

Guidelines for Communicating with Students

1. Purpose and objectives

The purpose of this document is to promote consistent levels of quality, professionalism and timeliness in the University's communications with its students. The specific objectives are to:

- Provide guidelines for staff in their communications with students
- Clarify the remits and responsibilities of the University's student-facing staff to set expectations and promote an efficient service
- Provide guidance on crisis communications, including when to contact the central Communications team, and so reduce the likelihood of reputational damage.

Please disseminate these guidelines to those who communicate to students in their role be they University or St George's Hospital staff.

2. Student communications principles

Staff are expected to be polite, timely and factual when communicating with students. Plain English should be used following our [house style guide](#). A spellcheck should be used.

Staff are reminded of their responsibility to serve the interests of the institution by ensuring all communications with students are appropriate, professional and sensitive to the student's perspective. In any correspondence, staff should be as helpful and proactive as possible, taking a warm and responsive tone. Example templates of what may constitute a warm and responsive tone can be found in section six.

The guiding principle is to communicate facts as tactfully, comprehensively and efficiently as is appropriate. Where possible and relevant, please adhere to the following:

- Acknowledge the receipt of an email from a student within a maximum of three working days.
- Provide a timeframe for resolving a given issue in this initial acknowledgement in order to manage expectations. If this timeframe changes, please notify the student as soon as you are aware and provide the revised schedule. If the original timeframe is an extended period (beyond a week), please check in with the student at an appropriate interval to reassure them of progress.
- Take ownership for solving an issue and, if needed, proactively approach staff who are in a better position to help if you are unable to respond to a query yourself.
- Consider who should be included in correspondence as a query progresses. Do not keep a student copied into correspondence unless there is a need to do so. Usually you would only bring the student back into the conversation at the earliest opportunity when a resolution has been reached.
- Avoid using the acronym 'SGUL' in communications to students.

- Ensure records of interactions with, and about, students are maintained and filed properly. Students are entitled to access any information communicated about them, whether sent directly to them or not, through a subject access request. In such circumstances, or in the event of a complaint/appeal, information needs to be readily accessible.
- Be clear in your email signature if you work adjusted/reduced hours so that students are aware if your inbox will not be monitored. **Staff are not expected to answer queries outside of core working hours (9:00am – 5:00pm, Monday – Friday).**

3. Channels

3.1 Primary channels

The University uses the following channels to communicate information with students.

Email

Email is the University's primary method of communication with students and in using this channel it is important to be aware of requirements under the General Data Protection Regulation. When initiating a communication with a student, staff must use their university email address, as opposed to a personal email address.

When emailing a group of students, please use the BCC function within Outlook to avoid giving students access to a mailing list. Please ensure that a student's personal information is never shared with anyone other than the student themselves.

When responding to a student's email, please provide a timely, factual response in line with the guidelines above. Mass emails sent out to all students are moderated by the Communications team, so please get in touch with them if you wish to contact all students.

Verbal

The communications principles stated in section 2 of being professional, appropriate and respectful apply to both written and verbal communications - be that face-to-face or over the phone. Please be sensitive and empathetic to a student's disposition in the tone taken when speaking to them.

Students may be distressed if, for example, they have been informed they have to retake a year of study or are experiencing financial pressure. Please ensure any verbal communication with students is appropriate to the situation.

Staff should not attempt to answer a student query verbally if they are not absolutely sure of the answer, particularly in relation to course regulations, general university regulations and student policies and procedures. In such circumstances a message should be taken, and the correct information obtained. If responding to the initial enquiry with a further telephone call, it is good practice to follow this call up in writing with an email.

[Website](#)

Information for students regarding the University's courses and services can be posted on the University's external website. There is a dedicated section for students on the website, which is currently managed by the Communications team. By default, information there is open to all, to help give prospective students a taste of life at St George's.

There is an option for content to be put behind a login, meaning it would only be accessible to people with a St George's email address, but please bear in mind that anything published online could be downloaded and shared with a wider audience. Please contact the Communications team with any enquiries about posting to the website.

[Virtual Learning Environment](#)

Course-related information, such as deadlines and resources, can be communicated to students on Canvas. Technical support for Canvas is provided by the [Canvas team](#).

[Newsletters](#)

Two forms of newsletter currently exist for students:

The monthly student newsletter created by the Communications team, which contains information applicable to the whole student body such as how the University is responding to student feedback, good news stories and University developments such as physical changes to the campus.

Course-specific newsletters, which are developed by course teams. The [Medicine newsletter](#) is well established and shares cohort specific information such as staffing changes or upcoming assessment deadlines. [Biomedical Science](#) have also recently introduced a course-specific newsletter for the same purpose. At the point of publication, discussions are ongoing about all courses at St George's implementing a dedicated course newsletter.

3.2 Secondary channels

Social media

If you wish to share information with students via social media, staff are encouraged to speak to the Communications team who are responsible for the University's central Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram accounts.

If posting from subsidiary accounts affiliated with the University on these platforms, staff are obliged to abide by St George's [social media guidelines](#).

Digital Screens

There are digital screens in the Students' Union bar, the Library and on the sixth floor which can display messaging to students. These are managed by the [Students' Union](#), [Library](#), and [IMBE](#) and the [Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education](#) respectively.

Print

Posters can be placed around campus at the University. When producing printed material, please follow the University's [branding guidelines](#).

4. Responsibilities and boundaries of remit

There are several teams who communicate with students on a regular basis, and while this list is not exhaustive, it is designed to indicate who has responsibility for what information.

Course teams, including administrative and teaching staff

Course and teaching-specific information, such as details of educational activities to complete, deadlines, exam dates, exams information (postgraduate), results, programme regulations

Student Services

Student wellbeing support, such as student finance, accommodation and disability queries

Graduation communications

Admissions

Enrolment information

Timetabling

Timetabling

Exams

Central exams services

Student Recruitment

Student Ambassadors (when working events such as Open Days, Clearing etc.)

Student Conduct and Compliance

Student conduct, student procedures

Communications team

University-wide communications that are applicable to all, or significant sections of, the student body, for example, the University being shut due to inclement weather

Crisis communications (please see section 5)

Students' Union

The Students' Union are a separate entity from the University and offer the following services in addition to those provided by the University:

Academic and wellbeing support – please email [Lon Teija](#) for further information

Academic support – please email the [Vice President for Education and Welfare](#) further information

Recreational advice e.g. sports/societies – please email the [Vice President for Finance and Student Activities](#) for further information

5. Crisis communications

5.1 Defining a crisis

The University has Business Continuity Plans in place to maintain the safety and security of staff and students in the event of a crisis. However, there are other circumstances where the University may need to get a message out to its stakeholders quickly and accurately.

Please consider whether the incident presents significant risk to St George's, its staff, students, reputation or assets. For example:

- Has there been any serious harm or loss of life on one of our sites or to someone at a University activity/event, on University business or a placement?
- Has there been a data breach or theft?
- Could there be a public liability claim?
- Has academic or research activity been mishandled?
- Has a regulatory body subjected us to an investigation, imposed sanctions or raised concerns about us?
- Could the incident attract media coverage that could significantly damage public trust in the University?

Please alert the Communications team in such circumstances so we can provide support and guidance on messaging for students as well as for institutional messaging more generally.

To contact the Communications team, please email communications@sgul.ac.uk

6. Example templates

6.1 Email response template

Dear XXXX,

Many thanks for your email.

I'm very sorry to hear that you are experiencing issues with XXXX.

Please be assured that I will look into what the issue is and find a resolution urgently.

In the meantime, please *[suggest alternative short term solution to the issue here]*.

I will keep you updated as to how matters progress.

Please let me know if anything is unclear or if you have any further queries.

Best wishes,

XXXX

6.2 Out of office template

Thank you for your email. I am currently out of the office and will not return until **[date of return]**.

For urgent matters, please contact my colleague **[contact name]** on **[contact email/phone number]** who may be able to assist. Otherwise, I will respond to your email, where appropriate, as soon as possible upon my return.

Best wishes,

[Your name]

If you have any queries on what is stated within this document, or require specific support with communicating with students, please [email Communications](#).