used a cross-sectional design, with a combination of opportunistic and snowball sampling. Ethical approval was sought from the Centre of Teaching and Innovation (CTI) Ethics Committee. The target population, Life Sciences students, in the 2018/19 cohort had approximately 491 students. Communications about the research were advertised on campus via posters, Blackboard notifications, emails and word of mouth. All students gave informed consent prior to participation. Data was kept anonymous and confidential. The researchers aimed to recruit 100+ Life Sciences students across all courses, males and females of varying ages and ethnic backgrounds.

3.2.2. Questionnaire Design

Following an overview of the literature and the findings from phase I of this study, a questionnaire exploring students' experience of communications and emails at the

University. Questions consisted of tick box, Likert type and open-ended responses (mixed-method questionnaire). The hard copy of questionnaire was transferred to an e-version using Google forms. The questionnaire was checked and edited (where necessary) by the academic partner to ensure capture of aspects to address relevant aims. The final version of the online questionnaire consisted of two broad sections:

- Demographic details
- Experience of communications and emails

3.2.3 Recruitment Strategy for Questionnaire Responses

A poster was designed to be eye catching and attract attention to the project. The poster incorporated a quick response (QR) code for convenience and mentioned the incentive (entering Amazon voucher competition) recognising students' time and effort. The poster was shared via core modules for the first-year cohort using a combination of Blackboard announcements, emails and face-to-face communications. A period of approximately 13 weeks was allowed for data collection.

3.3 Data Analysis

3.3.1 Phase I Data

Phase one data was tabulated and an overall of semester 1 email counts and details was documented.

3.3.2 Phase II Data

Questionnaire data was collected and stored as part of the Google form features. This allowed quick initial analysis by the researchers. Further quantitative analysis was carried out. This was completed using a combination of Microsoft Excel and SPSS. Demographic details are presented, where appropriate, as means \pm standard deviation (SD). Experience of emails and communications are reported in frequency and percentages for males, females and for the group as a whole. Open ended questions on the questionnaire were analysed by examining comments one at a time and coding accordingly. Key responses/themes that reoccurred are presented as word clouds or quotes.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Phase I

The students' detailed tally of Semester 1 emails can be found in Appendix D. In summary, it appears that over the course of Semester 1, particularly within the BMS pathway, the total number of emails were approximately 164. In terms of weekly email numbers, students were receiving a wide range from lowest being 9 emails/per week to highest being 19/emails per week. On average, per week, they were receiving 14 emails/week (Table 1.)

Table 1. Number of emails to Life Sciences students (in particular BMS) over Semester 1, 2018/19.

Week	Date in 2018/19	Total Emails
1	24 – 30 Sept	13
2	1 – 7 Oct	15
3	8 – 14 Oct	9
4	15 – 21 Oct	10
5	22 – 28 Oct	13
6	29 Oct – 4 Nov	10
7	5 – 11 Nov	16
8	12 – 18 Nov	19
9	19 – 25 Nov	13
10	26 Nov – 2 Dec	19
11	3 – 9 Dec	14
12	10 – 16 Dec	13
	Total in Sem 1	164
	Average per week	14

In terms of timing, these emails came in at varied times (Table 2.). Over the semester, most emails (53 emails) were coming in between 9:00pm and 10:00pm. Emails at this time were particularly from Blackboard (see Appendix D). Emails coming in during the early hours of day, for example those around 2:00am and then again around 5:00am, were Library notices (see Appendix D). It is important to be mindful that the numbers here could vary depending on what each student has borrowed.

Table 2. Times emails came into inboxes for Life Sciences students, BMS in particular.

Times of day	Wk 1	Wk2	Wk3	Wk4	Wk5	Wk6	Wk7	Wk8	Wk9	Wk10	Wk11	Wk12	Total
1am to 1:59 am													
2am to 2:59am	2	2		1	1	1	1	1		1		1	11
3am to 3:59am													0
4am to 4:59am													0
5am to 5:59am		2			1	1						1	5
6am to 6:59am													0
7am to 7:59am		1								1			2
8am to 8:59am													0
9am to 9:59am			3	1			2	2		2			10
10am to 10:59am		1						2	1	2		1	7
11am to 11:59am	2		1		1					1	2		7
12pm to 12:59pm	2	2		1		1				1		2	9
1pm to 1:59pm	1				1		1	2		1	1	1	8
2pm to 2:59pm		1	1				2		2	1		1	8
3pm to 3:59 pm					1	1		4		1	1		8
4pm to 4:59 pm		2				3	3	2	2	1	2		15
5pm to 5:59 pm					1								1
6pm to 6:59pm	1			2	2		1		1		1	3	11
7pm to 7:59pm					1			1	2	1	1		6
8pm to 8:59pm									1		1		2
9pm to 9:59pm	5	4	4	5	4	3	6	4	4	6	5	3	53
10pm to 10:59pm								1					1
11pm to 11:59pm													0
12am to 12:59am													0
Total	13	15	9	10	13	10	16	19	13	19	14	13	164

4.2 Phase II

A total of 46 participants completed the questionnaire for this work. Most were Life Sciences students expect 1 who was from Software Engineering. To maintain uniformity, this one student was not included in the analysis reported herein. Table 3. below, shows a higher response rate from females (84.4%) compared to males (15.6%). However, given the large first year cohort (~491 students) only a very tiny fraction (~9%) engaged with the questionnaire.

Table 3. Number of Life Sciences participants who took part (n=45); categorised by gender.

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

Many of the students were between the ages of 18-21 years of age (73.3%). On the whole, over 84% of the cohort were below the age of 25 years (Table 4). Approximately 4% of the cohort were from an older age category (37 years or greater)

Table 4. Number of Life Sciences participants (n=45); by age categories.

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

Around 82% of the study population were 'home' students, followed by small group of EU students (15.6%) and just one international (non-EU) student. The cohort of 45, strongly consisted of first year Biomedical Sciences (BMS) students (~71%) and other BMS courses (~20%). There was also a small representation from non-BMS courses (~9%) – see Table 5.

Table 5. Number of Life Sciences participants; categorised by residence and course of study.

Residence	Frequency	%	Course	Frequency	%
Home	37	82.2	Biomedical Sciences	32	71.1
Non-EU	1	2.2	Applied Biomedical Sciences	1	2.2
Other-EU	7	15.6	Biomedical Sciences (Sandwich)	8	17.8
			Pharmacology Physiology	2	4.4
			Human Nutrition	1	2.2
			Herbal Medicine	1	2.2
Total	45	100	Total	45	100

Responses to this questionnaire came from students from a diverse ethnic background (Table 6.). A large group of Asian students (33.3%) and students from other ethnic groups (33.3%) participated. A small group of students from Black/African/Caribbean background also took part (17.8%). There was little representation from Caucasian students (~9%).

Table 6. Ethnic background of participants

Ethnicity	Frequency	%
Caucasian/White British	4	8.9
Asian/Asian British	15	33.3
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	8	17.8
Mixed Multiple Ethnic Group	2	4.4
Other Ethnic Group	15	33.3
Prefer not to say	1	2.2
Total	45	100

With regards to emails, most students (76%) felt that emails on a weekly basis were anywhere between 1-10 emails. A small percentage (11%) felt like more emails came through on a weekly basis (somewhere between 11-15) and there were a few students (9% of the cohort) who perceived emails to be more than 15 a week (see Figure 1).

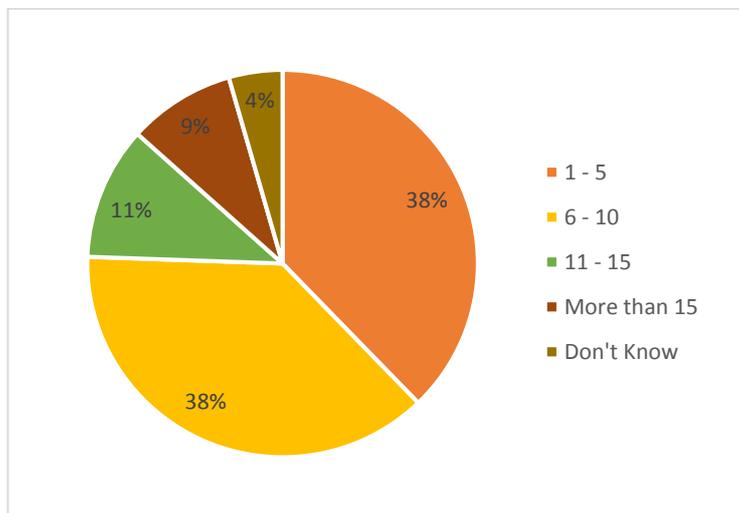


Figure 1. Pie chart representing the average number of emails students thought they received on a weekly basis (n = 45).

When students were asked how they felt about their email load within first month of starting university, most (26.7%) responded with a mid-response (5 on scale) - between not at all overloaded (1 on scale) to extremely overloaded (10 on scale) – see Figure 2.

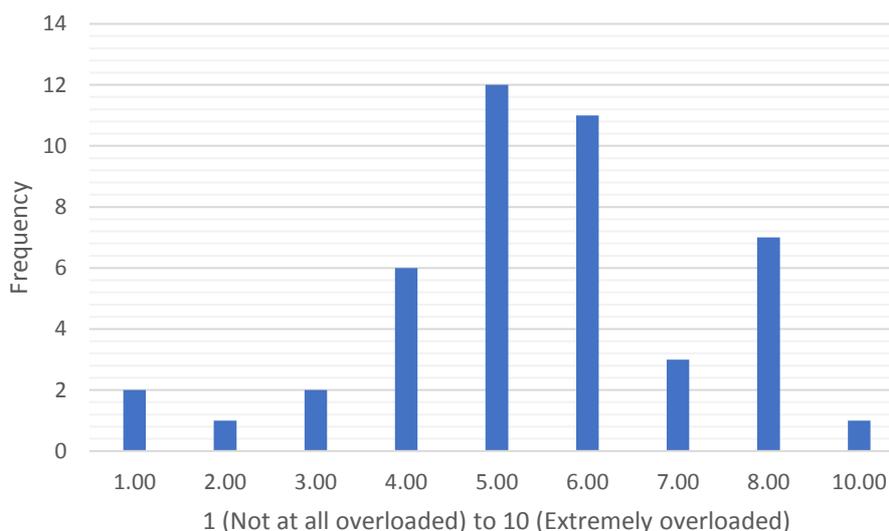


Figure 2. Bar graph representing feelings of overload in first month of starting university (n = 45).

In terms of usefulness of emails, student responses were rather mixed (Figure 3.) Many (35.5%) felt it was more towards the extremely useful end and marked 6 and 7 on the scale.

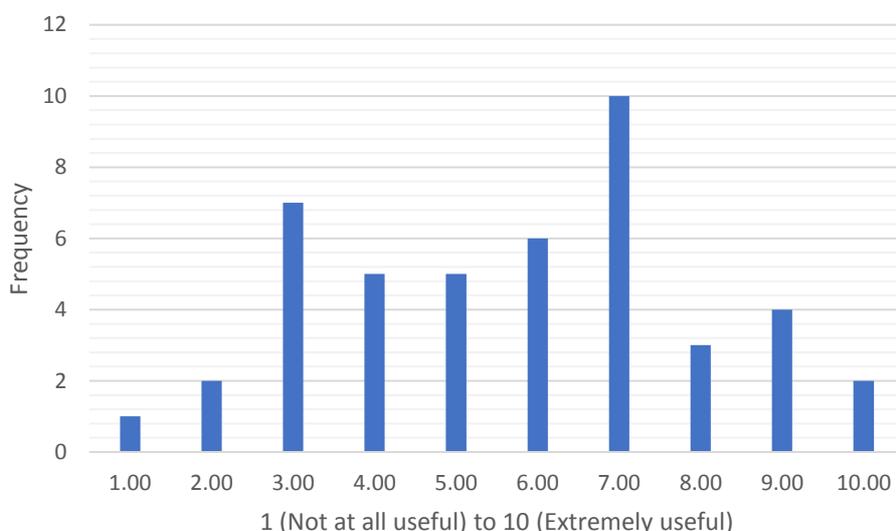


Figure 3. Bar graph representing thoughts on usefulness of emails (n = 45).

Similarly, in terms of relevance of emails, most students (28.9%) felt it was mid-way between not at all relevant and always relevant (5 on scale) – see Table 7.

Table 7. Student response to how relevant the emails were to their course.

Scale	Frequency	%
1 (Not at all relevant)	1	2.2
2	0	0
3	7	15.6
4	4	8.9
5	13	28.9
6	7	15.6
7	4	8.9
8	7	15.6
9	1	2.2
10 (Always relevant)	1	2.2
Total	45	100

When question on preferred method of communication however, most first year students (55%) responded that personalised emails would be best for them. This was followed by Blackboard announcements (36%) – see Figure 4. Of the cohort, only 7% said face-to-face communication was preferred.

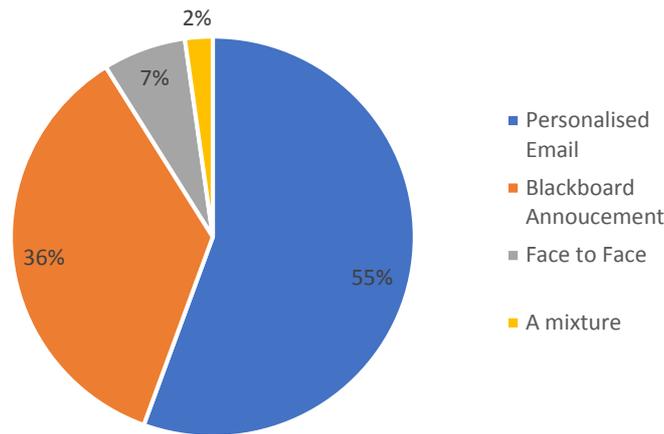


Figure 4. Pie chart representing preferred mode of communication (n = 45).

On the whole, of the 45 students' responses, it appears that most in their first year, are finding that the course is meeting their expectation (73.3%), with around 17.8% veering towards the latter end of a 1-10 scale, with one representing 'strongly disagree' to question on whether course is meeting expectation. Around 8.9% were in the middle.

Figure 5., shows a combined word cloud of all open-ended questions such as; what are your thoughts/opinions on the way the University communicates with students? What types of emails would you like to receive less often? What types of emails would you like to receive more often?



Figure 5. Word cloud of open-ended questions.

Overall, the received responses included wanting to receive emails regarding volunteer work, placement opportunities and events; for example:

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”*

Students would like to see less emails with repetitive relayed blackboard messages and non-specific emails sent to first year students such as deadlines for level 5 and 6 students; for example:

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”*

Some students also mentioned that it would be better to have communication via lecturers, for example:

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.”*

The overall experience with emails and Blackboard has been positive and many first year students indicated that the platforms were useful, informative and held easily accessible resources.

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”*

5. DISCUSSION

Effective communication is vital for all organisations, including universities, if they are to succeed, grow and innovate (Fielding, 2006; Tjosvold, 1991). The current project explored communications at the University of Westminster, with a particular focus on first year Life Sciences students.

Most of the responses were from BMS pathway (~91%), with a large number of females responding (84.4%). Furthermore, much of the cohort were in the young age category. The greater response from females and increased response from younger students appears to follow the trend for usual survey-based work (Singer, 2000; More and Tarnai, 2002). However, some work suggests that in terms of trends, more Caucasians tend to fill in questionnaires (Curtin et al., 2000). This was not the case in this current study where most of the students were of various ethnicities and is possibly a reflection of the demographics a university based in Central London.

This project found that typically, Life Sciences students (in particular BMS) received on average 14 emails per week over semester 1 of their studies. When questioned on this, only 11% of the students were able to select that the average number of emails they received per week fell within the 11-15 emails. Most felt it was either 1- 5 or 6-10 emails. When asked about the load of emails, most students appeared to not see this email throughput as an overload. This is a positive finding given that often the assumption is that there is information/email overload in HE (Hole, 2008). Whilst most students felt that many of the emails were relevant, when asked about usefulness of emails a varied response across the spectrum from being very useful to not at all was seen. It seems that the majority of students were neutral about emails they received at the beginning of the semester, with most being rather positive about receiving weekly emails. Contrary to the thoughts of this Students as Cocreators team, students wished to keep receiving emails though they did clearly emphasise only those relevant and specific to their course.

Researching about the specifics of emails within any organisation is very important to avoid information/email overload (Edmunds and Morris, 2000). Much work has shown that such an overload can often lead to overwhelming feels and stress (Hole, 2008; McMurtry, 2014). While the students in this study seemed to be able to handle the emails coming through, it is possible to see how the responses herein could easily steer towards feelings overload. Such feelings can certainly happen at both the student level and also the staff level (Hole, 2008).

Given the low response rate in connection to this study (~9%) it is difficult to translate the findings to the larger cohort in Life Sciences. This lack in engagement could have been as a result in delayed questionnaire release. The suggestion would be to rerun this questionnaire but at an appropriate time within the academic year, using varied communication mode including more emphasis on use of social media platforms such as twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Studies have shown increased engagement with questionnaires via these avenues (Efthymiou and Antoniou, 2012; Kayam and Hirsch, 2012).

Whether an organisation has email/information overload or not, in this day and age it is important to train all within the organisation how to manage such situations. Much work is increasingly being carried out on management of email overload. According to McMurtry (2014) there are three types of recommendations for coping with or mitigating email overload in the workplace. These include email management techniques for the employee, organisational strategies with respect to emails and inbox usability improvements. It is suggested, that the university could look into this for productive working environments and one which will work towards minimising stress and maintaining mental well-being.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To conclude, it can be established from the data that the majority of students received a fair number of emails weekly. However, this may differ for those on different courses such as BMS, Pharmacology and Physiology, Human Nutrition, to name a few.

The pilot data herein should be explored further given the mixed responses. On one hand, some students found the emails to be useful and relevant to their courses. On the other hand, nearly half of the students who took part in the survey did not find the emails to be useful. This could be for several reasons and one that was frequently referred to by the students was that much of the information was not directed to their level of study.

In spite of this, most of the students who took part in the survey still wish to continue receiving personalised emails from Blackboard, as they would like to stay up to date with the University and their studies. Many have also commented on some improvements that could be made to Blackboard, for example 'opportunities for students regarding the course' and their 'progression'.

It has also come to our attention that the Blackboard site has recently been renovated. Hopefully the new site will give an improved user-friendly experience to new first years. Staff and current

students will also benefit from this change and we believe that with our findings, feedback can be relayed to the university information technology (IT)/communications department for them to add further improvements where necessary.

7. DISSEMINATION

This Students as Cocreators team aim to send this report to the university IT/communications department who handle student (or even staff) emails and the Blackboard team. It is felt they may find this research particularly useful as they move forward to improve the communication between the university and the students.

It is envisaged that the team will communicate the outcomes Student as Cocreators events. Moving forward, we hope to liaise with smoke magazine to possibly write an article on what we found and our suggestions in terms of the way forward. Writing an article, drawing on our conclusions will not only allow other students to how to better handle communication from university.

In addition, we will require help from the Student as Cocreators team with regards to the dissemination of our project. Inviting members from the university IT/communications department to the Student as Cocreators annual event where we will be presenting our conclusions, would be a great opportunity for them to see how some of the current students feel about university communications and the necessary steps needed in order to improve the communication standards for all within the university.

8. REFLECTION

The research experience that we were faced with overall was a positive one. We successfully disseminated our questionnaire, posters and links. We learned a lot through the research experience such as generating QR codes, as well as researching various popular online platforms where we could upload our questionnaire such as Google Forms and analysing the research data that we obtained.

Even though we sent out posters, links and our incentives were persuasive however; we did not get as much feedback on the questionnaire as we had initially hoped. We aimed to get as many responses as possible from first year students so before we released the questionnaire we had hoped to get at least two hundred responses. In the end we only received forty-six responses in total. We know that getting our questionnaire onto Google Forms, disseminating the poster and questionnaire link was all done together in a very short period of time. We conclude that it would definitely have been possible for us to obtain more responses if we had sent out our questionnaire around the mid of semester two – better timing.

In the future, we will aim to get our questionnaire publicised by the beginning / towards the mid of semester two as many students will not be too busy. Alongside this, in the future, we would also like to hold a small event just a few days before releasing our questionnaire, where students can gather and hear about our background and the aims of this research. But the most important thing that we have learned from this is to have a realistic Gantt chart to follow (and have a contingency plan) in order to complete everything on time. This would enable less work pile up towards the latter stages of the project. We learned that in projects such as these, when working with others, you not only need to be responsible for yourself, but also your team members and work collectively. All our team members maintained a good work ethic throughout and if there were any issues, we did our best to resolve them.

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10. APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – Ethics Application



University of Westminster
University Research Ethics Sub Committee

OFFICE USE: ___ / ___ / ___

Application for Research Ethics Consideration*

COVER SHEET

Section 1 – PROJECT AND APPLICANT DETAILS	
1.1 Project Title: University Communications: Lived Experiences of First Year Students	
1.2 Applicant Details	
Name: Maira Bilal, Alisha Akbar, Kitija Baiba Antonova	University Email Address: w1678023@my.westminster.ac.uk w1712632@my.westminster.ac.uk w1712657@my.westminster.ac.uk
Contact Address: 115 New Cavendish Street Fitzrovia London W1W 6XH	Telephone Number: 02079115000
School: University of Westminster – College of Liberal Arts and Science	
Please check the relevant box: Undergraduate <input type="checkbox"/> Postgraduate <input type="checkbox"/> MPhil/PhD Student <input type="checkbox"/> Staff	
I have read the University's Code of Practice Governing the Ethical Conduct of Research	
1.3 Supervisor/Dean of School/ School Research Director details	
Please note that all applicants with a supervisor(s) must ensure that the supervisor signs the declaration at the bottom of this page if completing Part A only or in Section 10.3 if completing Part B.	
All staff must ensure that their Dean of School, or School Research Director (or nominee), as appropriate, signs the declaration at the bottom of this page if completing Part A only or in Section 10.3 if completing Part B	
Name: Dr Romy Begum	University Email Address: begumru@westminster.ac.uk
School: University of Westminster – College of Liberal Arts and Sciences	Telephone Number: 0207 911 5000 x64145

NOW COMPLETE PART A (* Part A is a self-assessment form used to ascertain whether you have ethical implications in your work. Part A is not an Application for Consideration by University Research Ethics Sub Committee (URESC) unless specified when submitting. Part B is the Application for Ethical Approval and when submitting, it should have a Cover Sheet and Part A attached in all cases).

PART A

Section 2 – Project Details

2.1 Please provide a description of the background with references to relevant literature (250 words maximum):

There appears to be little research into how mass email communication from university staff may desensitise students to key (important) messages sent. We found a blog post by Haskin (2016) which gave university staff an idea of what they could do to improve the email system, however no evidence of student thoughts were included in the post nor indication of whether universities have an email monitoring system in place. Other work (Pignata et al., 2015), has focused on employees' perceptions of email communication. However, this work reported on how academics and professionals organised their emails and how email overload led to increased levels of work-related stress for staff. Our project work aims to focus on students. Firstly, we wish to discover IF there is an information overload for first year students (personal experiences point to there being overload). We would like to collate some concrete evidence for this and use this evidence as a basis to create a questionnaire. We will survey the current first year population in Life Sciences to further explore experiences of email and blackboard communications. We hope to be able to reveal the lived experience of first year students and possibly suggest ways forward for effective communication.

References:

Haskin, Julia (2016) EAB [online] (Date accessed 25/10/18) <https://www.eab.com/daily-briefing/2016/12/05/why-students-dont-read-your-emails>
Pignata, S., Lushington, K., Sloan, J., Buchanan, F. (2015) Employees' Perceptions of Email Communication, Volume and Management Strategies in an Australian University, Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management. 37(2):159-171.

2.2. Please provide a brief description and the aims of your study (250 words maximum):

The aims of this research are:

Q1. How Many Email and 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 Blackboard Communications?

Q3. What is the Lived Experience of First Year Students when it comes to email and Blackboard communications?

2.3. Please outline the design and methodology of your study and details of the selection and recruitment of participants (if any) [attach extra information as necessary] (250 words maximum in total):

Participants :

First year students in the School of Life Sciences (studying, Biomedical Sciences, Applied Biomedical Science, Biological Science, Biochemistry and Human Nutrition) will be recruited into this study. Male and female participants will be recruited into the study and all participants will be above the age of 18 years. Informed consent will be sought from all participants.

Procedures:

- Phase I:** The three first year student members in this project, will go through their emails to date (i.e. first 9 weeks of university). Task here will be to tally where the emails have come from, what it was regarding, when email was received and whether the email was relevant or not. This information will give the researchers a concrete evidence to develop the online survey.

APPENDIX B – Questionnaire

Communication and Emails at the University of Westminster - First Year Experiences

Dear participants,
As we approach the end of our first year at the University of Westminster, it would be great to hear from you regarding communication and emails so far. We are interested to find out more about aspects such as what emails/communications you found useful, what was not so useful and whether you may have experienced an overload or not. This research is being conducted as part of a students as co-creators (SCC) project.

Please note:
All participation in this project is entirely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. You do not have to answer every question if you do not wish to do so, but answering all questions will enable us to better understand this area. Your responses will be made anonymous and will be kept confidential. No individuals will be identifiable from any collated data, written report of the research or any publications arising from it. All computer data files will be encrypted and password protected. The researcher will keep files in a secure place and will comply with the requirements of the Data Protection Act.

If you would like to find out what the outcomes are in a few months time, please do not hesitate to contact us and we will debrief you on findings. If you have any further questions about the research or the data you provide, please contact either one of the following:

Maira Bilal: w1678023@my.westminster.ac.uk
Alishba Akbar: w1712832@my.westminster.ac.uk
Dr Rummy Begum: begumnu@westminster.ac.uk

*Required

1. I confirm I am willing to be a participant in the above study and that I have the right to withdraw at any point without explanation. I will not be identifiable from the data, and findings will be communicated at a later date should I wish to know.

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No

Researchers' Consent

We confirm that we have provided participants with information regarding the project and have given participants the opportunity to contact us should they need any other information related to the study.

Maira Bilal, Alishba Akbar and Rummy Begum

Section A

This section asks a few questions about you.

2. Gender: *

Mark only one oval.

- Male
 Female
 Transgender
 Other
 Prefer Not to Say

3. Age: *

Mark only one oval.

- 18-21
 22-24
 25-27
 28-30
 31-33
 34-36
 37-39
 40 and above
 Prefer not to say

4. Ethnicity: *

Mark only one oval.

- White British
 Mixed Multiple Ethnic Groups
 Asian / Asian British
 Black / African / Caribbean / Black British
 Other Ethnic Group
 Prefer Not to Say

5. Course: *

Mark only one oval.

- Biomedical Sciences
 Applied Biomedical Science
 Biomedical Sciences (Sandwich)
 Biological Sciences
 Biochemistry
 Human Nutrition
 Human Nutrition with Foundation
 Pharmacology & Physiology
 Other: _____

6. Residence:

Mark only one oval.

- Home Student
 Other EU
 Non-EU
 Other: _____

Section B

This section asks questions on emails and communication at the University.

7. On average how many emails do you/did you receive weekly? *

Mark only one oval.

- 1 - 5
 6 - 10
 11 - 15
 More than 15
 Don't Know
 Other: _____

8. On a scale of 1-10, how did you feel about emails within the first month of starting University? *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Not at all overloaded	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely overloaded									

9. On a scale of 1-10, how useful have you found the emails you have received to date? *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Not at all useful	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely useful									

10. On a scale of 1-10, how relevant are these emails to your course? *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
No, not at all relevant	<input type="radio"/>	Yes, always relevant									

11. What is your preferred communication method? *

Mark only one oval.

- Blackboard Announcement
- Personalised Email
- Face to Face
- Other: _____

12. On a scale of 1-10, how are you finding your course at the moment? *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Not at all good	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely good									

13. On a scale of 1-10, has your course met your expectations so far? *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree									

14. What else would you like to see more of in your course to meet your expectations (if not already met)?

15. What are your thoughts/opinions on the way the University communicates with students? *

16. What types of emails would you like to receive less often? *

17. What types of emails would you like to receive more often? *

18. How has your experience been with Blackboard/Emails in general? *

19. Is there anything else you would like to share with us regarding communications and emails? If so, please state here.

20. If you would like to be entered into the prize draw for Amazon vouchers please leave your email address here.

End of Questionnaire. Thank you for your time.

Communication & Emails at the University of Westminster..
What are your thoughts & experiences?

UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER

All you need to do is...

- Take out your phone...
- Point your camera at the QR code...
- Open the Google form...
- Complete questionnaire 😊
- Takes just minutes!

You can also enter our prize draw to win £15 amazon vouchers !!! Just leave your email address if interested.

<https://forms.gle/wELGozoiC8AcPnt77>

Or click on this link 😊

If you need more information, you can contact: Maira Bilal: w1678023@my.westminster.ac.uk; Alishba Akbar: w1712832@my.westminster.ac.uk; Dr Rummy Begum: begumru@westminster.ac.uk

APPENDIX D – Semester One (2018-2019) Typical Email Tally for Life Sciences, Biomedical Sciences Student

Week	Who	Date and Time	Total no. of emails sent that week
1 24 – 30 Sept	Human Physiology: 0		13
	Cell Biology: - Welcome message	Mon - 11:14 am	
	Biochemistry: 0		
	Critical Skills for Biomedical Science: - Welcome message - Module tutor group timetable	Mon – 8:51 pm Thu – 11:28 am	
	Blackboard: - Relayed biochemistry and cell biology lecture announcement - Relayed biochemistry, cell biology, critical skills and human physiology announcement - Relayed cell biology, critical skills and message for second year Biomedical science students - Relayed biochemistry and biomedical science announcement - Relayed human physiology lecture announcement	Mon – 9:23 pm Tue – 9:20 pm Thu – 9:21 pm Fri – 9:18 pm Sun – 9:05 pm	
	Library: - Library books due notice - Library books due notice	Sat – 2:23 am Sun – 2:09 am	
	Student union: - Student union registration - Student union account conformation	Thu – 12:05 pm Thu – 12:20 pm	
	University: - Volunteering and work experience fair	Thu – 1:11 pm	
	Human Physiology: 0		
	Cell Biology: - Overview of lectures - Documents for practical 1	Mon – 12:01 pm Thu – 7:01 am	
2 1 – 7 Oct	Biochemistry: - Student support	Sun – 4:11 pm	15
	Critical Skills for Biomedical Science: - Virtual lab registration - Health and safety registration	Thu – 12:09 pm Fri – 4:45 pm	
	Blackboard: - Relayed biochemistry, cell biology and human physiology announcement - Relayed biochemistry and human physiology announcement - Relayed biochemistry, cell biology and critical skills announcement - Relayed biochemistry, cell biology, and biomedical science announcement	Mon – 9:29 pm Wed – 9:15 pm Thu – 9:20 pm Fri – 9:24 pm	
	Library: - Library books due notice - Library books due notice - Library laptop due notice - Library books due notice - Library books due notice	Mon – 5:01 am Tue – 2:06 am Tue – 2:23 pm Thu – 5:03 am Sat – 2:31 am	
	Student union: - Settling into student life	Tue – 10:11 am	
	University: 0		
	Human Physiology: 0		
	Cell Biology: - Practical timetable	Mon – 9:35 am	
	Biochemistry: 0		
	Critical Skills for Biomedical Science: - Biomedical science textbook	Mon – 9:19 am	
3 8 – 14 Oct	Blackboard: - Lunch time seminars for biomedical science students - Relayed biochemistry announcement - Relayed biochemistry announcement - Relayed human physiology lecture announcement - Year 1 biomedical science feedback padlet	Mon – 9:13 am Mon – 9:26 pm Tue – 9:22 pm Fri – 9:19 pm Sat – 9:06 pm	9
	Library: - Library laptop due notice	Mon – 2:03 pm	
	Student union: 0		
	University: - Westminster employability award	Mon – 11:01 am	

4 15 – 21 Oct	Human Physiology: 0		
	Cell Biology:		
	- Post lab assessment	Mon – 9:53 am	10
	- Registration for virtual labs	Thu – 6:35 pm	
	Biochemistry: 0		
	Critical Skills for Biomedical Science:		
	- Coursework submission receipt	Thu – 6:49 pm	
Blackboard:			
- Relayed biochemistry announcement	Mon – 9:26 pm		
- Personal development workshops	Tue – 12:36 pm		
- Relayed biochemistry and critical skills announcement	Tue – 9:28 pm		
- Relayed biochemistry and biomedical announcement	Wed – 9:21 pm		
- Relayed critical skills announcement	Thu – 9:32 pm		
- Relayed human physiology announcement	Fri – 9:24 pm		
Library:			
- Library books due notice	Wed – 2:05 am		
Student union: 0			
University: 0			
5 22 – 28 Oct	Human Physiology: 0		
	Cell Biology:		
	- Cell biology textbook	Mon – 1:55 pm	13
	Biochemistry: 0		
	Critical Skills for Biomedical Science:		
	- Article summaries	Thu – 11:45 am	
	Blackboard:		
- Relayed biochemistry and cell biology announcement	Tue – 9:29 pm		
- Relayed biochemistry and critical skills announcement	Thu – 9:26 pm		
- Relayed human physiology announcement	Fri – 9:19 pm		
- Learning at Westminster	Sun - 9:16 pm		
Library:			
- Library books due notice	Tue – 2:08 am		
- Library books due notice	Thu – 5:01 am		
Student union: 0			
University:			
- Volunteering and work experience opportunities	Mon – 3:03 pm		
- Engage newsletter	Mon – 6:52 pm		
- Volunteering and work experience opportunities	Fri – 5:01 pm		
- Engage newsletter	Sat – 7:37 pm		
- Learning at Westminster: academic success	Sun – 6:27 pm		
6 29 Oct – 4 Nov	Human Physiology: 0		
	Cell Biology: 0		
	Biochemistry: 0		
	Critical Skills for Biomedical Science: 0		
	Blackboard:		
	- Biomedical science exam periods 2019	Mon – 4:59 pm	10
	- Relayed biochemistry announcement	Mon – 9:23 pm	
- Relayed human physiology announcement	Fri – 9:21 pm		
- Relayed cell biology announcement	Sun – 9:13 pm		
Library:			
- Library books due notice	Tue – 2:04 am		
Student union: 0			
University:			
- Learning at Westminster: academic success correction	Mon – 5:35 am		
- Internet outage	Mon – 12:55 pm		
- Global opportunities	Mon – 3:51 pm		
- Westminster's latest events	Thu – 4:05 pm		
- Volunteering and work experience opportunities	Fri – 4:02 pm		

7 5 – 11 Nov	Human Physiology: 0		16
	Cell Biology: 0		
	Biochemistry: 0		
	Critical Skills for Biomedical Science: - Coursework assignment	Fri – 9:15 am	
	Blackboard: - Relayed biochemistry announcement - Relayed biochemistry announcement - Relayed biochemistry announcement - Relayed critical skills announcement - Relayed human physiology and biomedical science announcement - Relayed human physiology announcement	Mon – 9:37 pm Tue – 9:34 pm Wed – 9:30 pm Thu – 9:38 pm Fri – 9:22 pm Sun – 9:14 pm	
	Library: - Library laptop due notice - Library books due notice	Tue – 2:10 pm Sat – 2:17 am	
Student union:			
8 12 – 18 Nov	- November updates	Fri – 6:06 pm	19
	University: - Global opportunities - Westminster abroad international week - Global opportunities - Global opportunities - Global opportunities - iPad deployment	Mon – 4:16 pm Tue – 1:20 pm Tue – 2:41 pm Wed – 4:54 pm Thu – 4:50 pm Sat – 9:58 am	
	Human Physiology: - Submission of coursework receipt	Sat – 10:04 pm	
	Cell Biology: 0		
	Biochemistry: 0		
	Critical Skills for Biomedical Science: - Practical design part 1 - Practical design part 2	Wed – 3:41 pm Thu – 1:35 pm	
	Blackboard: - Relayed cell biology and human physiology announcement - Relayed critical skills announcement - Relayed critical skills and human physiology announcement - Relayed human physiology announcement	Tue – 9:35 pm Wed – 9:24 pm Thu – 9:32 pm Fri – 9:20 pm	
	Library: - Library laptop due notice - Library laptop due notice - Library books due notice	Tue – 3:49 pm Thu – 3:01 pm Sat – 2:23 am	
	Student union: - Cinema invitation	Tue – 10:37 am	
	University: - Global opportunities - Global opportunities - Global opportunities - Global opportunities - IT outage - Westminster's latest event - Global opportunities - Volunteering opportunities	Mon – 9:42 am Mon – 4:15 pm Tue – 9:52 am Tue – 4:36 pm Wed – 3:08 pm Thu – 10:26 am Thu – 1:07 pm Fri – 7:00 pm	
	Human Physiology: 0		
	9 19 – 25 Nov	Cell Biology: - Online survey for course - Microbiology practical instructions - Microbiology practical files	
Biochemistry: 0			
Critical Skills for Biomedical Science: 0			
Blackboard: - Relayed biochemistry and human physiology announcement - Relayed biochemistry and human physiology announcements - Relayed cell biology and critical skills announcement - Relayed human physiology announcement		Mon – 9:33 pm Wed – 9:23 pm Thu – 9:32 pm Fri – 9:22 pm	
Library: - Library laptop due notice		Tue – 2:59 pm	
Student union: 0.			
University: - Engage newsletter - iPad deployment - Invitation by head of college - iPad deployment - Volunteering and work experience opportunities		Mon – 6:04 pm Tue – 4:09 pm Wed – 10:34 am Wed – 8:09 pm Fri – 7:06 pm	

<p style="text-align: center;">10</p> <p style="text-align: center;">26 Nov – 2 Dec</p>	<p>Human Physiology: 0</p> <p>Cell Biology: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In – class essay instructions - Tutorial instructions <p>Biochemistry: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tutorial groups - Streaming of lectures <p>Critical Skills for Biomedical Science: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mandatory assessments <p>Blackboard: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relayed human physiology announcement - Critical skills and human physiology announcement - Biomedical science course feedback - Relayed critical skills announcement - Relayed critical skills announcement - Relayed critical skills and biochemistry announcement <p>Library: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Library laptop due notice - Library books due notice - Library books due notice - Library laptop due notice <p>Student union: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student union meet-up <p>University: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - XRLab inductions - Westminster's latest events - Volunteering and work experience opportunities 	<p>Fri – 9:50 am</p> <p>Sun – 7:48 pm</p> <p>Tue – 11:04 am</p> <p>Wed – 4:13 pm</p> <p>Tue – 2:46 pm</p> <p>Mon – 9:25 pm</p> <p>Tue – 9:22 pm</p> <p>Wed – 1:31 pm</p> <p>Wed – 9:14 pm</p> <p>Thu – 9:24 pm</p> <p>Fri – 9:20 pm</p> <p>Mon – 10:35 am</p> <p>Tue – 9:44 am</p> <p>Wed – 2:08 pm</p> <p>Thu – 3:02 pm</p> <p>Tue – 1:08 pm</p> <p>Wed – 10:11 am</p> <p>Thu – 12:32 pm</p> <p>Fri – 7:00 pm</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">19</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">11</p> <p style="text-align: center;">3 – 9 Dec</p>	<p>Human Physiology: 0</p> <p>Cell Biology: 0</p> <p>Biochemistry: 0</p> <p>Critical Skills for Biomedical Science: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assessment deadlines - Exam details - Coursework submission receipt <p>Blackboard: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relayed biochemistry, critical skills and human physiology announcement - Relayed biochemistry announcement - Relayed biochemistry and critical skills announcement - Relayed critical skills and human physiology announcement <p>Library: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Library laptop due notice - Library books due notice <p>Student union: 0</p> <p>University: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Global opportunities - Student online support - Student choice awards - Global opportunities - Volunteering and work experience opportunities 	<p>Mon – 9:51 pm</p> <p>Fri – 8:01 pm</p> <p>Sun – 4:30 pm</p> <p>Mon – 9:21 pm</p> <p>Tue – 9:20 pm</p> <p>Thu – 9:16 pm</p> <p>Fri – 9:15 pm</p> <p>Tue – 1:45 pm</p> <p>Thu – 11:50 am</p> <p>Mon – 4:07 pm</p> <p>Mon – 7:32 pm</p> <p>Wed – 3:17 pm</p> <p>Thu – 11:29 am</p> <p>Fri – 8:01 pm</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">14</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">12</p> <p style="text-align: center;">10 – 16 Dec</p>	<p>Human Physiology: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Past exam papers and course summary message <p>Cell Biology: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Post lab assessment instructions - Post lab assessment <p>Biochemistry: 0</p> <p>Critical Skills for Biomedical Science: 0</p> <p>Blackboard: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relayed critical skills announcement <p>Library: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Library books due notice - Library books due notice <p>Student union: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - December updates <p>University: 0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Global opportunities - Apply for the 125 fund - Westminster's latest events - Season's greetings - Engage newsletter - Work experience and volunteering opportunities 	<p>Fri – 9:16 pm</p> <p>Mon – 6:04 pm</p> <p>Mon – 9:22 pm</p> <p>Wed – 9:12 pm</p> <p>Tue – 2:08 am</p> <p>Thu – 5:03 am</p> <p>Tue – 6:35 pm</p> <p>Wed – 10:54 am</p> <p>Wed – 2:09 pm</p> <p>Thu – 12:20 pm</p> <p>Thu – 1:23 pm</p> <p>Fri – 12:04 am</p> <p>Fri – 6:04 pm</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">13</p>
TOTAL			164