



OfLA Project  
2018-1-UK01-KA203-048090

# O9 – Evaluation of the second cycle of studies

Prompts, communications, and  
action – NTU student research

RESPONSIBLE PARTNER:  
NOTTINGHAM TRENT  
UNIVERSITY

PARTICIPATING PARTNERS:  
UMC UTRECHT  
ARTEVELDE UNIVERSITY OF  
APPLIED SCIENCES



## Output 9 – Evaluation of the second cycle of studies

These reports will map the process of data-informed advice in the second year of the study.

A1. We will confirm with the new study subjects how we will work alongside them. This time however, we will have selected a new group of courses or degree programs to work with, or will be testing a new approach to using institutional data/ learning analytics in the advising and supporting process. This may include group tutorials, different types of alert or early warning, or advising using a particular pedagogical methodology.

A2. We will monitor and project manage the operation of the learning analytics resources.

A3. We will map how data (on each course and/or centralized) is used to firstly spot students at risk, how students are communicated to and how they are supported. Importantly, this year the reports will also include a summary of how we communicated with staff to set up the new round of interventions and challenges associated with the new cycle of interventions. The reports will also include recommendations for conducting the final cycle or research in 2020-2021.

A4. We will publish the resources to the website. AHS will take the overall responsibility for editing together the reports.

*"The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein."*

This output is a result of the European [Erasmus+](#) project [OfLA \(2018-1-UK01-KA203-048090\)](#)

Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union



## Contents

1.	Executive Summary .....	4
2.	Introduction and Methodology .....	4
2.1	Background Information .....	4
2.2	Introduction and Aims .....	6
2.3	Overview of Methodology .....	7
3.	Findings.....	8
3.1	Prompt .....	8
3.2	Communication.....	9
3.3	Action.....	16
4.	Discussion and summary of recommendations .....	19
4.1	Disparity of perceived experience of the students .....	19
4.2	Summary of findings .....	19
4.3	Recommendations for the final year of the project .....	21
5.	References .....	21

# 1. Executive Summary

The NTU Student Dashboard generates 'engagement' data for each student based on their interaction with the university using already available electronic measures. One way that NTU uses this engagement data is to generate an automated alert when there is no engagement with the university for a period of time. If a student does not interact with the university for 10 consecutive days during term time if they are a first year student, and 14 consecutive days if they are a second or final year student, an alert is automatically generated by the Dashboard and sent to the student's personal tutor (or their equivalent). The purpose of the alert is to support personal tutors to identify students that may not be engaging with their studies, and the tutor is encouraged to act upon this information. In 2019-20, this pilot was conducted to test the impact of also sending the alerts directly to students

The aim of this research was to gain feedback from students that had received alerts directly to find out more about their experience, in particular what is working well and where improvements can be made. Fourteen students that had received an alert were interviewed, and their views sought on each aspect of the OfLA three stage model: prompts, communication and actions. Students were asked, for example, about their views on the timing of the alert, the content and tone of the subsequent communication, and what had helped them to re-engage with their studies.

A key finding is that, although the students have made useful suggestions about how the alerts can be improved, there were no students that said that the university should not continue to monitor student engagement and act upon this information where appropriate. Overall, students liked that the university monitors and acts upon student engagement and believe that it should continue to do so. There was also found to be a disparity of experience in tutor support amongst the students, and how this may impact upon their re-engagement. This report makes recommendations, based on the students' feedback, at each of the three stages of the model: prompt, communication and actions.

## 2. Introduction and Methodology

### 2.1 Background Information

The NTU Student Dashboard generates 'engagement' data for each student based on their interaction with the university using the already available electronic measures of: attendance, Library loans, Log-in to NOW (the University's Virtual Learning Environment), Accessing NOW Learning Rooms, Card swipes to NTU buildings, use of E-Resources, and coursework submissions (through the NOW dropbox)<sup>1</sup>. Using these measures, the Dashboard algorithm provides an engagement rating for each student for each day of the year based on their activity levels: the more a student engages with the resources the higher their engagement rating. The engagement rating can be one of five ratings: High (H), Good (G), Partial (P), Low (L), or Very Low (V). Previous research by the Dashboard team has found that engagement data has a relationship with student progression and attainment at NTU (see OfLA (2020) [O9 – Evaluation of the second cycle of studies: NTU Mid-term reviews Appendix](#)). For further details about the Dashboard see the [NTU Student Dashboard Staff User Guide](#), the [STELA Project Case Study Zero](#), and the [NTU Student Dashboard – a brief explainer](#).

---

<sup>1</sup> Since this research has taken place the Dashboard algorithm has been altered in response to students primarily working off-campus due to Covid-19. From September 2020 the two on campus measures (card swipes and library loans) have been removed from the algorithm.

If a student does not interact with the university for 10 consecutive days during term time if they are a first year student, and 14 consecutive days<sup>2</sup> if they are a second or final year student (using the measures listed above) an alert is automatically generated by the Dashboard and sent to the student's personal tutor or academic mentor<sup>3</sup>. The purpose of the alert is to support personal tutors to identify students that may not be engaging with their studies, and the tutor is encouraged to act upon this information. [The OfLA NTU 06- Evaluation of First Year Studies research report](#) found that whilst tutors were often already aware that these students were potentially less engaged due to their own observations, the alert was particularly useful where students were not yet known (such as in a large cohort at the beginning of the year, or on courses where there was less contact) and were helpful to gain a fuller picture of the student's engagement alongside their own observations.

### **Feedback gained from students about alerts**

NTU conducts an annual survey of its first-year students, the Student Transition Survey (STS), in order to gain feedback from students to inform practice. Students were consulted on the development of the alerts in the Student Transition Survey 2017<sup>4</sup>, in which 97% of students thought that NTU should contact a student if it felt that it could improve their chances of progression and 74% of students said they would find receiving an alert if their engagement is low for 2 consecutive weeks valuable or very valuable (n=753).

The 2019 survey<sup>5</sup> explored students' views on the alert process, and found that whilst students would most like to receive an alert from their tutor (88% of students said that they would be happy to be contacted by their tutor), 71% of students would also be happy to receive an alert directly from the Student Dashboard. When students were asked how they would like to be contacted if a Dashboard alert was generated for them (such as by email, letter, phone, or text), students were most likely to say they would like to be contacted by email to their NTU email address (83%). For further information about the survey please see [The OfLA NTU 06- Evaluation of First Year Studies research report](#).

In response to this, it was decided to trial sending an alert directly to students with low engagement that would be sent to their NTU email address. Sending alerts directly to students with their tutor copied in to the email has the benefit of contacting all students (including those that may not yet have a tutor) and reduces the potential for time delay between the tutor receiving the alert and then contacting the student. See Appendix 2 for a copy of the automatically generated email alert that is sent to students.

### **Pilot of Dashboard alerts directly to students**

From the start of the 2019 academic year, alerts automatically generated by the Dashboard were sent directly to students' university email address in three schools<sup>6</sup> within the university. Alongside this, in 2019, a pilot was begun to trial a change in the timeframe of the alerts as follows:

- o 10 days no-engagement for first year students
- o 14 days no-engagement for second year students
- o 14 days no-engagement for final year students (see [OfLA 06 report – The impact of reducing the alert time period from 14 to 10 days in the NTU Student Dashboard](#))<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> See the [OfLA 09 - The impact of reducing the alert time period from 14 to 10 days in the NTU Student Dashboard](#) report for further information.

<sup>3</sup> For further information about the criteria used for alerts please see Appendix 1: Criteria for alerts.

<sup>4</sup> 753 students took part in the 2017 survey (10% response rate)

<sup>5</sup> 1,401 students completed the 2019 survey (a 16% response rate).

<sup>6</sup> NTU has nine academic schools that may typically be called faculties in other Higher Education Institutions.

<sup>7</sup> In the previous year, 2018-19, the Dashboard generated only alerts to tutors, and the alert period for all schools was 14 days.

Table 1 below illustrates the number of alerts generated by the Dashboard between 03/09/2019 and 16/03/2020 (before the university temporarily closed due to Covid 19).

<b>Alert facing</b>	<b>Total alerts generated</b>	<b>No. of students alerts generated for</b>	<b>Total alerts generated for students with unknown tutor</b>	<b>No. of students alerts generated for whose tutor was unknown</b>	<b>Percentage alerts generated for students with unknown tutor</b>	<b>Percentage of students alerts generated for whose tutor was unknown</b>
Staff and student facing	1,361	674	466	240	34%	36%
Staff only facing	2,851	1,296	1,281	618	45%	48%

Table 1: Alerts generated by the Dashboard between 03/09/2019 and 16/03/2020

The table illustrates that a slightly larger proportion of students with an unknown tutor have generated alerts and that this may be worth further exploration.

## 2.2 Introduction and Aims

### Research aims

The aim of this research was to gain feedback from students that had received alerts to find out more about their experience, in particular what is working well and where improvements can be made. The interview was designed in order to gain feedback on the three stage model: prompts, communication and actions, and students were prompted to discuss their experience of each stage of this model such as:

#### Prompt

- Were you aware that you might be contacted about your engagement?
- How did it feel to be contacted in this way?

#### Communication

Students were asked for their feedback on:

- Content of communication
- Timing of communication
- Communication type (such as phone, email) from their tutor
- Positive alerts

#### Action

- What did you do as a result of the alert?
- What subsequent support were you offered?

For the interview questions please see Appendix 3.

This research project therefore contributes to the OfLA project aims of testing interventions within a three stage model: prompts, communication and actions, in that it explores the student view of receiving alerts directly, and subsequent communication and actions that have taken place. It also builds upon the work of the ABLE Project report (2015) that was authored by the Dashboard team, that concluded that more work was needed to better understand the experience of students that have received communications about their engagement.

## 2.3 Overview of Methodology

This research took place within the three pilot schools in which students received an alert directly from the Dashboard. 423 students with Very Low or Low engagement (as measured by the Dashboard) that had received a student alert were sent an email inviting them to take part in the research on 3 April 2020. The following week, 195 students with Partial, Good or High engagement were sent an email inviting them to take part. This was in order to prioritise those students with Low or Very Low engagement that would like to take part. A range of students from different courses and different years were chosen to take part in the interview.

At the time of interviews (8-27 April) the university was closed due to Covid-19, so students were offered the choice between an online interview (through Microsoft Teams) and a phone interview, and all students except one chose a phone interview. The student who didn't choose a phone interview asked to conduct the interview using Teams without the video as his phone wasn't working. Students were given a £15 voucher after taking part in the interview and were sent a debrief sheet following the interview which gave details about where to access further support (see Appendix 4: OfLA Research Debrief Sheet).

The sample of fourteen students consisted of:

- Seven female and seven male students
- Six Year One, five Year Two and three Year Three students
- Three of the students were sandwich students, and one student had completed a year in industry in his second year.
- Two of the students said in the interview that they were mature students.

All the students had received at least one alert from the dashboard and all the students interviewed had therefore spent a period of time with low or very low engagement. Pseudonyms have been used in this report to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

The sample typically contains more males than we would expect to come forward for such research, and it appears that the research approach has enabled a variety of different students to take part. It is the reflection of the researchers that it is the combination of the incentive voucher as well as the option of a phone interview (rather than a face-to-face interview) that has facilitated this.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006) was used to analyse the data, with the analysis focusing upon themes that were important in relation to the research areas (prompt, communication, action) and students' current university experience. A number of students, for example, spoke about their own wellbeing and mental health difficulties and these experiences were also drawn out in the analysis. This was in order to understand the student experience of wellbeing and mental health given the increasing number of young people in higher education experiencing mental illness, as well as students reporting lower overall wellbeing than other young adults (Thorley, 2017). The interviews were fully transcribed, and analysed using Nvivo.

## 3. Findings

The findings have been written up in the three stages of the model: prompt, communication and actions, with associated recommendations included (as bullet points) throughout.

### 3.1 Prompt

#### **3.1.2 Were students aware that they would be contacted about low engagement?**

Five students said that they had been aware that that they would be contacted about their engagement (Arya, Hannah, Luke, Aazim, Zoe), and two students said that they hadn't been told this but presumed that they would be contacted if their engagement became low (Arthur and Conor). Four students (Leanna, Emma, Adam and Corrina) said that they were unaware that they would be contacted about their engagement<sup>8</sup>. It is therefore recommended that:

- **Clear guidance is given to students in induction about how their engagement data will be used and that they may be contacted regarding their engagement.**

#### **3.1.3 Were students aware that they had received an email alert automatically generated by the Dashboard?**

There were eight students that were not aware that they had received an email alert directly to their email address (Katie, Leanna, Tom, Emma, Arthur, Luke, Zoe, and Hannah). This may be because, as Arthur says, students may not regularly check their university email address:

*"In the first year at uni I, to be honest, I rarely checked my emails because I feel like people have their own kind of personal email account which they give priority and then they have their NTU Dashboard and sometimes people can forget about the whole student email alert." (Arthur)*

Three students said that they had received an email alert from the Dashboard as well as other communications from staff (Conor, Jacob and Arya) and three students (Adam, Corrina and Azim) said that they had received only a Dashboard alert directly to their email. Corrina believed that the alert that she had received was inaccurate because it was generated when she was studying abroad but didn't mind this, and felt that the university should continue to monitor students' engagement:

*"It didn't really bother me.... in a way its kind of a good reminder, because it means maybe I should check in to see if there's anything applicable to me while I was abroad." (Corrina)*

Adam, however explained that his alert was inaccurate because he had been disengaged from the university for longer than two weeks when he received the alert, *"I received an email saying I'd not been in for ten days and I knew full well that I hadn't been in for a month"*, and that this inaccuracy made him feel *"undervalued"*.

---

<sup>8</sup> Three students (Jacob, Katie and Tom) were not asked this question due to time in the interview as this question was less of a priority.



### **3.1.4 Did students agree with the timing of the Dashboard email alert?**

Deciding on when alerts be sent to students involves finding a balance between the accuracy of the alert and actionability (as discussed in the [O9: The impact of reducing the alert time period from 14 to 10 days in the NTU Student Dashboard report](#)). Half of the students in this research thought that the time frame should be reduced suggesting that, from the student view, it may be better to err on side of a falsely generated alert than to send an alert too late:

- Two students thought that the alert should be sent after one week or less for all students (Aazim and Hannah)
- Two students (Arya and Tom) thought that for second and third years the alert should be one week, and the time frame for first years should stay the same.
- One student, Arthur, thought that the first year alert should be after one week and the second and third year alert stay the same
- Two students (Jacob and Zoe) thought that the alert should be ten days for all students
- Six students thought the timing was just right (Katie, Leanna, Emma, Conor, Corrina, and Luke)
- One student, Adam, thought that the alert should be after two weeks and then followed up by a phone call from a tutor or support team, and that the student should receive more than one call if needed.

It is therefore recommended that:

- **In addition to the considerations outlined in the [O9: The impact of reducing the alert time period from 14 to 10 days in the NTU Student Dashboard report](#) students' views on the timing of alerts are considered, and that these are also shared when communicating about why and how alerts are generated.**

## **3.2 Communication**

### **3.2.1 Should the university continue to monitor student engagement?**

It is worth noting that whilst there were differences in opinion (as seen below) about the types of communication that the university should have with students once they are identified as low in engagement, there were no students that said that the university should not continue to monitor student engagement. For Arya, for example, receiving an email alert and a communication from her tutor made her feel that the university cared:

*"It makes me feel like they do care because I guess... them contacting me about my attendance and engagement means that they care about us... I guess I could say they care enough to reach out to me." (Arya)*

Corrina believes that the university should continue to monitor student engagement because it is motivating:

*"It is helpful when you need it so it definitely works, its effective in doing what its needed to do, it motivates students, I don't think there should be any reasons for, if for example, NTU was to discontinue it, I don't think they should because it does help students." (Corrina)*

It is therefore recommended that:

- **Universities monitor student engagement and act upon this information where appropriate.**

### **3.2.2 What did students think about the content and tone of the automated alert?**

Adam, as seen above, felt that the content of the alert was inaccurate, and advised that if alerts were continued, the content of the email be changed to be more supportive in tone and that it include a photograph of those that can be accessed for support:

*"The content of the email does need to change I think, it should be more of a supportive tone... it said what you were doing wrong, but didn't really tell you what... I feel like it should highlight what's available, it should, maybe read like "if you are lacking in engagement with lessons or struggling, please contact your tutor, or support team", and provide a photo of, in the email, of the support team or something, so it can give you a visualisation." (Adam)*

As seen in Appendix 2: Direct to student alert content email) the content of the alert email to students does include how to find their personal tutor and a link to student support and library support, however this feedback from Adam suggests that including a photograph of the tutor or support team may make this information more explicit. The other five students who were aware that they had received the automated email alert were happy with its content and tone. Conor described that the content "was fine", and Arya that the automated alert had a "good tone". Corrina was happy with the tone of the alert, saying that it was "informative... so it's just pushing students to engage a bit more and that's it." Aazim received the alert at a time when he says he hadn't been feeling too well so had "genuine reasons for not being there" and liked what he described as "a friendly reminder":

*"It was ok to be honest just a friendly reminder... people have all sorts of different problems, so having been given that reminder just for saying we are checking up on you, is quite nice... it was quite good knowing that there was someone there checking up on you just in case there is something else a bit more serious than just a cold or flu" (Aazim)*

Arya suggested that a link to mental health support was also added within the body of the email and suggested that it could be more informal in tone. Jacob was also happy with the tone of the alert and suggested too that it could be more informal. Speaking of the automated email, Jacob says:

*"I think it struck a balance quite well for me personally because its bit of a 'oh, ok what do I need to do'".*

However Jacob also suggests later in the interview that the email alert could be updated to be "a bit more on the students level and not so formal" suggesting it say:

*"Just something like to say you know 'hi name, erm just to give a little bit of a nudge but we have noticed recently your attendance is this level, are you aware of this, if you need any more support with this we do have our [name of support] to support you, you've got your personal tutor to speak to, there are lots of things you can get involved with at university etc. Which is a little bit more kind of... I'm talking to you rather than oh, this is just an automated email." (Jacob).*

Overall then, the students appeared to be happy with the content and tone of the email alert (as seen in Appendix 2: Direct to student alert content email), and have suggested some useful additions to the content and how we communicate about the alert with students. Based on the students' suggestions, it is recommended that:

- **A link to mental health support is included in communications with students about their engagement where appropriate.**

- **When informing students that they will be contacted about their engagement in induction ensure that the message is given that the Dashboard is an *indicator* of engagement in order to manage expectations about its accuracy.**
- **Where possible include a photograph of the tutor, and those that the student can contact for support, in communications with students.**

### **3.2.3 What was the experience of students of communications from staff about their engagement?**

There was a range of experiences for those students who had received communications from members of staff about their engagement and attendance. Firstly, due to differences in tutor arrangements, students may have had communications from different staff members because not all of the students had a tutor that they saw on a one-to-one basis. Whether students had a tutor (or not) wasn't a question that was asked in the interview, but appeared to be an important part of the student experience. The following is a summary of these differences as described to the researcher in the interview

- Seven students had one-to-one tutorials
- Three students had group tutorials (so didn't see a tutor on a one-to-one basis)
- Two students were invited to contact their tutor for a one-to-one tutorial
- One student only saw their personal tutor on the first day (due to staff absence)
- One student had no personal tutor

For further details please see Appendix 5: Type of tutor by student.

However, having a one-to-one tutor didn't always ensure a consistency of experience for students. Katie and Luke both have a personal tutor with whom they have one-to-one tutorials, and both described positive experiences of being contacted by their tutor. Luke liked the informal language used in an email by his tutor to check up on his wellbeing at the start of lockdown due to Covid-19, "*I have my tutor check up on me, not just for attendance just for general wellbeing*" and recommends that such communications are informal and better coming from a tutor:

*"Keep the emails quite casual... it makes you feel more comfortable when you're reading it... like friendly language opening up the email...it is better from a tutor because it feels more personal."* (Luke)

Katie was contacted by her tutor and a member of administration staff in a tone that Katie describes as "*direct by caring*" and that this approach was a factor in supporting her reengagement (Katie's experience is discussed further below).

Leanna, Arthur and Adam, however describe a different experience. They also each have a personal tutor with whom they have one-to-one tutorials. Leanna felt that an email follow up from the course leader about her engagement had an "*accusatory*" rather than a supportive tone, and when asked to describe how this could be improved Leanna suggested:

*"...being more concerned with your wellbeing rather than acting like you'd done something wrong straight away, or that you're not interested."* (Leanna)

Arthur was asked to attend a meeting with other students that had been identified as having low attendance and low engagement. Arthur explained that, on the whole, he had

been attending sessions, but that he couldn't sign in using the attendance QR code<sup>9</sup> because his phone wouldn't recognise the QR code. The meeting request included a number of other students as well as himself in it, and the meeting was also with other students. Although he says that he does appreciate the university checking up on him, he found this communication and the meeting daunting:

*"I do like appreciate them checking up on me, but I just felt like it was very, I don't know the whole kind of going to the meeting was very daunting... I was there mainly most of the time, it was just because my QR code wouldn't work on my Samsung and it was just a bit intimidating." (Arthur)*

Adam described that the only communication that he received from his tutor was a group email asking "how is everybody?", and says of this generalised email approach:

*"I think "who's going to reply to that email?", "oh yeah I'm great thank you", you know just, I don't think it was a very sensible approach." (Adam)*

Luke and Conor both received a letter to their term-time address from their school regarding their engagement and both felt happy with its content and tone. Luke described that:

*"I think it was quite polite and it just addressed the seriousness of the situation really...It didn't make me feel on edge or anything like that... It made me appreciate it is a serious topic." (Luke)*

It is the letter that prompted Luke to take the action of contacting his tutor. Conor described the content and tone of the letter as "fine" although as seen below it was the email from his tutor that prompted him to take action.

As seen above with the experience of Leanna and Arthur there is potential for students to feel 'accused' by communications, particularly where they may perceive that there has been an assumption that they have chosen to disengage. It is recommended then that initial communications with students about their engagement are supportive in tone. It is also recommended that such communications are, where possible, sent individually to students and that tutors are given time and resources to enable them to do this.

- **Ensure that initial communications about engagement with students are supportive in tone.**
- **Communications about engagement are, where possible, sent individually to students and that tutors are given time and resources to enable them to do this.**
- **Training and guidance (including example communications) is given to staff who may contact students about their engagement.**
- **Those students that do not have a personal tutor are assigned a named person that they can contact about their engagement.**

---

<sup>9</sup> Attendance at NTU is registered through the use of a QR code specific to each session.

### **3.2.4 Should the university continue to send automated alerts directly to students?**

When asked whether the university should continue to send automated alerts to students, ten students said yes, with these three students describing that it gave them the opportunity to correct their engagement themselves:

*"...because it does help students... we want to be independent" (Corrina)*

*"I do see them as a bit more of a helpful nudge if that makes sense" (Jacob)*

*"You get the reminder and take it on board and sort of move on" (Aazim)*

As Arya says, the email alert was a reminder that the university is aware of the student:

*"It was helpful [the email alert] - letting me know the university is keeping an eye out for me" (Arya)*

One student, Adam, however, felt strongly that the university shouldn't continue the automated response to students and suggested that it should either be a tutor or an 'engagement support team' that should contact the student by phone. This student had received an automated Dashboard alert only.

### **3.2.5 What was the students' preferred mode of communication?**

There was a variation amongst the students about which was their preferred mode of communication. As seen above, many of the students felt that the university should continue to send automated alerts to students using email. In addition, three of the students, (Leanna, Conor and Emma), said that they would prefer other forms of communications (but didn't say no to the automated alert). Leanna and Conor would have preferred contact from their tutor, and Emma thought it would be better for students to be contacted *"in a more personal way"* through text or email to the students personal email address *"because if students were disengaged they probably wouldn't be looking at their work email"*. Aazim, too, said that he would be happy to be contacted by text about his engagement.

Arya and Corrina were happy to be contacted by phone or email: Arya was happy with either approach and Corrina felt that *"an email would be appropriate first and then if that action... is not taken into account by the student, then maybe a phone call would be necessary"*. Arya also suggested that the alert should also be on the NTU app and on the Student Dashboard itself. Arthur also suggested *"having an alert would definitely be a good idea on the Dashboard"* suggesting that the first alert is on the Dashboard and then the second alert would involve contact with the tutor. Leanna, as will be discussed below, had mixed feelings about the phone, and described that she also had a communication from her tutor in a seminar, in which her tutor approached her about her absence. It was this direct contact with her tutor that she much preferred to the email that she had received from her course leader:

*"That was much nicer, she actually seemed concerned" (Leanna).*

Luke was the only student to say that a letter was the preferred method of communication.

It is therefore recommended that institutions:

- **Consider the inclusion of the alert on other university platforms such as the university app and the Student Dashboard itself.**

- **Consider different communication types for different stages of contact where escalation is needed, for example an initial alert, then an email, then a letter.**

### **3.2.6 The phone as a potential method of communication**

Seven students also mentioned that they would have liked to have been contacted by phone and gave different reasons for this. Hannah felt that the phone would be "*harder to ignore*" than emails, and Arthur and Leanna felt that a phone call would be more "*personal*", although Leanna says that a phone call would also make them feel more "*on the spot*" whereas an email would allow time to "*think through whatever it is you need to say and then communicate properly*" (although Leanna's preference as seen above is for tutor contact in class). Arya would like to be able to talk to her tutor on the phone and to be able to arrange a phone appointment with them for practical reasons, because "*sometimes it was difficult getting the one to one meeting with an advisor*".

Both Adam and Jacob explained that a phone call that would refer students on to further support would be helpful. Adam recommended that this be run by an "*attendance team*":

*"...where it's just, literally like one or two, three people max., and it's three staff members where they track students' progress and stuff, and then they refer students who are struggling on to the student support."* (Adam)

Jacob explains that a phone call or a letter to term-time address would be a more effective intervention because it would reach students quicker than an email:

*"When you get an email it's like you know whilst you intend to read it, it could be up to 5 days, up to 6, 7 days, erm so by the time you get it you think I'll either not respond or I'll respond later so potentially you know a phone call or maybe a letter to your registered address".* (Jacob)

It is of note that Jacob is someone who, as he describes, had "*buried my head in the sand*" and did "*completely disengage*":

*"I think personally I was one of those typical people who just didn't talk about anything, if that makes sense, I kind of like buried my head in the sand if that makes any sense, you know I'd check my email occasionally but I did completely just like completely disengage at that point"* (Jacob)

It is also of note that Jacob didn't have a tutor, so when he was having difficulties in the second year he didn't know who to speak to:

*"I don't really like it cos when I was going through those issues in second year I really didn't know who to speak to."* (Jacob)

He explained the difficulty of seeking support when it is just signposted, that he would find it less anxiety-provoking if he was able to speak to another student about what would happen when contacting support, as approaching one of the services for the first time can be "*quite unnerving*". This is the type of student the Student Dashboard is particularly keen to identify and support to re-engage and this is discussed further in section 3.3 below.

There were only two students who disliked the phone call as a method of communication: Conor said that he preferred not to be contacted by phone, and said that in this case he "*wouldn't have picked up*", and Aazim that:

*"A phone call would be too much because, there's a lot of times you might be busy you might be in a lecture or seminar, you might be at work or something, so I think a text or email is a lot easier to reply when you want". (Aazim)*

It is important to note here that although these students are suggesting phone calls as a means of communication that they may not have experienced them. This feedback from students will be used to inform the next stage of the research that will trial a phone call following an alert (see section 4.3 below).

### **3.2.7 Should positive communications be sent to students?**

There was only one student, Hannah, that had received a positive email communication from a member of staff and this was from a staff member who had emailed her praising her for her contribution in a seminar. Hannah described that it *"felt good"* when she received the email and that she felt *"valued for being there"*.

When asked whether students should receive positive communications about their engagement, nine students said yes, with eight of these students stating that the communication should be from their tutor because, as Luke says, it would be *"more personal"*. As these students describe:

*"I think an email from someone like your personal tutor would be quite good, just to sort of say that you're doing well and getting back on track, might motivate some students to know that they are getting recognised, that sort of thing."*  
(Aazim)

*"I think one from my tutor would have felt more, had more of an impact"*  
(Leanna)

Two students, Tom and Corrina felt that this was not necessary, and Katie, a mature student, was undecided on this:

*"From one side of me I'd love to be told I'm being really good but the more sensible side of me goes 'we're just going to bring up human beings who are told they are doing something really good when they're not really doing good at all' does that make sense?"* (Katie)<sup>10</sup>

It is therefore recommended that institutions:

- **Consider the use of positive communications using the Dashboard engagement data, and where possible for these to be sent by the tutor to give a more personal experience for the student.**

---

<sup>10</sup> Two students, Anya and Emma didn't express a view on this.

### **3.2.8 Was there consistent use of the Dashboard notes by staff and students?**

Only two of the students said that they were aware that Dashboard notes had been used to record meetings, (Tom and Conor), suggesting that more training needs to be done here, with both staff and students (as it may be that notes were written and that the students aren't aware of them). It is therefore recommended that institutions:

- **Provide training and guidance for both staff and students on the use and importance of Dashboard notes.**

## **3.3 Action**

### **3.3.1 What helped students to re-engage with their studies?**

The researchers were particularly keen to learn from these students about what had helped them to re-engage in order to inform how to support students in future. Adam described that the difficulty with not engaging is that it is embarrassing then to re-engage, and here it is personal contact that is needed:

*"A lot of the time with engagement you're quite embarrassed about it .... it would help better if you knew, if you knew who you was talking to, you could properly level with them, if you knew like the team." (Adam)*

We saw with Jacob (above) that he had buried his "head in the sand" about his problems, and this was also the case with Luke who described that a letter to his term time address (he doesn't recall receiving a Dashboard alert) prompted him to take the action of contacting his tutor because it alerted him to the seriousness of his situation. He says of the letter:

*"It was good, it woke me up...it brought the problems that I had, it brought attention to it if that makes sense, it brought it from the back of my head to the front and engaged the problem... and I then contacted my tutor" (Luke)*

Luke's tutor then informed him about wellbeing support within the university (that he wasn't aware of) and went with him to the helpdesk to ask about this support. Luke says that this "just made me feel like I had my tutor behind me" and that he probably wouldn't have accessed this support if his tutor hadn't been with him:

*"I think if you're an anxious person and then people leave it to you to make the decision then you just go into your shell and you don't do it." (Luke)*

Luke advises that the university should "make the wellbeing service more known."

Similarly, as we have seen above, Jacob describes that he found making the step of seeking support when it is just signposted difficult, and that he felt that being able to speak to someone on the phone about what would happen when contacting support would help with this. Whilst Jacob didn't have a personal tutor, he did go and see his lecturer after he had received an email from them about his attendance and engagement. He describes that it was the combination of the email alert and the "human touch" from his lecturer that supported him to re-engage with his studies. Speaking about the email alert he says:

*"It makes you kind of realise that you are kind of at university for a reason, so it could kind of push you in one of two ways if you're saying I don't enjoy this then and leave, or actually no I do want to be here so I'll put effort in and get on with it, so I think it makes you kind of put things into perspective I think, in a positive way." (Jacob)*



When asked which was more likely to influence a change in his behaviour, an automated email or an email from the tutor, Jacob replied:

*"I think it is a combination of both but I do think the tutor one would give you the kick to be honest."*

Jacob doesn't have a personal tutor and as seen above didn't know who to speak to when he was "going through issues" in his second year, and that this is something that still concerns him if he has further problems in the future:

*"Like now if I have any issues I actually have to go to the course leader...it is quite strange as sometimes you don't want to escalate it to that level. I mean I know she is trying to get the balance right between being you know 'you can talk to me at a tutor level' but you are very aware that she is the course leader which is weird." (Jacob)*

Katie's interview also gave insight into why some students may not engage with communications from the university straight away. Katie explains how her anxiety meant that she was unable to respond to university communications for a period of time when she had "kind of fell off the cliff really". She explains that she did receive a call from the university but didn't answer the phone, and was unable to open emails sent by her course team because:

*"I put myself in this category [of anxiety] where you just can't open an email or can't respond because it makes you feel sick at that time ... you just have that level of anxiety that's just I can't do anything, I just can't face it, you can't do anything." (Katie)*

Katie had several subsequent communications with her course team, and describes the turning point in her reengagement was coming out of a period of depression, and receiving a "quite direct but also caring" email from a member of staff, "I remember part of it saying if there is anything further we can do to support you..." Katie describes this staff member as having "an administrative role on the course... her role is many things... but I suppose she oversees student wellness". This email said that the faculty leader would need to be contacted about her absence which Katie says:

*"... spurred me on to if I don't get in contact now.... but you know they've got to be direct haven't they, they can't pussyfoot around people." (Katie)*

Katie also attributed her reengagement to a new personal tutor that she "got on with" immediately:

*"I felt he knew and understood...the way he spoke to me it made me feel like cracking on with it... that is very much a personality thing, it's not that he is a better person but he was more of a match for me as a tutor." (Katie)*

We see then, with Katie, Jacob and Luke that it was the combination of communication from the university and the support of university staff that supported their re-engagement. For Hannah, it was a tutor referral to Student Support Services that supported her re-engagement. Hannah was having mental health difficulties that were affecting her studies that were noticed by her tutor in her first meeting with her (this was in a group tutorial as Hannah doesn't have 1-1 tutorials). As Hannah explains:

*"In my first ever tutorial with her, I did end up in tears because I was so anxious and suffering from intrusive thoughts that was OCD that I didn't know about, and she was just brilliant. This was my first tutorial with her, so tops to her, she didn't know me at all, she was really nice and she listened and then she'd sort of not*

*keep an eye on me, but she'd be like "oh hi Hannah how you doing"... and maybe the next week she was like "hiya" or maybe I was still having a bit of an issue and she was like well, Student Support Services would really help you... it was at that time my mental health was affecting my studies, I hadn't gone down in grades particularly, but I was existing on autopilot and not fully there. So, her prompting me to go [to seek support] was really good." (Hannah)*

Conor received an email from the Dashboard, a letter to his term time address and an email from his tutor. He says that he "didn't mind" the email from the Dashboard and the letter because they were a "good reminder" and said it was the email from the tutor that led him to arrange an appointment with his tutor. Speaking of the email from his tutor Conor says:

*"That's probably the one that I actioned on the most like the letter just kind of like didn't really do much." (Conor)*

He felt like the letter was generic so he didn't need to act upon it, but that he did need to respond to the tutor communication, and that it did make him attend more seminars:

*"I guess like the issue with the letter is because it's so sent to so many people it's not like anything you have to act upon." (Conor)*

The email from the tutor, he says, asked him to contact his tutor and arrange a one-to-one meeting which he did, and said that in response he increased his attendance:

*"I made sure I went to all the crucial stuff. still missed a couple of the lectures, but I could watch them online, but it made me go to more seminars." (Conor)*

In summary then, students preferred communications that were more supportive and caring and tone, and that this can include being direct with students. It appears that it is the combination of communications received (such as an email or letter) alongside the more personal communications from a member of staff that supported students to re-engage, and that there is potential here for students without a tutor to be disadvantaged. As can be seen here, disengagement may be due to issues such as anxiety and mental health difficulties, and in this case students may not respond to initial communications. It is therefore recommended that:

- **Generic or automated communications with students about their engagement, such as a Dashboard alert or letter from the school, are supported where possible with a more personal communication from a tutor or equivalent member of staff.**
- **Guidance and training to staff include examples of the student experience of anxiety and mental health difficulties and how this may affect their engagement, and re-engagement, and the potential importance of several communications to students.**
- **Support for wellbeing and mental health is widely advertised to students.**
- **Future research continues to explore what works to re-engage students that have had periods of low engagement.**

## 4. Discussion and summary of recommendations

A key finding is that, although the students have made useful suggestions about how the alerts can be improved, there were no students that said that the university should not continue to monitor student engagement and act upon this information where appropriate. Overall, students liked that the university monitors and acts upon student engagement and believe that it should continue to do so.

### 4.1 Disparity of perceived experience of the students

In addition to the recommendations made above in each of the three stages of the model: prompt, communication and actions (that are summarised below), an additional finding is that there is a disparity of experience in tutor support amongst the students, and how this may impact upon their re-engagement.

Firstly, that there are some students who have a personal tutor that they can see on an individual basis and some students that have only a group tutorial, or in the case of Jacob, no tutor at all. However, there was also a disparity of experience for those students that did have a personal tutor, ranging from Luke, whose tutor emailed him to check on his wellbeing and went with him to the helpdesk to seek wellbeing support, to Adam who said that he received only group emails from his tutor. It is therefore recommended that a consistent working practice following an alert is developed to ensure consistency of student experience, and that where possible its effectiveness in leading to action is evaluated as well as the student experience of the alert.

It was also found that that a slightly larger proportion of students with an unknown tutor have generated alerts (as seen in table 1) and this suggests that this is worth further exploration. It is therefore recommended that there is further exploration about whether students that have no known tutor are more likely to generate alerts. These additional recommendations are included at the end of the summary of recommendations below.

### 4.2 Summary of findings

#### 4.2.1 Prompt

- Clear guidance is given to students in induction about how their engagement data will be used, and that they may be contacted regarding their engagement.
- In addition to the considerations outlined in the [O9: The impact of reducing the alert time period from 14 to 10 days in the NTU Student Dashboard report](#) students' views on the timing of alerts are considered, and that these are also shared when communicating about why and how alerts are generated.

#### 4.2.2 Communication

- Universities monitor student engagement and act upon this information where appropriate.
- A link to mental health support is included in communications with students about their engagement where appropriate.
- When informing students that they will be contacted about their engagement in induction ensure that the message is given that the Dashboard is an indicator of engagement in order to manage expectations about its accuracy.

- Where possible include a photograph of the tutor, and those that the student can contact for support, in communications with students.
- Ensure that initial communications about engagement with students are supportive in tone.
- Communications about engagement are, where possible, sent individually to students and that tutors are given time and resources to enable them to do this.
- Training and guidance (including example communications) is given to staff who may contact students about their engagement.
- Those students that do not have a personal tutor are assigned a named person that they can contact about their engagement.
- Consider the inclusion of the alert on other university platforms such as the university app and the Student Dashboard itself.
- Consider different communication types for different stages of contact where escalation is needed, for example an initial alert, then an email, then a letter.
- Consider the use of positive communications using the Dashboard engagement data, and where possible for these to be sent by the tutor to give a more personal experience for the student.
- Provide training and guidance for both staff and students on the use and importance of Dashboard notes.

#### **4.2.3 Action**

- Generic or automated communications with students about their engagement, such as a Dashboard alert or letter from the school, are supported where possible with a more personal communication from a tutor or equivalent member of staff.
- Guidance and training to staff include examples of the student experience of anxiety and mental health difficulties and how this may affect their engagement, and re-engagement, and the potential importance of several communications to students.
- Support for wellbeing and mental health is widely advertised to students.
- Future research continues to explore what works to re-engage students that have had periods of low engagement.

#### **4.2.4 Additional recommendations: Disparity of perceived experience of the students**

- It is recommended that a consistent working practice following an alert is developed to ensure consistency of student experience
- It is recommended that there is further exploration about whether students that have no known tutor are more likely to generate alerts

### 4.3 Recommendations for the final year of the project

This finding has informed recommendations for the final year of the project. The suggestion in section 3.2 by students that they would like to receive a phone call support the recommendation made in the [O9 – NTU: Staff Reflective Diaries Study](#), for a “developed call campaign, aimed at low engaged students, with the aim of encouraging re-engagement with study” (Recommendation 7). Such a call campaign would also ensure a consistent working practice following an alert and allow evaluation of whether this has an impact on student engagement.

## 5. References

Braun, V., and Clarke V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

Foster, E. (2020). *The NTU Student Dashboard – a brief explainer*. Retrieved from <https://livinglearninganalytics.blog/2020/03/13/the-ntu-student-dashboard-a-brief-explainer/>.

Nottingham Trent University. (2018). *The NTU Student Dashboard: Staff User Guide*. Retrieved from [https://www4.ntu.ac.uk/adq/document\\_uploads/running\\_a\\_course/164304.pdf](https://www4.ntu.ac.uk/adq/document_uploads/running_a_course/164304.pdf).

Onwards from Learning Analytics (OfLA). (2020). *06- Evaluation of First Year Studies report - A summary of the current situation, strengths, and challenges at NTU*. Retrieved from <https://oflaproject.eu/outputs/output-6/>.

Onwards from Learning Analytics (OfLA). (2020). *09- Evaluation of First Year Studies report - A summary of the current situation, strengths, and challenges at NTU*. Retrieved from <https://oflaproject.eu/outputs/output-6/>.

Onwards from Learning Analytics (OfLA). (2020). *09 – Evaluation of the second cycle of studies NTU: Staff Reflective Diaries Study*. Retrieved from <https://oflaproject.eu/outputs/output-6/>.

Onwards from Learning Analytics (OfLA). (2020). *09 – Evaluation of the second cycle of studies: NTU Mid-term reviews Appendix*. Retrieved from <https://oflaproject.eu/outputs/output-9-evaluation-of-second-cycle/>.

Onwards from Learning Analytics (OfLA). (2020). *09 – Evaluation of the second cycle of studies: The impact of reducing the alert time period from 14 to 10 days in the NTU Student Dashboard*. Retrieved from <https://oflaproject.eu/outputs/output-9-evaluation-of-second-cycle/>.

Onwards from Learning Analytics (OfLA). (2020). *09 – Evaluation of the second cycle of studies: Prompts, communications and action – NTU student research Appendix*. Retrieved from <https://oflaproject.eu/outputs/output-9-evaluation-of-second-cycle/>.

STELA Project. (2017). *Case Study Zero: NTU Student Dashboard*. Retrieved from [https://stela-project.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/caseStudy0\\_tex.pdf](https://stela-project.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/caseStudy0_tex.pdf).

Thorley, C. (2017). *Not by Degrees: Improving Student Mental Health in the UK's Universities*. Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR). Retrieved from <https://www.ippr.org/publications/not-by-degrees>.

---

**To cite this report:**

Onwards from Learning Analytics (OfLA). (2020). *O9 – Evaluation of the second cycle of studies: Prompts, communications, and action – NTU student research*. Retrieved from <https://oflaproject.eu/outputs/output-9-evaluation-of-second-cycle/>.

For further information, please contact the following people:

- Ed Foster, Student Engagement Manager, The Centre for Student and Community Engagement (CenSCE), Nottingham Trent University, [ed.foster@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:ed.foster@ntu.ac.uk)
- Peter Crowson, Learning Analytics and Research Coordinator (Access and Participation), The Centre for Student and Community Engagement (CenSCE), Nottingham Trent University, [peter.crowson@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:peter.crowson@ntu.ac.uk)
- Sarah Lawther, Learning Analytics and Research Coordinator (Access and Participation), The Centre for Student and Community Engagement (CenSCE), Nottingham Trent University, [sarah.lawther@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:sarah.lawther@ntu.ac.uk)