

Staff-student digital communications in the IoD: guidance to use only email, MS Teams and QMPlus forums

A proposal for the Institute of Dentistry

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“I think communication by email and by Microsoft teams is plenty enough and allows boundaries to be placed.

I think communication by other media is too intrusive”.

Undergraduate IoD student, Summer 2020.

Background

Some staff in the IoD require or request students to join WhatsApp groups to share information.

51% of students to a survey last summer said staff were using this and other social media to communicate with them (see figure 2 below).

There are **concerns in other schools at QM** that staff are using other social media e.g., [Discord](#), to do the same.

Whilst there may be benefits from using social media in our pedagogy, **its use introduces several ethical issues**, among them:

- With apps like WhatsApp, students and staff **automatically share their personal telephone numbers**
- Staff may be **interrupting students' social space**, as social media is used for personal and social aspects of students' lives
- Students not part of the group, or who choose not to use the app, may **miss information**, which means that their use is not inclusive
- **Difficult for students to control** when they receive / look at university messages, making it more difficult to switch off mentally
- It may mean that **boundaries** become blurred, with students and staff alike feeling able to contact each other at any time of day or night
- Together, many of these are likely to impact student and staff **mental health / wellbeing**

30% of students report staff using WhatsApp to communicate with them.

Student support colleagues from across the university are unanimous in **condemning the use of WhatsApp and other non-QM platforms for communicating with students** for the reasons above.

QM’s own **safeguarding training** explicitly states that “...students **shouldn’t have your personal phone number...**” (figure 1), which they do when staff befriend them on WhatsApp.



Figure 1 Screenshot of QM Safeguarding Training

QMUL Student Services caution staff:

“...it is important that you **look after your own wellbeing** and keep **firm boundaries** with the student – a good example here is **never to give out your personal phone number** or a non-Queen Mary email address” ¹.

For this proposal, **Simon Jarvis, Head of Student Wellbeing**, writes:

“By sticking to this principle, you are **protecting yourself** from potential nefarious accusations or complaints from students, to say nothing of being able to **communicate with students in a way in which they can feel safe and confident in what they are being told.**”

¹ <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/advisorhub/mental-health-and-wellbeing/mental-health/>

We would hope that colleagues would understand that, say, **befriending students on social media** sites like Facebook is a **bad idea**; **sharing personal phone numbers, email addresses or other private contacts is no different**".

For this proposal, **Tasnima Kamali, Mental Health Advisor**, writes:

"I would really like to **encourage staff to think of the wellbeing and expectations of students**, as well as themselves.

The use of communication via platforms **that are also used in one's personal life leads** students to believe they have access to university staff 24/7 and vice versa. This does not help enforce any sense of **boundary or management of expectations, on either side**.

Staff must help students establish what **healthy boundaries** are. By setting these ourselves, it enables students to seek what they need **via the most appropriate method during working hours** and from the most relevant person(s) or service(s). This, in turn, is more sustainable in **creating a healthy dynamic** for students and staff at QMUL."

The **QMSU's VP for Welfare** in 2019-20, Shamima Akhter, wrote when asked for her view on the use of WhatsApp and social media by staff with students:

"Using WhatsApp as a means of communication between staff and students is **not something we encourage**. It is vital that the **boundaries between staff and students are there** and an **element of professionalism maintained** through formal means of communications, such as emails."

The **literature also cautions staff** about the use of social media, for example from inclusivity and boundary violation perspectives.

"...if instructors want to use social media to convey instructions and announcements, they must consider **how students who do not use the social media platform will receive that information**.

“Instructors should **avoid creating creepy treehouses**, or situations “in which an authority figure or an institutional power **forces those below him/her into social or quasi-social situations**”².

Forcing students into these relationships could **violate appropriate boundaries** with students.

“Boundary violations are occurrences in the professional–client relationship in which the **professional exploits the relationship for his or her own needs with a potential consequence of harm to the client.**

“Within the university setting, boundary issues affecting faculty–student relationships **are not clearly articulated.** With the exception of sexual/dating relationships and sexual harassment issues addressed by some universities, **guidance about boundary crossings and boundary violations and the potential impact that these could have on faculty–student interactions is rarely provided**”³.

In the summer of 2020, with Dom Jethwa, a colleague from Student Services, I **polled dental students about their views of social media use by staff.**

113 students responded, 104 (92%) of whom were BDS and 7 (6.2%) BSc or Diploma.

51% identified staff using one or more social media platforms to communicate with them (figure 2).

44% of students have some or strong reservations about the use of WhatsApp by staff

² McEwan B. Managing boundaries in the Web 2.0 classroom. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*. Chapter 2. 2012;131:15-28.

³ Owen PR, Zwahr-Castro J. Boundary issues in academia: Student perceptions of faculty–student boundary crossings. *Ethics & behavior*. 2007 Jun 11;17(2):117-29.

Beyond QM email and MS teams, which forms of social media do staff currently use to communicate with you?

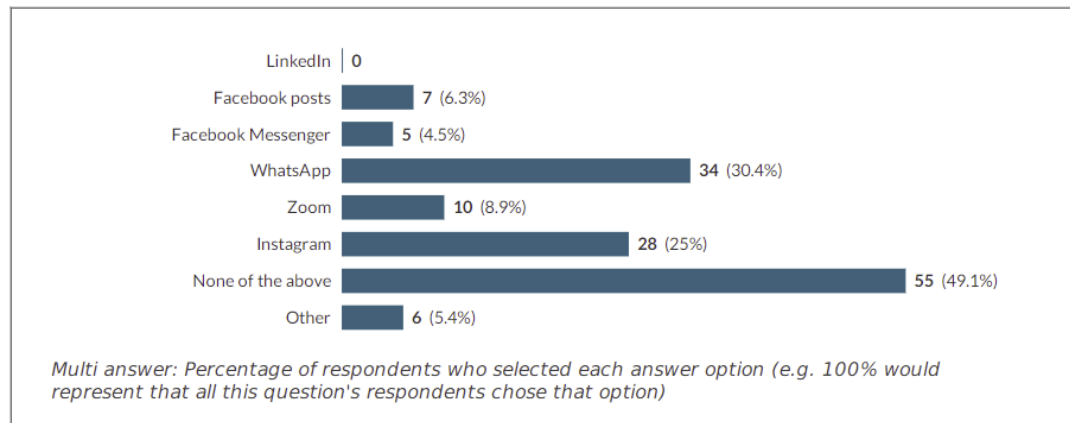


Figure 2 Question 3: Beyond QM email and MS teams, which forms of social media do staff currently use to communicate with you?

76% had **some or strong reservations** about staff using **Facebook Messenger** to communicate with them (figure 3) though only 4.5% reported this platform being used (figure 2).

Facebook Messenger



Figure 3 Question 4: Alongside QM e-mail and Teams how would / do you feel about using the following methods for communication with staff? Facebook Messenger

44% had **some or strong reservations** about staff using **WhatsApp** (figure 4).

Given that is the **single most common way** – 30% (figure 2) – in which students reported staff communicated with them, **this should be of concern to us.**

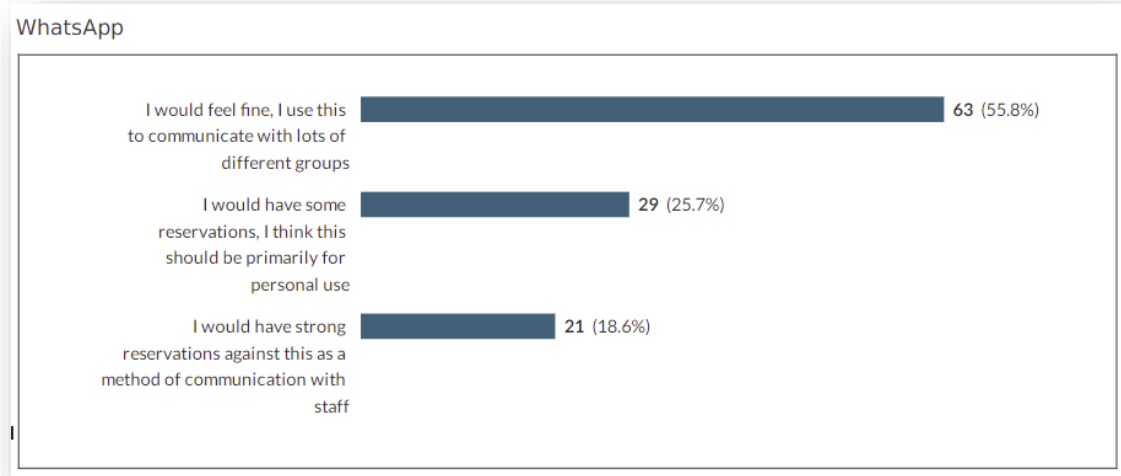


Figure 4 Question 4: Alongside QM e-mail and Teams how would / do you feel about using the following methods for communication with staff? WhatsApp

44% of students would **never, rarely, or only sometimes feel comfortable** saying they **did not want to share their phone number with staff** (figure 5) and yet this is exactly what a staff member is asking if they ask a student to join a WhatsApp group.

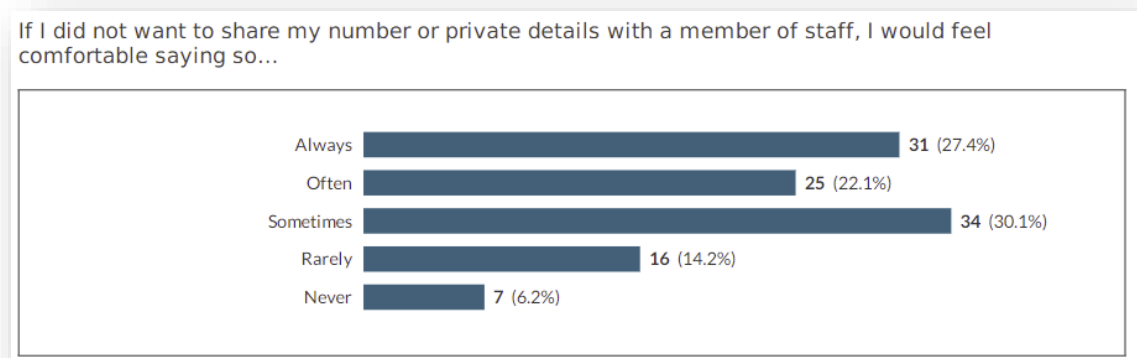


Figure 5 Question 5: If I did not want to share my number or private details with a member of staff, I would feel comfortable to say so...

Equally of concern is that **almost half of students would never, rarely, or sometimes feel comfortable to withdraw from a social media group with staff** if it was **becoming too intrusive** (figure 6). This suggests that many students feel that they have very little control over being in or out of these groups.

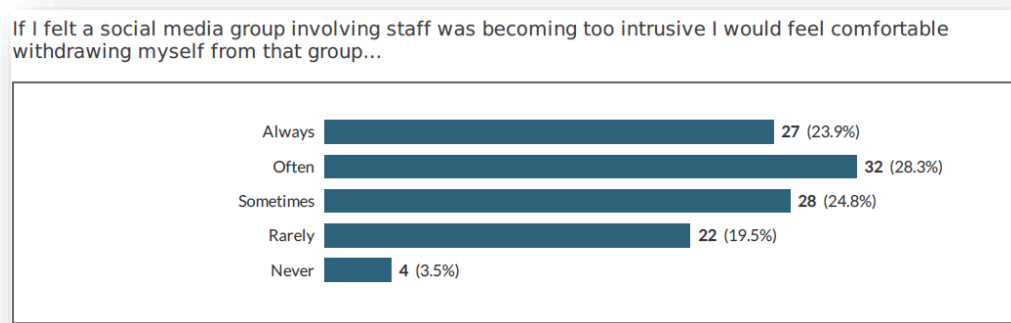


Figure 6 Question 6: If I felt a social media group involving staff was becoming too intrusive I would feel comfortable

Finally, this **anonymous quote from one respondent** summarizes the concerns raised in this document and by students in the survey:

“I think communication by **email and by Microsoft teams is plenty enough** and allows **boundaries to be placed**.

“I think communication by other media is **too intrusive** for both staff and students as these are media **traditionally used for social purposes** and are **less easy to mute** in “out of office” times.

“I think it is important for staff and students to have **space away from work**.

“I also think that the use of **private group chats** involving students may **exclude those who feel uncomfortable joining them**, and thus may cause miscommunications where important

information is mentioned on said chats and not followed up through emails, creating unfair advantages and disadvantages among students.” [my bold highlighting].

Proposal

The IoD should provide **simple guidance about digital means of communication with students.**

This should state that:

1. **Only QM email (MS Outlook), MS Teams and QMPlus forums** be used by staff to communicate with students.
2. **Prohibit staff from requesting contact with students** on other digital platforms, given the large proportion of students who would find it difficult to refuse.



END