Exciting Emails

Emails are a justifiably popular way for course reps to update, and seek opinions from, their course mates. Everyone has an email address, after all, and it's easy to contact all your course mates in one go. But realistically, how many of the emails you receive daily do you read and respond to? How many do you delete without opening? Those that you open probably only have a couple of seconds to grab your attention before heading for the Trash folder. Bear all of this in mind when composing your emails and yours will have more impact.

The 7 Deadly Sins of Boring Emails

1. **Boring Subject Line**
It'as the first thing your reader sees when their finger is hovering over the delete button. Make it good and they might read it, make it bad and your email falls at the first hurdle. Think about what you would want to read—if you are updating students on a meeting where you discussed feedback, why not choose the subject "Better Feedback on History Courses" over "SSCC update"?

2. **It Looks Dull**
Too much text, no formatting, no pictures—where's the fun in reading that? Most people will not bother to read a big chunk of text in an email. Add emphasis using bold, italics, underlining and easy-to-read colours. Pick out key points with bullet points. Highlight key questions by enlarging the text, and using them to sum up paragraphs. Add in relevant pictures if your email system supports this—but don't overdo it! You may wish to attach a Word or PDF newsletter if your email provider will not allow you to format emails in this way.

3. **Too Much Information**
Linked to the second deadly sin, the curse of TMI can make your emails unreadable. Think about what **your key message** is and make sure that comes across in a clear and succinct way. If you're reporting back from a meeting, you may wish to bullet point the actions coming out of the meeting, rather than a lengthy commentary on what was discussed, If you want feedback on a specific issue, give your readers the minimum background knowledge they need to understand your question and **phrase any questions as simply as possible**.

4. Getting the Tone Wrong
Nothing kills off negotiations with your Course Director or lecturer faster than emailing as if s/he's your mate, or making demands in a rude or tactless way. Keep your emails professional, and remember your audience. You may wish to be more light-hearted and approachable when contacting your course mates in order to appear friendly and approachable, but remember you also wish to inspire confidence that you are doing a good job as their representative.

5. Relying Only On the Minutes
Sharing the minutes of your SSCC meetings with your course mates is definitely something you should do. They are the formal record of the meeting and should be publicly available. However, only circulating the minutes ensures that only the keenest minority of your fellow students will find out about the great work you are doing on their behalf. They also tend to come out a long time after the meeting has happened. Why not circulate a short update immediately after the meeting, then when the minutes come out, summarise them and any developments since the meeting in a concise and interesting way.

6. Irrelevance
Do your students really need to know this? Ask yourself this question every time you send something out. Phrase your emails so that it is clear how what you are saying is relevant to the people you are emailing. Similarly, when emailing staff, are you sure they are the right person to be directing your query to? Time is money, after all.

7. The Black Hole of Not Replying
Perhaps the deadliest email sin a course rep can commit: the blank void of nothingness where a reply should be. Students will rapidly lose faith in your ability to represent them if their queries are not responded to, and staff will think you do not take your role seriously and may look for other ways to consult with students.
If the query requires substantial work on your part, it's a good idea to acknowledge the query and give a timescale for a reply so they know you're on the case.

> **Concise | Professional | Interesting**

Using Social Media
Social media can be an excellent way to engage with your course mates. Most of us use it in our daily lives anyway, so it can be a good way to bring your course rep role into spaces students already inhabit (rather than creating new spaces and expecting them to come to you). However, there are some do's and don'ts, as well as some innovative ways to use social media, which will be covered on these pages. The most important thing to remember with social media is not to assume that it will engage everyone: not everyone has or wants a Facebook or Twitter account, so in order to remain representative you will need to back up your social media presence with emails and face-to-face contact. Ulster University social media guidelines

Your Course Facebook Group
Having a Facebook group for your course allows for discussion to happen in a closed environment, and gives everyone a space to interact on social and academic issues. However, there are some things to bear in mind when setting up and running a Facebook group for your course.

Keep It Closed
Make the group closed to keep discussions private to members of your course only. This avoids potential problems with confidentiality, and gives students the safety of being able to speak freely in a closed space.

Keep It Updated
People are more likely to come back to the group page if things are happening on it. Post discussion questions, the agenda for your next meeting, or any social events. You may wish to meet with your course based society if you have one, so that you can include their events on your page. Use the Files section to store minutes, your meeting notes or any reports you produce.

Keep It Moderated
The group may be closed, but it should still be treated as a semi-public space. Insulting or tactless comments about individuals should be removed with an explanation, and you may wish to put a disclaimer or acceptable behaviour code in your group description. Moderation should not be used to stifle debate, but to prevent harmful or offensive content in a space that you are responsible for.

Less discursive than Facebook due to its 140-character limit, Twitter nevertheless has its uses. Why not set up a course rep account, or publicise your personal one if you dare?

#MyCourse
A good way to get discussions going without losing your personal Twitter account is to assign a hashtag to your course, and direct everyone to include it in tweets about their experiences. This way anyone who clicks on the hashtag can read all the tweets around the subject, as illustrated for the hashtag "#registertovote", which was the official hashtag for a recent Students' Union campaign. Tweeters can express opinions, ask questions and debate issues on the hashtag, and you can gain valuable feedback from the interactions you see.

Blogging/Vlogging
You may wish to write blog pieces about your experiences as a course rep, or to recount your recent meetings. If you do this, you can include a link to your blog in any emails you send out to give more interested students a fuller account. You may also wish to feed back via videos, using free sites like YouTube, which you can also email to your classmates. This can be more interesting than a bog-standard email, and is a good tool to get your face known.

Interesting Ways to Use Social Media
- Share interesting pieces of news or commentary relevant to the students on your course to provoke debate.
- Create a hashtag for one of your modules, to make the lectures more interactive. Can you get a lecturer on side to agree to take questions via Twitter?
- Create Facebook polls as a quick way of getting feedback on an issue.
- Link to surveys you've created on SurveyMonkey or GoogleDocs.
- Follow relevant accounts, such as your school/department or faculty, Ulster University and of course UUSU, and retweet relevant information to your followers.
- Blog about your experience as a course rep, or about a higher education issue you are passionate about.

Face to Face
The most important way to keep in touch with your course mates is to meet with them face to face. That way they know who you are, you can have a meaningful dialogue with them and you have a deeper understanding of their issues. Statistics only go so far: to be a good course rep you need a more nuanced engagement with both the students on your course and with the issues they present.

Office Hours
Running office hours or drop-in surgeries over a coffee can be a good way to meet students with specific issues: if everyone knows that you will be in the same place at the same time every week, it makes you easy to find and contact. You should choose a room that is easily accessible and familiar to the students on your course, or use your Students' Union facilities. Contact your Academic Representation Coordinator if you would like a space or room booked. Advertise your office hours by email, on Facebook, in lectures and through posters on your School/Department notice board or on your course support area.

Course Meetings and Socials

Office hours rely on your course mates taking the initiative to come to you with their problems, which some people will not do. One way to get a sense of your course mates' opinions of their course is to talk to them at more informal, social gatherings. Why not organise a coffee morning, meal out or other event with space to chat about the course and other things? You could do this jointly with your course based society, if one

exists: ask them if you can have some space at one of their events to talk about the course, or run a joint event.

Running Focus Groups

Running focus groups is a great way to undertake formal research into your classmates' experiences. Not only does it give you evidence to bring to meetings or put into reports, it gives you first-hand primary research experience, which is valuable for your skills development and employability.

Preparing for the session

- Identify the key objectives—what issue do you want your focus group to be about? A general chat is not a focus group.
- Carefully develop 5 to 6 questions that will provoke a discussion
  - *Ask yourself what problem needs to be addressed*
  - *Identify the information you need to gather*
- Plan your session
  - *Scheduling, plan meeting to be around 1.5 hours long to give enough time for detailed responses.*
  - *Settings and refreshments, choose the room appropriately and try to provide at least a drink – get in touch with your Students' Union they will be able to help out!*
  - *Ground rules, its useful to set some so people feel comfortable*
  - *Agenda, create this so you stay on target*
  - *Record it, using either video or audio so you can refer back to it*
- Find appropriate people to attend the focus group, and then call them the day before to remind them. You normally want 8-10, any more will be hard to manage.

Facilitating the session

- Introduce yourself. You may wish to run the focus group in a pair, with one of you facilitating and the other taking notes.
- Explain why it's being recorded and where the information will go.
- Carefully word each question and probe into students' answers if necessary,
- After each question summarise the students' responses.
- Ensure even participation so that everyone feels able to contribute—if someone is being quiet, ask them a direct question in a non-threatening way.
- Close the session and thank everyone for coming.

After the session

Consider what information you discovered and how you wish to use it. A full transcript of who said what is not particularly helpful as evidence to bring to staff, so you may prefer to use selected quotes, count the numbers of participants who agree with a certain question, or give a general overview of the responses. Just presenting focus group findings will not be as persuasive as if you use the evidence to formulate recommendations. Make sure your recommendations are backed up by evidence, and look for corroborating sources such as the National Student Survey for a stronger argument.

Designing Surveys

Change campaigns are only successful if based on evidence, and the best evidence by far is the opinion of students on your course. Surveys are an easy way to obtain high quality data, facts and figures that back up your arguments and help you make your case. Asking specific questions often gathers more valuable information than a blanket "what issues do you have with the course", and surveys allow you to corroborate and dig deeper into issues you have identified from other sources such as the NSS or individual student comment.

Principles of survey design Ask the right questions

What do you want to find out? What will you do with the information you gather? These two questions will affect the wording of the questions in your survey. You should make sure that each question you ask has a purpose, and gives you the information you wish to discover. For example, you would only ask a question about gender if you specifically wanted to know how gender impacts on your issue.

Get the right data

The way your questions are phrased, and the type of responses you collect, have an enormous impact on the value of your data. Re-read each question several times and make the wording as unambiguous as possible. If you need to clarify what you mean, or what you want respondents to focus on in their answer, write a short descriptive sentence to accompany the question.

Think about what sort of question you want to ask. Will you ask respondents to rate something from 1 to 5? Choose from a list of options? Give a short or long comment answer? Ideally you should mix these question types so that you have both qualitative and quantitative data. You should also provide a mechanism for respondents to clarify their ratings or other quantitative feedback with a comment or description.

Keep it short. Keep it relevant.

People are much more likely to complete a questionnaire if it does't take too long, and is clearly relevant to them. You may wish to add a short descriptive paragraph at the start outlining the purpose of the survey, the change you hope to make and what you will use the data for.

Using SurveyMonkey

SurveyMonkey is a useful, free tool to design online surveys.
The free version allows you ten questions and a maximum of 100 respondents, which is usually sufficient for course rep purposes. If you wish to design a larger survey, contact the Students' Union for support.

Getting started

Visit www.surveymonkey.com and sign up for a free account.
Once you've signed up, you can create surveys. Click "Create Survey" on the right hand side. Enter your survey title and choose a suitable category. "Education" normally suffices.
Add questions by clicking the "add question" button near the bottom of the Edit Survey page.

Question types

Think about what sort of information you wish to gather, and tailor the question to it. Do you want a figure, a rating, or a comment?

Multiple Choice allows you to set a defined range of options to choose from. You may wish to add an "other" option with a comment field.

Comment boxes are completely open, allowing respondents to give you more information in sentences. They generate a lot of data, but can be hard to analyse and spot patterns or trends.

Rating scales allow students to express preferences on a numerical scale. You may wish to add a comment field or supplementary question to clarify the numerical responses.

Matrix questions allow respondents to choose options from a "grid" of possible combinations. It is a good option for multiple ratings, or for date and time combinations.

Textboxes allow a limited number of characters in a smaller box, and are good for short information such as name, course and email address.

Using your data

When your survey has been completed by a sufficient number of students, you will want to look at your results and use them to lobby for change. The free version of SurveyMonkey does not allow you to create charts or export your data to Excel, but you can view all the answers to your questions, and see which answer was most popular in ratings and multiple choice questions. You may wish to create your own tables for numerical data, and look for common themes or issues in qualitative responses. Pick out key quotes that support your argument for emphasis. You might like to write a short report to present at your next SSLC.

20 Ways to Communicate with Course mates

Giving Information
- Do a quick announcement before or after a lecture (get the lecturer's permission first)
- Send a mass email
- Post on your course Facebook group or Twitter hashtag
- Put up a poster in some common space
- Give out small photocopied leaflets with your contact details on
- Link up with your departmental society and ask to attend their events to promote yourself
- Hold an open meeting to update after SSCCs
- Write a report from each SSCC

Getting Information
- Run an online survey using SurveyMonkey
- Photocopy a short paper survey and give it out before a lecture
- Leave post-it notes on desks before a lecture, ask a simple question in the form of a lecture shout, ask students to write their answers on the post-its and gather them at the end of the lecture or seminar
- Hold a focus group
- Hold an open meeting to gather information before SSCCs/to discuss an issue
- Attend a course based society event and talk to people about their experience
- Send a mass email asking for responses
- Run a Facebook or Doodle poll
- Start a discussion thread on Facebook, your VLE or Twitter
- Start a Wiki page and invite course mates to comment on what you write
- Do a simple hands-up vote in a lecture
- Hold office hours and advertise them prominently

Remember, if you need any additional help, or to back up your research with other sources such as National Student Survey data, contact the Students' Union (m.mulholland@uusu.org)