

Text Messaging Policy 2016-2017

1. Background

The increasing and almost universal use of mobile phones has opened up a new avenue of opportunity for communication between the University and its staff and students.

This policy sets out the way in which the University will use Short Message Service (SMS) text messaging appropriately to pass on important information to staff and students. The use of SMS is intended to sit alongside other existing forms of communication such as letters, email, social networking sites (Facebook and Twitter) and the University's website. When considering the use of SMS for communicating to large groups its use must be appropriate and cost effective.

Text messaging has wide accessibility. People who are blind or visually impaired can use mobile phones, and some mobile phones have text-to-speech capability, meaning that individuals can listen to text messages.

Data Protection and privacy issues have been taken into account in preparing this policy. In all cases, people will be asked if they wish to 'opt-out' to receive messages. However, there may be emergency circumstances in which the University will need to contact as many staff and students as possible, ignoring personal preferences (which is permissible if it is in the 'vital interests of the data subject' – Data Protection Act Schedule 2(4)). Phone numbers may be stored by third parties for the purpose of sending messages, but names will not be stored. There may, very rarely, be the need to send a message for test purposes.

However, the usefulness of SMS depends on having reliable data. The mobile numbers will be taken from the University's student database (Quercus) and provided as part of the registration process so it is important that these are kept up to date. This will be achieved by means of email reminders or Portal announcements, at least annually to staff and students to keep their details up to date.

2. Types of SMS messages

2.1 Emergencies

These are messages whose content is deemed to be essential or urgent.

- An outbreak of meningitis, mumps or measles amongst the student population
- A fire, flood, or similar incident in a University building
- Any serious crime or terrorism incidents
- Closure to University buildings or car parks

The University may decide a text message is appropriate whenever it is considered important to contact a group of people urgently for reasons of health or safety. This applies to staff and students (both residential and non-residential).

It should be noted that there is no guarantee that text messages will be delivered promptly or at all by the mobile phone companies. In some types of emergency, e.g. a terrorist incident, the emergency services may commandeer the mobile phone network, so no messages will get through.

Simultaneous, multiple approaches are essential. Text messages must be supplemented by other means of communication, such as emails, messages issued via Facebook or Twitter or information posted on the University website, to ensure that as many of the target audience as possible receive the message.

2.2 Work-related Incidents

These are messages that are sent to one or more staff members relating to incidents at work. These could include, for example, alerts or work instructions relating to maintenance or equipment failures.

A text message may be appropriate to communicate with a member of staff about matters relating to his or her job, where that person is likely to be moving around the campus, or 'on call'. It is impossible to give a definitive list of possible applications; the deciding factor has to be whether it is an effective means of communication.

2.3 Administration

These are messages that are either sent to individual or groups of students for many miscellaneous uses.

- reminding students to register or select options
- announcing room and timetable changes
- coursework: announcements, essay deadline reminders, updating reading lists
- lecture announcements: changes in venue
- credit control: reminders of payment dates, convocation payments
- welfare: for student welfare or conduct issues
- car parking: where cars are causing an unacceptable obstruction
- where a student's email box is full and there is a need to contact the student

SMS should not be used for:

- Communicating personal or confidential information to students e.g. exam results or details of fees owing
- Repeat reminders of messages already circulated
- Personal matters e.g. items for sale or lost, farewell messages
- Contacting prospective students at any point prior to their enrolment at the University

3. Recipients

- The intended recipients will have the option to opt out of receiving non-emergency messages. Mobile phone numbers will be requested for use in an emergency situation but will not be compulsory.
- Lists of phone numbers should be reviewed at least annually to keep them up to date.
- Recipients must be permitted to change their minds and opt out at a later date.
- Opt-outs must be respected.
- People issued with mobile phones by the University for work purposes may not opt-out of receiving text messages.
- Remember that personal data is being handled and this must be done in accordance with the principles of the Data Protection Act.
- Text messaging must not be the sole means of communication. People who have opted-out should not be disadvantaged. There may be people who do not possess mobile phones, or have difficulties using them (e.g. visually impaired).

4. Approvers/Senders

A request to send a message to all students or staff must be approved by a member of SMG or nominated deputy.

Messages for individuals or small groups of students/staff can be approved and sent by departmental heads or nominated deputy.

5. Format of message

All messages should

- Start with the words 'RAU Alert:' so that the recipients of the text can see that it is an official message from the University requiring their attention.
- Be no longer than 160 characters.
- Include essential points, and should avoid 'text speak', e.g. write 'you', not 'u'; and 'for', not '4'.
- Clearly state who the message is from, which department.

For more information regarding this policy document please contact
Nigel.Warner@rau.ac.uk