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Report on the SMS Usage at the University of Bath

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Information Sheet

This working paper was written by members of the e-learning community at the University of Bath. If you'd like to access other working papers, presentations or posters given by the e-learning team at the University of Bath then see our Online Publications Store, <http://opus.bath.ac.uk/view/divisions/elearning.html>. If you have any questions about this paper then please contact the author(s) directly.

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Introduction

The aim of this report is to outline the usage of SMS at the University of Bath, between the 1st September, 2008 and 20th February, 2009.

The University of Bath uses the EduTxt SMS Service. The current set of pilots follows a previous phase of pilots in the Department of Education and the Faculty of Engineering. These had been funded through a Teaching Development Fund. For a full project report see <http://go.bath.ac.uk/smspilot1>

Usage at the University of Bath

During the period 01/09/08 to 20/02/09 a total of 1498 text messages were sent by 6 projects (see Appendix 1 for the complete breakdown). The bulk has been sent by the Learning Support Team. These focussed on sending reminders to students about appointments. The types of use across the pilots include;

- Acknowledgement of receipt of application for a place at the University.
- Notification of an offer of a place at the University.
- Reminders about appointments.

- Notifications to collect reports.
- Reminders to make entries in reflective journals and to attend focus groups.
- Reminders to engage in learning activities
- Guidance and encouragement about study.

Initial use has not been as high as originally expected. This is related to a number of factors, including some University Services delaying or revising their plans regarding their proposed pilots, and the relatively low exposure to SMS across the University. This second point is related to the e-learning team needing to identify, negotiate and implement an appropriate process to enable new pilot projects to get started.

At this stage it is too early to identify the impact of the SMS projects that are currently running. However, some observations from practitioners include;

- One administrator comments the immediacy of the texts means she can rely on the information reaching the applicant. She feels closer to the applicant as a result.
- One administrator reports satisfaction in the immediacy of student responses to requests from the office.
- The use of SMS has contributed to building a relationship with research participants
- One administrator suggests the use of SMS has increased engagement in Moodle

However, these pilots have highlighted a few problems with data management:

- Some issues with uploading international number in the wrong format.
- Large number (183) of failed deliveries due to inaccurate records of mobile numbers.
- Requirements to share address books in flexible ways.

In conclusion, the initial findings imply some people are very positive about the impact of SMS. However, there are lessons to be learnt in terms of ensuring the mobile phone number data is accurate and maintained.

The intention is to undertake a more extensive evaluation later in this academic year. However, for more information on the actual use and reflections on the outcomes please see the project blog (<http://blogs.bath.ac.uk/sms>).

Future use at the University of Bath

It would be expected that a similar pattern would continue for the rest of this academic year (2008/09). There are a number of other projects likely to start or have actually started post March 2009. These include the use of a SMS to disseminate e-learning news.

Case Study: e-learning, SMS, Twitter and Moodle

The e-learning team provide e-learning news as an SMS service. This requires the individual to subscribe through texting a key word to our incoming number (see <http://www.bath.ac.uk/learningandteaching/themes/e-learning/>). As a result the will receive no more than one text message (news item) each week.

A challenge for the e-learning team has been to support its dispersed communication model. For instance, we offer a number of different entry points for people to access the same information. The intention is for people to select their preferred access route. However, offering these choices brings with it a challenge of providing everyone with quality assured information in a way which is efficient for members of the e-learning team. For example, one person might wish to use the e-learning web site to gather updates on e-learning news, projects and support materials. While another might prefer to follow the e-learning Team's Twitter account (eatbath), or only regularly visit the e-learning practitioners Forum in Moodle, or one of our specialist projects blogs. To accommodate this diversity the e-learning Team are re-publishing the SMS updates in an automated approach. This will ensure the SMS messages are published in a large number of our services and gains the widest possible access. The process for broadcasting news is as follows;

Step 1: SMS EduTxt: e-learning news group

Sending a text to the e-learning news alerts group. This group also contains the number and details to update the e-learning Twitter account (eatbath).

Step 2: Twitter to RSS

The Twitter account is automatically updated with the same message in the SMS update. This update is made available as an RSS feed.

Step 3: Plumbing in the other services

As the Twitter status is available as an RSS feed, this simply connects to the infeed into the public web site, the Moodle Course, the specialise blog.

The outcome is the SMS news update will automatically ripple through a large number of other communication channels.

There are a number of other new projects likely to start in Departments and Schools who were not originally part of the project. The implementation model will require Departments to fund the purchase of an incoming number (if required) and text bundles.

Appendix 1: Use at the University of Bath

| Department | Target audience | One/two way? | Personalised? | Texts sent by | Number sent | Nature of text | Issues/comments |
|------------------------|--|--------------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------|---|---|
| Computer Science | Prospective MSc students | One-way - outgoing | No | PG administrator | 69 | -Acknowledge receipt of application. -Notification of offer. | -Some issues with uploading international number in the wrong format. -The administrator comments that the immediacy of the texts means she can rely on the information reaching the applicant. She feels closer to the applicant as a result. |
| Bath Assessment Centre | UofB students and students attending nearby institutions | One-way - outgoing | Yes - firstname | Administrators | 145 | -Reminders about appointments. -Notifications to collect reports | -Contact with students is only over 4-6 week periods |
| Learning Support | All students entitled to learning support | One-way - outgoing | No | Administrators | 696 | -Reminders about appointments. | Large number (183) of failed deliveries due to inaccurate records of mobile |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|--|-----------------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|-----|--|--|
| | | | | | | | numbers. There is a requirement to share address books. Administrators report satisfaction in the immediacy of student responses to request from the office. |
| Dpt Education PGCE programme | Students participating in e-portfolio research project | Two-way number used one way | Yes - firstname | Research project coordinator | 258 | Reminders to make entries in reflective journals and to attend focus groups. | Has contributed to building a relationship with research participants |
| Dpt Education UG programme | First year students | Two-way number used one way | Yes - firstname | UG administrator | 292 | Reminders to engage in learning activities | Increased engagement in Moodle |
| Faculty of Engineering distance learning unit | Distance learning PG students | Two-way number used one way | ? | | 38 | Guidance and encouragement | |