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Student communications: a review of current practices and scoping a new vision

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ABSTRACT

Student communications has developed as a professional field in universities in recent decades, as universities seek to more strategically engage diverse student populations with ever-changing expectations and needs. Whilst most universities now have some form of function or resourcing dedicated to considering how to best communicate with current students, there is minimal research exploring the priorities of these functions. This article takes a narrative review of practice approach, critiquing and highlighting the student communications practices of 17 universities around the world. The review thematically grouped the efforts of these institutions, finding that the main activities of student communications functions are: (1) implementing structures, strategic frameworks and policies (2) creation of campaigns to build campus pride and belonging (3) development of channels to better inform students about support and opportunities (4) evaluate students' engagement, satisfaction and trust with their institution. Following the review of current practice, this article identifies gaps that should be addressed to enhance student communications functions, as well as principles that student communicators should adopt to gain legitimacy in their work.

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Introduction

Within universities, it used to be accepted that academic staff and student support teams would directly interact with students and convey all the important information that they need (Byrd et al. 2012). As part of this, it was assumed that students would be responsive and act on whatever was communicated to them; however, over time this assumption has been challenged.

There are several reasons for this change. Firstly, at least within many international higher education contexts, the individual student is expected to contribute a greater amount financially towards their degree. This cost has changed the expectations that students have from their degree, placing more onus on institutions to effectively communicate their offering of services and opportunities to students (Temple et al. 2014; Tomlinson 2008). Secondly, as student populations have become more diverse, there is a greater demand on universities to be able to segment or personalise what information is communicated to students (Gilani, Russell, and Wilson 2022; Heagney 2008); recognising the different needs (Picton and Kahu 2022) and preferences that students will have (Gilani 2024). Finally, in marketised higher education systems, universities have a financial incentive to ensure that their students graduate as invested

ambassadors for their institution (Dennis et al. 2016). Building a strong affinity with students, whilst they are studying at the university, is more likely to make them contribute, perhaps financially, as an alum (Pedro, Pereira, and Carrasqueira 2018).

These factors have driven more and more universities to invest in professionalising their approaches to communicating with current students (Gilani 2024). This has often taken the form of establishing student communications functions, that attempt to take an institution-wide approach. These teams are tasked with utilising the tools, channels and practises available to make sure that students are informed and feel valued as part of their university community.

This article aims to do three things:

1. Review current practice from student communications teams around the world.
2. Identify what is currently missing from most student communications efforts.
3. Articulate values needed for student communications functions to thrive into the future.

A traditional, narrative review approach is utilised to consider current practices taking place within student communications functions across the globe. The findings of this result thematically group student

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communications efforts into four core areas: introduction of strategic frameworks, creation of campaigns, channel development and evaluation. These case studies showcase the current state of student communications practices against these themes. Following presentation of case studies, the discussion section of this article critiques what is currently missing, as well as the principles needed by student communicators to enhance student communications efforts.

Methodological approach for this article

Whilst most reviews typically explore published literature on a topic, there is minimal academic research on the topic of student communications (Gilani 2024). However, it is common in creative or more practical fields for reviews to also consider practical examples and case studies, rather than just focusing on published literature (Bocken et al. 2014; Nelson 2013; Pott 2021). Considering practical case studies also helps to ensure that reviews can consider the most up-to-date developments (Harland, Bradley, and Worth 2023).

The professional experiences of the first author have been drawn upon heavily for this review of practice. The first author has worked as a communications consultant in higher education for three decades. This has included working directly with many different universities, as well as having the work of other institutions recommended to as exemplars of excellent student communications work. As part of preparation for the 2024 CASE Student Communications conference, and through conversations with the second author, the broad experiences of the first author were reviewed and brought together into a structure that showcases the current state of student communications practice.

Recognising that the first author's exposure to practical case studies is inherently subjective, this article takes a narrative literature review approach. Narrative reviews – also known as traditional or generic literature reviews – are typically considered to be the most flexible typology of review (Brennan et al. 2020; Grant and Booth 2009). This is helpful for the context of student communications practice, where the level of information available about different practices is highly variable. In some cases, the first author has first-hand experience of such practices, whereas in other cases only information published on institutional websites is available. The level of comprehensiveness for such a review is highly dependent on the author; therefore, it is important to recognise that there is a high risk of bias.

Given that there has been no published review of student communications practices carried out to date, this article aims to contribute small steps to building on understanding of how this field operates. The included case studies are meant to highlight

examples of good practice from universities across the world. However, inclusion of an example from one university does not mean that they are the only university doing this type of work in their approaches to student communications.

Results

Practices from 16 universities are considered within this review of practice. This section thematically groups existing student communications practice into four core areas:

- Introduction of strategic frameworks;
- Creation of campaigns;
- Channel development;
- And evaluation.

Strategic frameworks: approaches, structures and policies

As practical work around student communications has matured, more institutions have created explicit frameworks to guide their work. These frameworks take the form of policies, processes and new team structures that give a strategic focus to the way students are communicated with. For example, the University of Otago has a detailed student communications policy (University of Otago 2015), which articulates what the university will communicate, through which channels, and what's expected from students in terms of their own communications behaviours. This latter point recognises that communications is not just about what the institution transmits, but also the active role of the student in responding to and communicating back to the University.

A more explicit example of this framing of student communications as a two-way process, is the Student Engagement Framework from the Victoria University of Wellington (2024). This framework emphasises that student communications is not just about imparting information, but about how students and staff work together to understand what is most important and ensure that information is clearly understood. Setting expectations about how students will be communicated with – also described as student meta-communications (Gilani 2024) – is now much more commonly found in early messaging to students (Adelaide 2024).

Student communications functions sit in a variety of places across institutions. Perhaps the most typical structure is that used by Brunel University London, where student communications sits within a Corporate Communications team (Figure 1).

This is in contrast to examples such as the University of Aberdeen, where student communications are handled within a Student Experience, Engagement

Corporate Communications

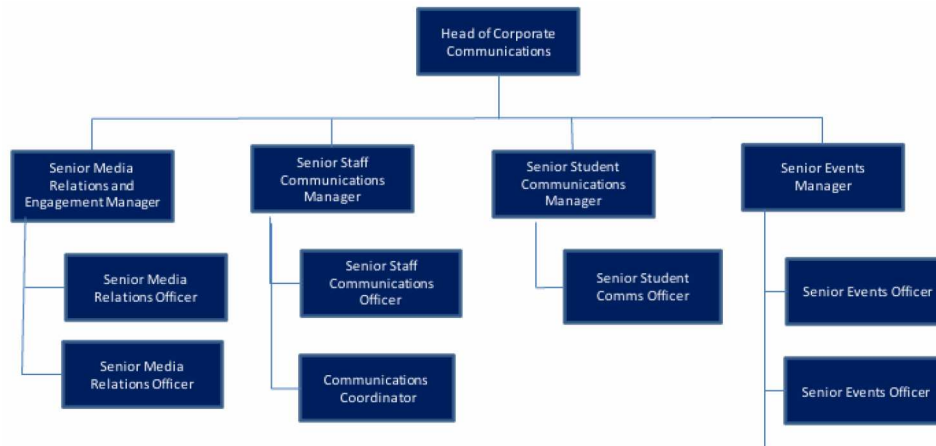


Figure 1. Corporate Communications function structure at Brunel University London, which includes their student communications function.

and Wellbeing directorate, as part of student services. Some universities have moved student communications across different functions. This includes Edge Hill University, where student communications used to sit within student services and now it is within student recruitment and marketing. Universities within the United States tend to place student communications within much larger Student Affairs functions. One example of this is the University of Virginia, where their student communications function is also responsible for how they use technology to communicate with students. The University of Toronto is the first university, as far as the authors are aware, to have a director-level role dedicated to student communications, recognising the strategic importance that communication plays as part of student success.

Campaigns to build pride, sense of belonging and campus climate

Student communications functions are often responsible for taking a strategic approach to building a sense of belonging amongst, through the use of pride-and-community-building campaigns. Whilst most literature around sense of belonging focuses on how students develop this psychological connection within an academic domain, or amongst peers (Ahn and Davis 2020), there are also recognised benefits when students feel connected to wider campus climate and feel proud of their institution (De Rosa and de Oliveira 2022; Dennis et al. 2016).

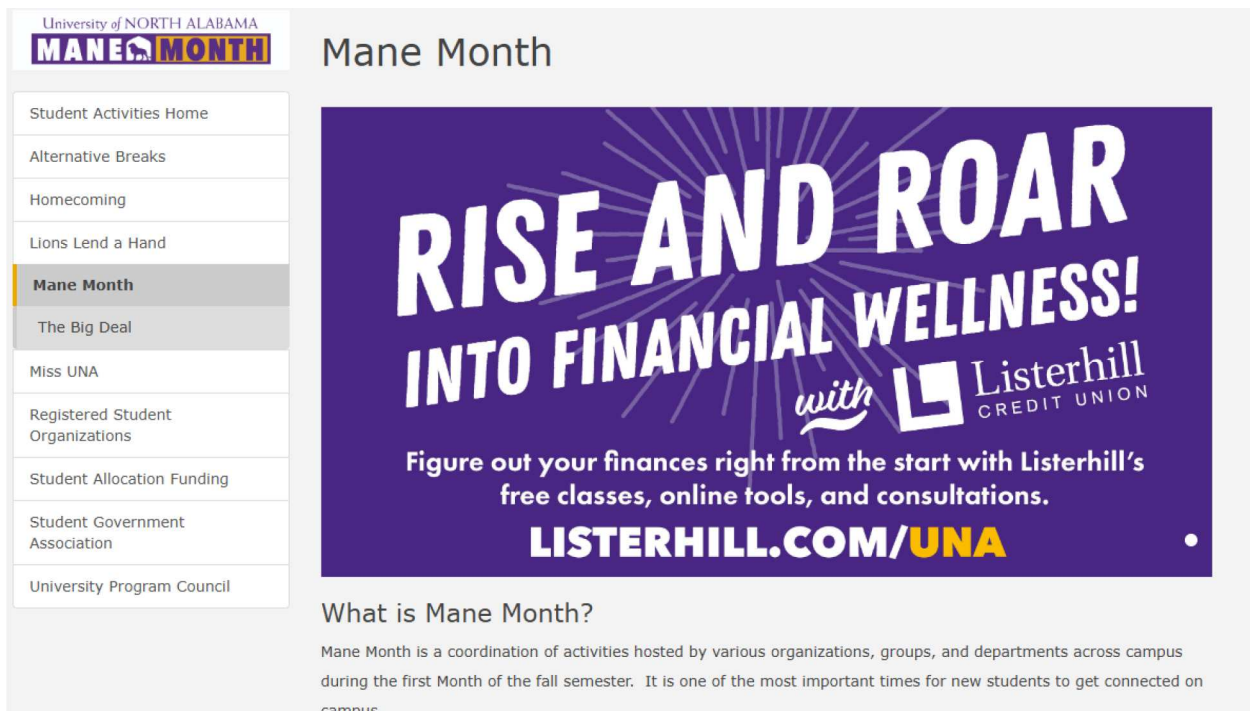
The University of North Alabama provides a very clear example of having a strong theme, from which all community-building campaigns can centre around. In the 1970s, the President of the University bought a lion onto the campus and built an enclosure that has since been the home for many lions in

succession to that first arrival and they have become a symbol for the institution. All the messaging and the way in which communications is positioned is built around lion-based imagery. This includes use of terms such as pride, mane and roar as part of campaign taglines (Figure 2). They have also used this imagery for an emergency communications platform, where students can sign up to receive lion alerts when there are urgent messages that need to be communicated.

However, institutions do not need overarching mascots to be able to run pride-building campaigns. Tulane University in New Orleans has introduced a weekly pride-building event called Tulane Tuesdays (Figure 3). It is the day when every student is made to feel extra important on campus, and a lot of the campaign communications is built around that. Often outside organisations can provide freebies and students are encouraged to wear Tulane-branded clothing as part of the events, also helping to cement a feeling of being part of the University community.

What is less clear is whether such pride-building campaigns rely on a broader type of campus climate that is very typical in US higher education contexts, but less apparent in other higher education systems. US universities are very good at using sport to build loyalty, as well as clear imagery, mascots and brand identities around the university (Warner and Dixon 2013). Within other higher education contexts, such as in Europe or Australia, there is much less of a focus on sport and therefore a less competitive culture that can lead to this particular type of brand loyalty. Students are less seen as future brand ambassadors and more as partners (Matthews 2016).

There are many examples of universities running pride-building approaches within universities outside of the US; such as Glasgow University's #TeamUofG campaign (Figure 4) or the University of Chester's



University of NORTH ALABAMA
MANE MONTH

Student Activities Home

Alternative Breaks

Homecoming

Lions Lend a Hand

Mane Month

The Big Deal

Miss UNA

Registered Student Organizations

Student Allocation Funding

Student Government Association

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What is Mane Month?

Mane Month is a coordination of activities hosted by various organizations, groups, and departments across campus during the first Month of the fall semester. It is one of the most important times for new students to get connected on campus.

Figure 2. 'Rise and Roar' campaign as part of the University of North Alabama's work on student communications and building pride.

Student Shout Out campaign (University of Chester 2024). Whilst these campaigns do appear to help promote a sense of community amongst students, it is unclear whether they will have the same longevity as campaigns from US universities. One potential explanation for this is the focus within US universities around building affinity with students for future

fundraising and philanthropy efforts. This strategic imperative for US universities means that such pride-building campaigns are seen through the lens of future alumni relationships and fundraising opportunities (Dennis et al. 2016), which is more likely to mean that they will be resourced appropriately.



Figure 3. Photo from Tulane Tuesdays event, where students at Tulane University have access to free products every week thereby helping brand awareness amongst current students.

Channel development: innovating in how we communicate with our students

Given that students will have different preferences in how they are communicated with, and that these needs and preferences from students will change over time (Temple et al. 2014); it is crucial that universities are agile in their student communications approaches, utilising a variety of channels and innovating through their use of technology.

One approach to ensuring that an institution's student communications remains relevant to students is to have the content led more heavily by current students. The University of British Columbia provides an example of this through their UBC Life Blog, which is curated each year through a team of current students employed within the institution's student communications team. This blog series includes student lifestyle stories, blogs and video interviews. (Figure 5)

The University of North Carolina has invested in their use of a student app, recognising that they are a multi-campus institution and that students need to be able to easily find out information about campus resources depending on where they are. The app originally categorised information based on what students

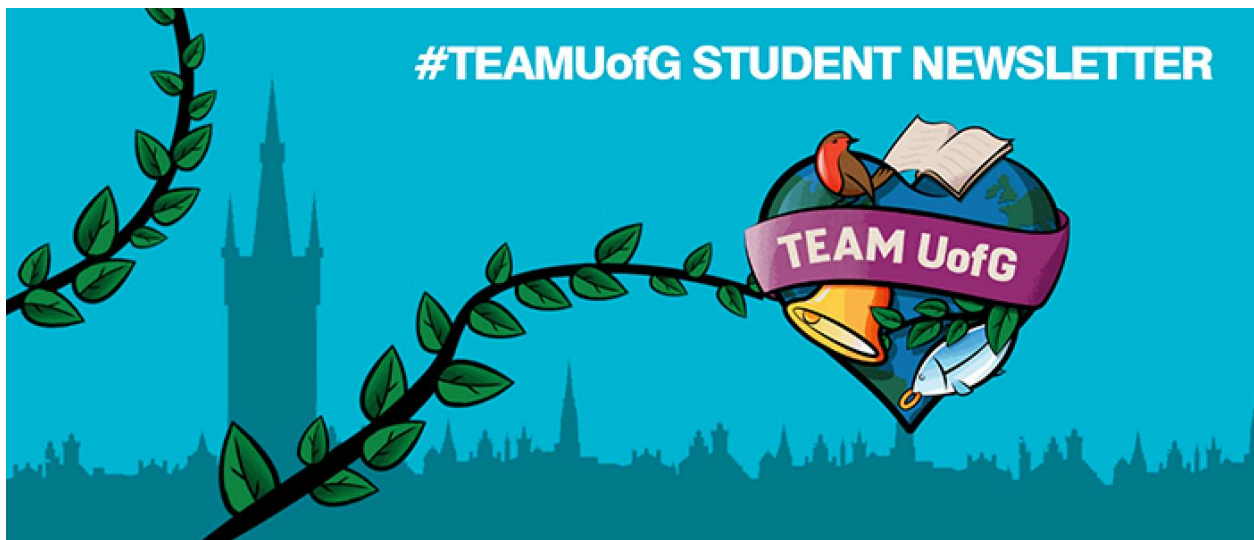


Figure 4. TeamUofG pride-building campaign graphic from Glasgow University.

might want to do whilst they're on campus. For example, there was an 'Eat' section, with information about campus catering outlets, including menus and opening hours. (Figure 6)

The University of Oulu in Finland has been prioritising efforts for students to receive more segmented communications, but has done this through the creation of different student newsletters for each Faculty. This allows students to choose the content that is relevant to their subject of study or for their future profession.

Evaluation: how do we know when it's working?

To be able to evaluate the impact of these student communications efforts, more and more institutions are investing in reviews of their practice. These reviews often include surveys with students about their communications attitudes, preferences and satisfaction levels (Gilani 2024), but also other methods of gathering student feedback, such as focus groups or on-campus conversations to gather more qualitative feedback.

One good example of this work is Waterloo University in Canada, who carry out a student communications review every two years, tracking changes and progress. This includes a holistic measure – 'how satisfied are you with communications from the university as a whole?' – as well as a series of other questions around tone and the best channels to use for communicating different messages. (Figure 7)

Discussion

The previous results section presents examples of efforts from 16 universities to bring strategy and structure, innovative campaigns and channels and

evaluation approaches to student communications practice. This discussion section splits into three parts; firstly, providing a set of recommendations for student communications, based on what is most commonly missing from current practices; secondly, articulating a set of principles that are needed for student communicators to build legitimacy in their efforts; and thirdly, considering the limitations of the narrative practice review approach used within this article.

What's missing? Top recommendations for the field of student communications

Following these examples of good practice around the student communications world, this section summarises areas that are either missing or at best very inconsistent in how they are being delivered within institutions. These recommendations are based on the professional experiences of the authors and thus should be seen as provocations to readers. It is certainly the case that there are institutions that are already delivering and excelling against at least some of these recommendations.

Most of the recommendations are targeted towards student communicators, however some need to be addressed by senior leaders, including directors of communications departments, when considering how to appropriately resource student communications work:

1. **Equitable resourcing** – Based on the experiences of the authors, it is still often the case that universities prioritise communications investment into attracting new students, rather than ensuring there is appropriate capacity to supporting, retaining and building pride amongst current students. Until all stages of the student lifecycle are equitably resourced, current student communications will be

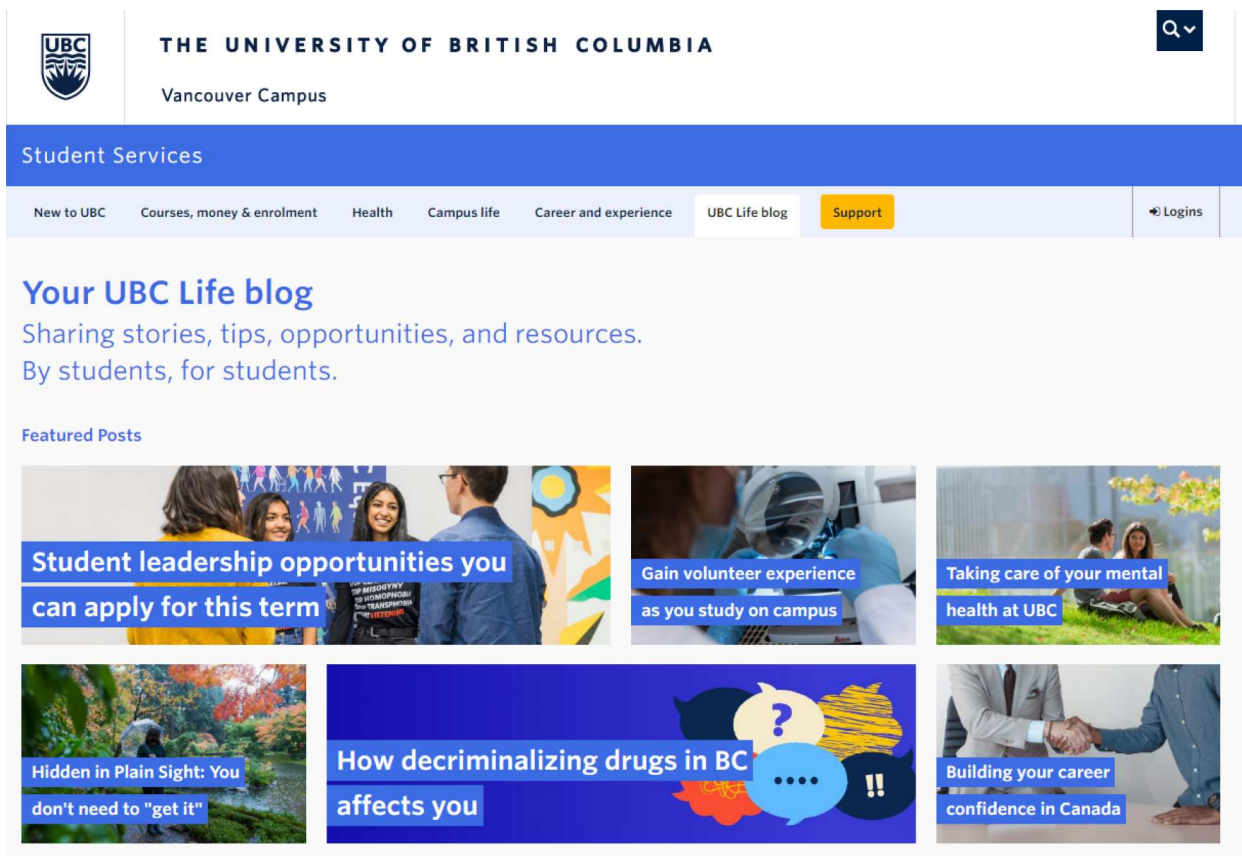


Figure 5. The University of British Columbia's Your UBC Life blog, written by current students who are employed by the institution each year.

held back. The exception for this is perhaps most notable in the US context, where universities have recognised the value of building pride amongst current students towards future fundraising efforts.

2. **Segmentation and tailoring** – Despite the varied needs of student audiences, student

communications approaches are still, far too often, providing generic information through all-student messages, rather than segmenting and tailoring communications.

3. **Better cross-university planning and coordination** – One of the biggest tasks for new strategic

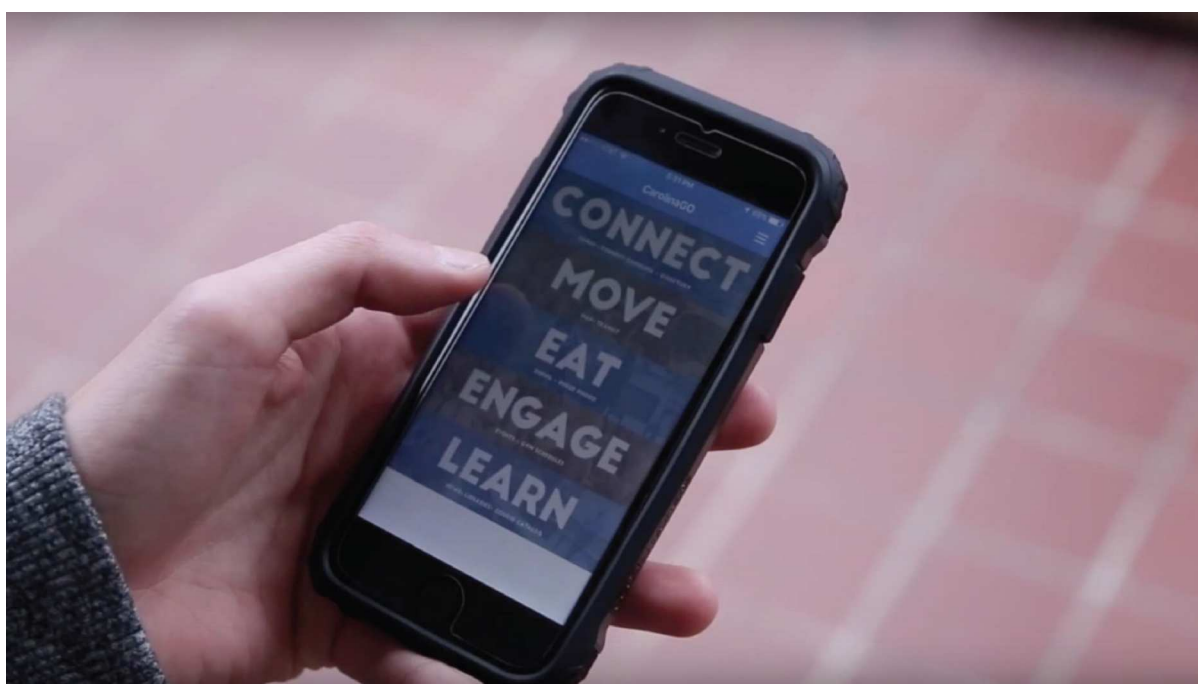


Figure 6. Photo of the University of North Carolina's award-winning student mobile app.

ARE COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE UNIVERSITY CLEAR, CONSTRUCTIVE AND APPROACHABLE?

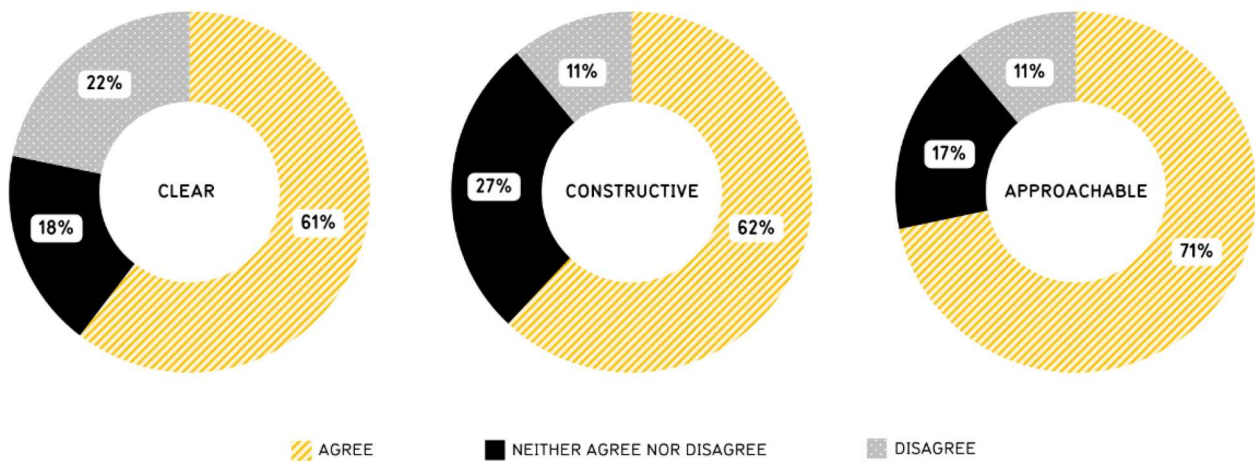


Figure 7. A subset of results from the University of Waterloo in Canada's student communications survey in 2023.

student communications functions is auditing all the different teams and staff areas across their institution that are communicating with students. There is often a high degree of evolution, that can detract from cross-university planned and coordinated approaches to communications and thereby run the risk of disrupting overall 'belonging' to the university brand.

4. **Including communications as a measure in all student surveys** – Whilst not all universities will have capacity or resources for regular student communications reviews, it is easily achievable that universities can include questions around student communications as part of broader all-student surveys.
5. **Greater focus on particular student cycle milestones** – Universities often put a lot of resource into how they will communicate with students as part of welcome and induction periods because it is recognised as a key transition point where students often encounter difficulties. Student communications approaches should also consider transition between years and levels of study, module selection and assessment periods.
6. **Reaching 'non-traditional' students (online/commuters/field-based)** – Communications approaches need to remember that not all students' educational journeys are the same, with some studying predominantly online and others having placements for large portions of the academic year.
7. **Keeping ahead of channel trends and evolving AI implications** – Students' expectations on how we will communicate with them change year-on-year and so institutions need to be able to respond to these changing student expectations in their development of new channels and use of technology in student communications.
8. **Better channels for sudden emergencies (e.g. text messaging)** – Many institutions seem to struggle to implement effective crisis communications approaches, often due to sensitivities around using invasive channels such as text messaging. Students often have a reluctance in providing universities with private phone numbers, which does create a tension to be addressed.
9. **Ensuring effective communications drives belonging + satisfaction** – Student communications needs to be linked closely to key strategic priorities around the broader student experience, such as belonging and satisfaction.

The principles needed to 'step up our game'

Underlying the practical work that is needed for student communications functions to rise to the challenges facing universities are a set of principles for teams to adapt. Trust, creativity and proof are the three essential ingredients that the authors contend are needed for student communications roles in order to elevate their status and signal greater importance for their work.

It is essential that student communications teams are trusted for their professional expertise. As the field is still relatively in its infancy compared to other professional functions in universities, it is important that student communications professionals are seen as trusted advisors (Maister 2021); providing expertise to other student-facing areas of universities on communications principles. Involvement with professional organisations such as CASE and their student communications network helps towards ensuring that teams have this credibility. There is also professional frameworks from organisations such as the Institution of Internal Communications (IoIC 2024), which can be

leveraged by student communications teams in their planning and staff development activities.

The second principle is creativity. Student communications need to be more creative in our approaches; not just relying on re-producing activities from previous years or other institutions, but taking the time to consider how new campaigns, channels and approaches can tackle the challenges of the day. This also leans itself to investing more time in creating student communications work in partnership with students and then testing out content with students.

Finally, student communications functions need to prove that what we do is making a difference to students and to our broader institutions. Teams need to be capable and confident to collect and analyse data on students' attitudes and behaviours, so that we can make evidence-informed decisions and show the impact of our work.

Developing these principles of trust, creativity and proof, will provide the correct foundations to address what is currently missing and ensure student communications stays relevant into the future.

Limitations and opportunities for future research

The main limitations of this article stem from the subjective inclusion criteria of the review. Only including case studies that the first author has been either directly involved with or recommended to them, means that the search method is inherently uncomprehensive (Grant and Booth 2009). Further research could systematise the inclusion stages of such a review by conducting interviews with a wider variety of professionals working within the student communications space. This would provide an opportunity to ask for examples of good practice from multiple different perspectives, and more closely matches the approaches used by reviewers for the EEF (Harland, Bradley, and Worth 2023). Alternatively, a more systematic review of grey literature, such as content published on university websites, could be employed to consider how universities position their student communications work. However, an inherent challenge in this type of review would be limiting included materials to just those on publicly available sites; whereas it is common for many universities to communicate with current students through portals, intranets and other platforms behind a login.

Conclusions

Student communications approaches continue to professionalise in response to the changing needs of students and the priorities of universities. By showcasing examples of global practice from various institutions, this article highlights how student communications

functions are already making positive impact. Key areas often underutilised or overlooked have been identified through this exploration of existing practices. Recommendations are offered to help institutions strengthen the resourcing, planning and delivery of student communications in the future. Finally, principles have been outlined for student communications functions to adopt in order to gain greater support and recognition within their institutions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors



Justin Shaw is a global consultant addressing issues of reputation, communications, engagement, influence and media performance in HE. He worked in the Communications Office of the University of Hertfordshire before establishing the UK's first consulting practice in higher education communications – supporting 250 clients (including 125 universities around the world). His early career was as a chief reporter, feature writer, news editor, and columnist and he was recognised as a Reporter of the Year.



David Gilani works at Middlesex University as a staff governor and their Head of Student Engagement and Advocacy leading their efforts to engage both current students and alumni. Having started his career as a students' union officer, he is a strong proponent of the student voice and in 2012 he founded the Student Publication Association, which supports student journalists across the UK and Ireland. He believes strongly in universities working together to support student engagement efforts, and so co-chairs the CASE Student Communications conference and leads AHEP's Student Experience and Engagement Network. He is also studying for his PhD at the University of York on the topic of student belonging.

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