University Communication

Preface

During the second semester of the academic year 2021-2022, the Leiden University Student platform (LUS) assessed the subject of University communication. To gain insight, the LUS organized different events for students to attend and gave them the opportunity to share their opinion. All the LUS members set up short 'Prikborden'-sessions at their faculty, where they talked to their fellow students and asked them different questions on the topic of communication. Furthermore, the LUS prepared a university wide input session that took place on May 9th. Based on the visions gained during these occasions and brainstorming sessions with the LUS members themselves, this report has been put together.

Communication is a rather broad topic. In this report, the important distinction is made between information that students might be looking for and messages that the university wants to bring across. Furthermore, the LUS decided to focus on a couple of sub-topics to narrow down the subject. First-year students and the different communication channels have been chosen as the main focus points.

The topic of communication should be viewed against the background of previous LUS reports. Especially the report on student well-being shows that communication can be an important enabler but also a stress factor. Research on the topic of what to keep from online teaching also shows that communication has significantly changed in the last two years. We are slowly adjusting to a new normal. Therefore, now is a good moment to re-think and evaluate how university communication (should) go(es).

Contents

First-year students

Considering new students at the University, a mentorship structure in small groups has proven beneficial at different faculties. Organising a few sessions, preferably led by older-year students from the same program, can provide a good introduction. In addition, a central document with basic information for each study can help with the most frequently asked questions. This could be done in the form of a flowchart, guiding students through the first steps of studying in Leiden. Topics that might be addressed in this manner are exam registrations, structure of the programs, the different online platforms, organs within the faculty, etc. By centralizing and standardizing these documents, students should be able to find the necessary information with more ease. These flowcharts should also remain accessible for students in the higher years.

Furthermore, more emphasis could be put on the important people that can supply support and assistance during our years at the University. It should be clearer where students can go with their different questions, as offer and demand do not always align. By sending their questions to the right people directly, the pressure on especially the study advisors can also be eased. The representative organs can also play a role in showing how students can get more involved in their education and where they can give feedback.

Communication channels

General advice

First of all, it has proven crucial for communication to be directly addressed to the students of interest. Preferably, there should be a clear sender and receiver for students to know whether the message is relevant for them or not, as most of us get a lot of e-mails each day. By making effective use of the subject line, the right people can be targeted.

Taking timing into consideration, it is recommended to keep to working hours when possible and send essential information at least 2-3 days in advance. This should ensure that students can work around their own complex schedules and manage to prepare any assignments also within normal working hours. Potentially, the introduction of a (colour)coding for emergencies, might provide students a helping hand when structuring the information they receive from the University. If, for example, there is an important announcement that students need to be aware of within 24 hours, these e-mails could get the colour red.

In addition, several students have pointed out that they would appreciate more clarity concerning their deadlines. Different actions that might help are:
- The introduction of an overview of the most important deadlines at the beginning of each course. This could be done in the form of a short Brightspace message that is send around during the first few days.
- Increased awareness on the circulation of old documents that have not been updated and give students contradictory instructions.
- Within big courses, the help of student assistants could make sure that the student perspective is more easily heard and bared in mind.

Another frequently discussed subject is communication around course/exam registration and the attribution of study points, as uncertainty about the possibility of having a resit causes a lot of pressure. When teachers do not adhere to the current guidelines, this should be honestly communicated to the affected students. Also, providing them a realistic timeline can be an important aspect of expectation management.

Different channels

Student website

While gathering input about the website, an often-heard concern is that it is not well-arranged, and it is often not clear where to find information. In most cases, external search engines are used to navigate the website. The LUS also investigated how the website is administered and where some of the confusion could come from. We noticed that it is a complex issue with no quick solution. Our advice is to continue having constructive dialogues with students. The openness for feedback about the website, that we have experienced in our process, should provide steps forward. Awareness campaigns, where students are informed where and how they can direct their feedback, could also be beneficial.

A sub-part of the website, the e-prospectus, received a lot of positive feedback from students and seems to be a very frequently used source of information. Potentially, best practices from the e-prospectus could also be applied elsewhere.

E-mails

This method of communication is perceived as the most formal and useful by a lot of students, as it is selective, and students cannot miss any crucial information. However, the University should be careful with bulk e-mailing, as that counters the aforementioned importance of targeted communication.

Instagram

The pages from the University and the different faculties are valued by students for pointing out different extracurricular activities. However, a clear division between content for current and future students could be made. As long as the most essential information is still shared through e-mail and Brightspace, Instagram can be used in a creative way to spread more awareness on current topics.

Brightspace

Compared to blackboard, students find Brightspace a real improvement. The program allows for a comprehensive working environment, making the platform interactive and easy to use. Further improvements could be made regarding the set-up between the courses. Currently, each teacher structures the content in their own way. In turn, students spend a significant amount of time getting accustomed to the different modules. By setting up guidelines on the structuring of content, it would be clearer where certain information can be found. Hence, students would be able to work more efficiently.

Moreover, students have pointed out to get a lot of notifications through Brightspace to courses that they do not follow currently. Therefore, they would welcome the possibility to silence certain courses

that are not relevant for them at this moment. This would reduce the amount of information that students are presented with each day, making it more organized. Additionally, students have trouble finding manuals on, for example, the coupling of their e-mail to Brightspace and the app Pulse. A satisfactory solution could be provided by creating an introductory module within the system, where all these manuals and guidelines, with the most frequently asked questions, can be stored.

Teams

Platforms such as Teams, Kaltura and Zoom are a constructive addition within the different learning environments, as these programs allow students and teachers to interact in a wide variety of ways. The platforms have proven especially useful during the pandemic and will remain important in the future of hybrid education. To guarantee a pleasurable working experience, it is crucial for students to know on which platform what information can be found. This is particularly relevant concerning the use of Teams and Brightspace at the same time. Some teachers only use Teams as a platform to host their classes, others upload all material to teams instead of Brightspace. Clarity on where documents are, and potential standardization could be beneficial. As a result, students will lose less energy on searching for the right materials, freeing up time and reducing stress.

uSis

The registration for exams remains an impediment for a lot of students. Searching with the different activity-numbers and the division between exam and course enrollment make the process unintuitive. Consequently, students worry about whether they did it properly. It would be nicer if the program could show the courses that the student must still complete for their program and combine the course with the exam registration.

In addition, the current introduction of new systems, such as MyStudyMap, has added to the confusion. For most students, it is ambiguous which program they need to use and with what purpose. Minimizing the number of different platforms and providing a clear overview would be very welcome. Furthermore, a summary concerning the process of graduating would also be useful. At the moment, students figure out the different steps by asking their peers or e-mailing study advisers, which is an unwanted detour when it comes to such an important and standardized action.

Final notes

A common thread throughout this report regarding communication is the need for small-scale, personal, and well targeted interaction between the University and her students. There should be as much clarity, efficiency, and honesty as possible to ensure constructive transmission of information. As soon as students are put into the position of actively hunting around for instructions, there is a high chance of misunderstandings and the rise of frustration.

Furthermore, the University should always consider the accessibility of communication and information that is provided. Special attention should, among others, be given to students with special needs and the international community. Prime examples to take into account are students with seeing and hearing impairments, as well as the demand to provide all necessary information both in Dutch and in English.

The LUS has noticed that there are a lot of initiatives from the University that are, thus far, not well known among students. To ensure better alignment of demand and offer, emphasis on the creation of a community feeling could offer improvement. Students tend to use their peers and older students as a first source of information, making this an unbelievably valuable channel for communication.

The positive effects of effective communication and information provision surely add to a student's experience in many ways. Especially its effects on student well-being, by decreasing stress, should not be overlooked. This LUS report can only indicate the first directions in which improvements can be made. Establishing a concrete overview concerning the essential information that a student needs in his/her student life is a further effort to be considered. The reduction of stressful factors will stay a continuous process.