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## Mass email at university: current literature and tactics for future use

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### ABSTRACT

I am a lecturer with professional marketing experience, and this study was motivated by my dismay at university about what I have perceived as oversights in colleagues' typical use of mass email (emailing a single message to a large group of subscribers) for content delivery, in comparison to the communication strategies of major industries (for example, retail and public administration). I examine non-academic research about mass email best-practice, as implemented in industry communications; then I perform a systematic review of academic research on mass email for content delivery. My review of 19 studies confirms academics are behind the industry when it comes to mass email evaluation and optimisation strategies. Finally, I outline tactics necessary for more effective mass emails at university, the most salient being systematically analysing a range of email metrics, and testing and optimising emails. Also, included in this study is my identification of current obstacles to more effective mass email at university, and these include the technological limitations of learning management systems (LMS), and the limited expertise of teaching staff.

### KEYWORDS

E-mail; learning analytics; data; survey; higher education

### Introduction: just send them an email

'We'll email the students'. It was that simple. This was how we would invite undergraduate students to participate in our research. The decision was made one morning as we were finishing the first draft of an ethics application for a research project at the Australian university where I was working. The project was designed to evaluate one part of an undergraduate's experience of their first year of university, and it hinged on data gathered from surveys. Strangely, given the importance of the invitations, the decision to email students passed almost unnoticed—like anything second-nature. A note was made in the minutes that a draft of the email invitation text needed to be included in the application, but that was it.

I have noticed the same attitude to mass email in various contexts at university. In each case, there is a lack of consideration about the complexities of sending (and receiving) emails. In a course I was teaching, the coordinator would type up a plain text weekly email, with course updates and/or assessment tips, and randomly 'blast' it out to the 200+ undergraduates. Students never seemed to get the weekly emails, or read them—at least, that is what they said

in class. Another time, I overheard a conversation between a senior academic and a postgraduate student, and the student (who needed other postgraduates to attend a focus group) was told to 'just send them an email'.

These anecdotal examples motivated me to research the effectiveness of teachers'/ researchers' ('academics') use of mass email as a channel for content delivery at university. 'Mass email' involves emailing a single message to a large group of students, often with no follow-up. Examples of mass email sent by academics include: general updates; round-ups; notifications; course specific content updates; event invitations (including survey invites); and dedicated emails sent to specific groups (for example, 'at risk' students).<sup>1</sup> The research I discovered demonstrates only a basic understanding of sending and receiving mass email at university.

I am a lecturer with previous professional experience as a digital marketer, and to be clearer, this study was motivated by my dismay at the use of mass email at university for content delivery in comparison to the communication strategies of major industries ('the industry'); for example, retail and public administration.<sup>2</sup> The industry has been testing and sending mass emails for at least the past 15 years<sup>3</sup>; they are familiar with how email performs and what to improve (and *how*) for optimal success. In this study, I explain how this is not the case for academics. I show how there is only a small amount of academic research on mass email at university, and overwhelmingly it does not demonstrate a breadth of understanding about email evaluation strategies—in other words, understanding what to test and measure, and email optimisation strategies—understanding how to implement data and create emails more likely to achieve a specified purpose.

In what follows, I identify gaps in academics' use of mass email and outline optimal tactics for future use. First, I examine industry best-practise for creating, sending, testing and optimising mass email. It is to be expected that the sources used are non-academic and that the research depends on commercial search engines—in particular, Google. Of course, search results are massive (for example, a Google search for the keywords 'email best-practise' produces more than 10 million results), and results are also algorithmically governed, but my professional expertise assisted in my identification of credible sources in the search engine results pages (SERPs). Second, I systematically review academic literature that discusses mass email at university. A review of 19 studies confirms there is a superficial understanding at university of email evaluation and optimisation strategies. Finally, having identified best-practise recommendations for mass email (part 1) as well as knowledge gaps in academics' use of mass email (part 2), I outline (part 3) optimal tactics for future use of mass email at university.

## Mass email: lessons from the industry

Research shows that mass email remains widely used in the industry and is still a popular communication channel for audiences. Here, in part 1, I outline what is typically tested and analysed, and to what end. What becomes clear is that, from an industry perspective, mass email is a serious business; sending an email is so much more than simply *sending an email*—there is detailed data analysis involved, and there can be multiple iterations of each email. Industry organisations know what to expect from mass email, and how to get as close as possible to achieving 'success'. While it is the case that

mass email does not typically lead to massive engagement with subscribers, that is not to say that it does not remain an opportunity for a high return on investment (ROI).

Generally, mass email and bulk email are synonymous, and both involve emailing a single message to a large group of 'subscribers' (Bulk email, [n.d.](#)), and typically these emails are not followed up. HubSpot, a content marketing vendor with over 30,000 customers in more than 90 countries (Our story, [n.d.](#)), explains how mass marketing emails fall into the following two categories: informational emails (content announcements, product updates, newsletters and internal updates) and transactional emails—or 'one-to-one emails triggered by specific actions such as completing a purchase' (Hussain, [2016](#)).

Over the last 15 years mass email has become a staple of digital communication. Email marketing, for example, is claimed by some experts to be almost 50 years old and is 'smarter and stronger than ever' (7 email marketing predictions for [2017](#), [n.d.](#)). Contently, a technology company that 'helps brands create content at scale', and one of *Inc. Magazine's* 100 fastest-growing private companies, stated in 2016 that: 'The email newsletter will serve as the foundation for your entire content marketing programme' (Lazauskas, [2016](#)). Marketo, a marketing automation organisation founded in 2006 and ranked as highly as 78 on the Inc. 5000 rankings (Marketo, [n.d.](#)), also notes email as one of the best ways to communicate with an audience. They claim, for example, that 74% of consumers prefer to receive commercial communication via email (Merkle in What is lead nurturing?, [n.d.](#)). They also claim that 'all age groups named email as their preferred source of communication' (Marketo, [2013](#)).

For many years, organisations have been testing and analysing mass email in some detail. The focus has been on data, metrics, analytics and optimisation. *Data* are information, in this case collected about a user's interaction with a digital asset such as email (but it could also be a website, webpage, YouTube video, mobile application, etc.), and *metrics* are standards of measurement specific to the different kinds of engagement with digital assets; for example, 'output metrics related to the measure of [content] produced' (Patterson, [2015](#)). Email service providers (ESP), many of which provide a level of use for free, typically provide data on the following metrics: open rate, or how many successfully delivered campaigns were opened by subscribers; click-through rate (CTR), a percentage that tells you how many successfully delivered campaigns registered at least one click (sometimes an email click-map overlay is provided); bounce rate, or the number of emails that can't be delivered to a subscriber; and which mobile platforms subscribers used. *Analytics* involves 'applying statistics and mathematics [...] in an effort to see patterns in the data' (Patterson, [2015](#)). Moreover, effective analytics involves identifying patterns from combinations of metrics (Kaushick in Patel, [2016](#)). For example, in terms of a webpage, Patel ([2016](#)) explains that engagement is best measured using a combination of the following: bounce rate (which in this case is 'the number of people who leave a site from the same page they arrived on'); session duration; page depth, which is the 'count of pages that a visitor visits on your site beyond the page they landed on'; the amount of 'new' vs. 'returning' users to a website; and return visitor rate, where you 'divide the number of return visitors to your website by the total number of unique visitors for a given period'. In terms of email, accurate analytics depends on a combination of metrics, at least open rate and click rate—and also (but less typical), 'repeat purchases, renewal rates, [and] feature adoption' (7 email marketing predictions for [2017](#), [n.d.](#)). What have organisations been doing with these

data and the insights from analytics? They have been testing emails and improving their effectiveness. This is a continual process of improvement called *optimisation*. Stokes (2018) makes the point that digital marketing (which, of course, includes the use of mass email) is fundamentally powerful because the digital sphere is almost completely measurable—in some cases, in real time. This means it is possible to see a direct, quantifiable effect of attempts to optimise web assets. Not to optimise email, then, is to look a (digital) gift horse in the mouth.

Optimisation has established data benchmarks against which success has been measured. MailChimp is an ESP used by more than 12 million people and is recommended by Contently. They have tracked ‘hundreds of emails’ delivered by their system, where there were at least 1000 subscribers on the email list, and calculated ‘the average unique open-rates, average unique click rates, average unique soft bounces [...] by industry’ (Email marketing benchmarks, n.d.). At the time of writing, the benchmarks are as follows: in ‘education and training’ 21.7% of subscribers open an email and 2.69% of subscribers typically click on any tracked link in an email campaign. At the lower end of the range is e-commerce, with 16.76% open rate and 0.31% CTR; at the higher end of the range is architecture and construction, with 24.81% open rate and 1.55% CTR (Email marketing benchmarks, n.d.). There is no doubt these engagement figures appear low. It appears to be typical across the board for less than a quarter of subscribers to even open an email, and average click-through rates can be less than half of 1% (Burns-Millyard, n.d.).

Testing and optimisation has also highlighted several best-practise strategies for increasing engagement and aiming for benchmark success. Basic strategies include: using subject-lines that (1) include the recipient’s name and (2) accurately describe what is in the email; avoiding spam trigger words, such as ‘important information’, ‘message contains’, and ‘please read’ (Rubin, 2012); and placing the important content at the beginning of the email (Patterson, 2018). Also, given the high rate of mobile usage today, it is advised to design mass emails for mobile/tablet—in other words, build emails with mobile-specific code so they adapt to different screen sizes and use basic layouts (such as a single column), larger fonts, and aim for absolute concision with copy (Responsive email design, n.d.).

As suggested above also, testing and optimisation is crucial to email design. At a basic level, it is recommended to preview how emails look before they are sent, and this is typically achieved by using an ESP’s ‘preview mode’ to make sure the layout appears as it was intended. It is also recommended, based on the findings from optimisation, to test multiple send times (Insights from MailChimp’s send time optimisation strategy, 2014), and to track open rates and clicks in order to evaluate layout, and content, and include the findings in the next iteration of the email (Best-practices for email marketing, n.d.).

More sophisticated strategies include A/B testing, which involves testing two or even three variations of each email (see, for example, A/B testing, n.d.)—which can be used to determine which subject-lines lead to higher open rates and whether send time affects open rates and CTR. Strategies predicted by experts that will become effective and commonplace include personalisation based on subscribers’ expressed preference and behavioural insights gleaned from consumer usage data (gathered, for example, from smart devices in the home), and advanced audience segmentation that includes time-optimised sending (7 email marketing predictions for 2017, n.d.).

The implementation of these best-practise strategies has been shown in case studies to increase engagement. MarketingSherpa, 'a research firm specialising in tracking what works in all aspects of marketing' (About MarketingSherpa, [n.d.](#)), examines several case studies. Consider two indicative examples. In the first, the marketing team decreased the number of emails sent by an organisation to subscribers and, as a result, increased the email open rate by 205% (Eckerle, [2015b](#)). In the second case study, an online education organisation conducted A/B testing on email elements including headers, subject-lines and link placement. Results were a 39% increase in open rates and a 59% increase in CTR (Eckerle, [2015a](#)).

While any increase from optimisation is valuable, it does need to be noted that the gains will typically remain small; for example, a 39% increase in an open rate (in 'Education and Training') of 21.7% results in no more than 8.5% more opens. Some experts *do* claim that click rates can get as high as 40% 'when the email list is highly cultivated with active buyers who have a high amount of trust for the company' (Burns-Millyard, [n.d.](#)), but based on MailChimp's CTR benchmarks and the fact that no industry exceeds a CTR of 4%, this seems rare. It is reasonable to conclude that it is unlikely email engagement in the future will creep significantly higher than current benchmarks.

It can be claimed with certainty that mass email remains widely used in the industry and is a staple communication channel for a variety of reasons. Over at least the last 15 years, the industry has made inroads into understanding how to use design, layout and copy to produce more successful emails, and understanding which metrics and their combinations to consider when evaluating mass email. Involved in the latter is the comparison of these metrics against benchmarks, produced from ESPs' Big Data analysis of email engagement. Ultimately, industry expertise on mass email boils down to optimisation—that is, continuous improvement based on insights gathered from comparisons of data, obtained through testing. Moreover, industry demonstrates how improvements can be made from relatively small changes. At the end of the day, however, it is safe to say that despite optimisation, and future predictions about increased optimisation through, for example, more sophisticated segmentation, the number of subscribers actually opening and clicking emails (and perhaps reading emails) will always be low relative to the number of people who receive them. It remains, however, that sending an email to many people is simple, and almost instantaneous, and audiences are easier than ever to reach due to smart phone technology and the ubiquity of the internet. And so, even a small level of email engagement is rightly considered a worthwhile ROI.

### Mass email at university: current literature

From my personal experience, I have been dismayed by what I have perceived as a superficial use of mass email as a content delivery channel at university. This experience has motivated me to systematically review academic literature pertaining to the use of mass email (by academics) at university. The research I discovered demonstrates knowledge gaps in email evaluation and optimisation strategies. Since published research is the front-line of cutting-edge developments and innovation at university, these findings add credibility to my initial scepticism about the efficacy of academics' understanding and use of mass email at university—especially in comparison to the industry.

My search for relevant literature was limited to English books, peer reviewed journal articles and conference proceedings. In addition, research was only considered from 2010 onwards. I chose this range because 2010 is the beginning of significant change and growth in email. 2010 marks the beginning of the increased market share growth of smartphones with the Android operating system (relative to the iPhone, introduced in 2007), and the introduction of the iPad (Arthur, 2012). In this period of smartphone and tablet growth these technologies have become increasingly used to access emails; by 2017, internet users were spending approximately 69% of their time on their smartphones, and it has been predicted that by 2018, 80% of email users will access their email accounts exclusively via mobile (Sukhraj, 2017). In addition, this recent period is defined by the mainstream availability of email metrics, due to the use of ESPs (such as MailChimp, established in 2004) with sophisticated data analytics capabilities—often available to any internet user free of charge.<sup>4</sup>

The online databases used were Scopus and EBSCO Megafile Complete (specifically: Academic Search Complete, Communication Abstracts, Education Research Complete and ERIC). Keywords used for searching the databases were the following: email, e-mail, university, higher education. The logical relationship for search terms was email OR e-mail; student AND (university OR 'higher education'). In terms of the keywords used, it became apparent that email and e-mail tend to appear consistently in most search results since the author's/authors' contact emails are often included in database SERPs. To address this problem and refine the results, email OR e-mail was searched in the title field, and combined with student AND (university OR 'higher education') in the abstract field. Google Scholar was used to find related research that cited key texts; but, it was not used as a primary search tool since advanced search strings combining title and abstract are not possible with this search engine (Search tips, n.d.).

Preliminary searches involved identifying sources according to the following conditions: (a) if they were concerned with the use of mass email; and (b) if they involved emails sent to students from the university (e.g. they were *not* studies of marketing emails sent by the university to prospective clients). The research topics identified in preliminary results can be divided into four categories. First, most studies examined email in terms of student use, including: etiquette (e.g. their politeness when contacting academic staff); discursive patterns; cultural cues in email language; and the dynamics of email use between students (e.g. Uddin & Jacobson, 2013). Next, a smaller amount of studies examined the use of email as a learning tool, particularly for English language students (e.g. Wang, Eberhard, Voron, & Bernas, 2016); and other studies examined the discussion of technical issues involved in the use of mass email at university—for example, advantages/disadvantages of using course-specific email accounts (Ortwein, 2015). The fourth category examined the use of mass email for content delivery, including invitations to 'interventions'—for example, alcohol awareness or nutrition interventions; survey invitations; and emails containing reminders/updates/feedback. This category was considered most relevant for this study because these emails are designed by the sender for the students to take some action ('engagement')—and this includes opening, reading and clicking on links. Therefore, knowledge of the complexity of sending and receiving emails is necessary. A total of 19 studies were included in this category—not including related citations found in Google Scholar (Appendix).



It became evident that the research in this category overlooks a rigorous consideration of email evaluation and optimisation strategies. Almost half of the studies examined interventions delivered to students via email. For example, McCambridge et al. (2013) examine the effectiveness of an alcohol assessment emailed to students, but do not consider email metrics, optimal send times, or testing/optimising subject-lines; it is much the same for Bernstein, Wood, and Erickson (2016) research into alcohol abuse messages sent via email; and—even though survey metrics and webpage metrics are mentioned—the research by Carter, Donovan, and Jalleh (2011), overlooks crucial email evaluation metrics. In Carter et al.'s (2011) work, the researchers evaluate the use of mass email for distributing links to students to tobacco control advertisements. The effectiveness of email is evaluated in terms of 'hits' on the videos, embedded on a separate web page. A more comprehensive analysis would consider email open rate, and CTR, as these metrics could shed further light on 'hits' on the advertisement. For example, a low open rate might reveal there were several students who did not even see the email; and/or, a low CTR might indicate a problem with the wording of the call to action (CTA) in the email.<sup>5</sup>

A small cluster of research in this category (using mass email at university for content delivery) is concerned with sending supportive/motivational messages to large groups of students. In this cluster, testing and evaluation strategies are identified, but there is room for more detail, in terms (again) of the analysis of key metrics and recommendations regarding design/layout. Inkelaar and Simpson (2015) used the industry ESP Campaign Monitor to send motivational emails to an experimental group of distance education students in The University of London International Programmes. It is not clear if the students were prompted to expect the emails (although it is likely, given students would probably have consented to participate in the experiment). The researchers note a small increase in retention, of around 2.3% (p. 159). Importantly, they note from Campaign Monitor's report that the emails were opened by 37.3% of recipients on the list. Further discussion, however, is needed about the implications of the open rate for the project; for example, about whether the open rate could be improved, and the limitations of email more generally in terms of what appears to be a relatively low measure of engagement. Also, the researchers note that future emails could be improved by making them more 'interactive' (by adding links), but there is no mention of collecting data on this interactivity to measure success. The researchers suggest the importance in future emails of employing a 'nudging and priming' strategy, which is based on psychology research from 2009/2010 and translates to 'some minor modifications to the wording of the emails' (p. 161).

Inkelaar and Simpson (2015) appear to follow the example set by Huett, Kalinowski, Moller, and Cleaves (2008) 7 years earlier, and craft content that results in an email that more closely resembles an academic essay—albeit formatted using Campaign Monitor's template. Huett et al. (2008) examine the efficacy of motivational messages, sent via email, for improving the motivation and retention of students. The researchers explain that they designed the messages using the 'ARCS' model, which is based on theory from the 1930s that 'attempts to synthesise behavioural, cognitive and affective learning theories and demonstrate that learner motivation can be influenced through external conditions' (Moller cited in Huett et al., 2008, p. 161). Clearly, the audience analysis here is based on a rigorous understanding of the student learner. To this end, the researchers also enlisted a panel of professors with online teaching experience to write the email



messages and develop the email template (Huett et al., 2008, p. 167). The emails created resemble an academic essay format consisting of the following paragraphs: introduction, goal reminders, words of encouragement and a final paragraph offering contact points for feedback opportunities (pp. 167–168). The authors suggest in their conclusion, the value for future research of testing different messages, and they acknowledge uncertainty about the ideal time to send the messages. While Huett et al. (2008) note the importance of varying email send time, including open rate and CTR data in their analysis would have provided more insight generally into student engagement with the emails.

Other research in this cluster that examines the use of email for sending messages to students includes: Dickinson (2017), who found a connection between email tone and student performance in an online class; and Quinn (2015), whose research claims texting and emailing are both an effective means of communicating reminders to students. Again, however, the academics' understanding of email lacks detail—which adds some ambiguity to the findings. Dickinson (2017) attributes a relative increase in student grades to her change in email communications to a more friendly and respectful tone—and this claim is supported by survey data that show an increase in positive sentiment in teacher evaluations. The researcher, however, does not consider if email open rates remained consistent during the study. What if it was the case that several students never even opened the messages? Also, the researcher does not consider send time either. Was this consistent? Could this have affected open rate? To be fair, the researcher mentions that the LMS<sup>6</sup> used to send the emails was Blackboard (BB), which does not provide these email metrics (see my discussion in part 3); nevertheless, mention of these limitations would be helpful. Similarly in Quinn (2015), a more detailed understanding of the effectiveness of email (or text messages) for reminding students to take a quiz would be achieved with an analysis of the open rate of the emails. In addition, it would be valuable to test the effect of different send times and CTAs.

Most fruitful for discussions about email optimisation in this category is the cluster of research that examines strategies for using email as a method for increasing survey response rates. This cluster of research is most vocal in its illumination of the complexities of email, but more detail is still needed. Trespalacios and Perkins (2016) examined the response rate to surveys sent to participants via email, and found that neither the degree of personalisation nor the length of the invitation email impacted survey response. In this research, however, a comparison of open rate and CTR would go some way to resolving the hypothesis that a personalised email loses its effectiveness when an 'experienced computer user' suspects the email is automatised (Heerwegh in Trespalacios & Perkins, 2016, p. 333).

Trespalacios and Perkins (2016) also cite Porter and Whitcomb (2005) and Trouteaud (2004), and these studies need to be briefly noted because, although outside the time-frame of the current study, both are frequently cited in post-2010 research into using email for survey recruitment. Porter and Whitcomb (2005) test the relationship between subject-line, the rate at which individuals click on the hyperlink directing them to the survey (CTR) and the rate at which individuals submitted completed surveys. Results indicate that CTR varies dependent upon whether the reason for the email, or the sponsor, was mentioned in the email subject-line. Trouteaud (2004) analyses the relationship between survey response rates and the variation of time sent and minor

changes to the subject-line and body content of the email. While the detail of the variables tested are clearly aimed at the specific concerns of an audience, i.e. potential survey respondents, the findings more generally identify the value of testing email subject-lines, varying content specific to users' needs, and varying send time.

A perspective armed with industry insights reveals some oversight in these analyses. To be clear, research that attributes positive or negative results to certain isolated email components can be problematic; for example, attributing a variation in survey response rates to changes in subject-line text (see Trouteaud, 2004, p. 390) is problematic because a subject-line may appeal to an email recipient, and they read the email content, yet they may not attempt the survey. Here, the effectiveness of the subject-line would not be accounted for since the measure of a successful subject-line is survey completions. Similarly, uncertainty about whether a subject-line is interpreted as spam (Porter & Whitcomb, 2005, p. 384) could be resolved if another metric, open rate, was considered. If the open rate for the sample that received a particular subject-line was relatively high, yet the CTR is low, then problems with the subject-line could be ruled out.

This trend towards focusing on some email metrics and not others has continued since 2004/2005. Google Scholar identifies the following research citing Porter and Whitcomb (2005): Sappleton and Lourenço (2016); Janke (2014) and Kaplowitz, Lupi, Couper, and Thorp (2012). Sappleton and Lourenço's (2016) work does not appear to consider open rate data, yet if it did it could assist the authors in understanding the number of recipients who 'simply discarded [the email] without reading it' (pp. 619–620). Janke (2014), also citing Porter and Whitcomb (2005) does not consider CTR and open rate. Kaplowitz et al. (2012) note that despite other research claiming the positive effect of mentioning shorter survey time, this was not the case in their own experiment (p. 345). A comparison of CTR and response rate could help these researchers identify a number of students who intended to respond but did not.

Google Scholar identifies one study citing Kaplowitz et al. (2012) and Janke (2014) that contributed a 'systematic approach' to analysing mass email campaigns on par with industry approaches in terms of 'the entire spectrum of user response data' which includes 'open rate/time' as well as CTR (Lim, Lim, Jiang, & Achananuparp, 2016, p. 256). Lim et al. implemented a controlled experiment to test the authority status of the email sender. The researchers note the relative importance of the open rate metric and they gather data by embedding a tracking pixel in each email that 'records the user who opened the email and the time of opening' (p. 257). As the researchers note, this systematic approach is valuable because it identifies more thoroughly the 'exit points' where recipients might abandon engagement with an email (p. 259)—exit points that appear to be overlooked in the above research.

Yet in terms of open rates specifically, industry research from almost 10 years ago has been claiming this metric is somewhat unreliable (Volpe, 2008). Typically, an email is recorded as 'opened' if a tiny image, embedded in the email, is downloaded by the server. One of the main problems with measuring open rate is that some email clients block images, which means that a user may read an email even though the tracking pixel is not downloaded; or, some users' inboxes may be configured with a 'preview pane' meaning that every email is 'opened' even though the user has taken no actual action. As a result, there can be inconsistencies in data when considering open rates of emails sent to multiple clients. What needs to be added

to a systematic approach to analysing email in a university context is a clarification based on advice provided by HubSpot: ‘You can get some value out of open rate as a metric if you use it as a comparative metric [...] since the variables are somewhat controlled’ (Kolowich, 2016).

Research reveals that, in a university context, gaps in understanding mass email are in the areas of metrics, layout/design and related to the latter: audience analysis. In terms of metrics, it appears time and time again that analyses focus on some metrics at the expense of others, and consequently do not paint a comprehensive picture of email engagement. There is also an absence of benchmark data, and so evaluating the efficacy of emails themselves is largely guesswork. In terms of layout/design, expert research suggests that even the most considered mass emails sent at university look more like academic mini-essays. Finally, while the content of these messages might demonstrate an understanding of the student learner, they don’t demonstrate an understanding of the fact that students are also internet users, most of whom have grown up on a diet of ‘beautiful’ mass emails from the likes of MailChimp and Campaign Monitor.

### Discussion: recommendations for mass email at university

Based on the research, what are academics not doing when it comes to using and evaluating mass email, and what should they be doing? In this final section I will answer this question and provide several recommendations. What also becomes clear, in addition to the need for more comprehensive analyses of email data, are several obstacles to mass email optimisation at university.

A recurring problem in email research at university is that some email metrics are overlooked—in other words, a ‘systematic’ approach is not taken to mass email (Lim et al., 2016). For example, in Inkelaar and Simpson’s work (2015), CTR could shed light on the amount of students actually reading their emails. True, they note an open rate, but opening emails and reading them are not the same actions. For instance, engagement might be low because of a problem related to opens and/or clicks—a subscriber might not open the email because the subject-line is vague or sounds like spam, or they may open the email and then exit without reading or clicking. Best-practise is to collect data on both open rate and click rate, evaluate each in relation to the other, and test each in relation to each other. Accurately, understanding email, therefore, involves taking into account a range of metrics.

Basic advice for optimal opens—that every email blast needs to incorporate (even if it is a simple course update)—involves constructing optimal subject-lines. Academic research advises keeping them brief and ensuring they are descriptive of the content of the email, and personalising them with the recipient’s name. Industry research adds the importance of avoiding spam words (for example, problematic words relevant to education and training include ‘important information’). Some research recommends placing important words at the beginning of the subject-line (Goudreau, 2015), and using some capital letters. In some cases, email clients (for example: Gmail) may allow users to preview the content of emails without opening them, and if this is the case then it needs to be remembered that open rate data may be inaccurate. Again, as HubSpot makes clear, open rate is valuable only if used as a comparative metric (Kolowich, 2016).

As was mentioned, getting students to open emails is only half the battle; they also need to achieve the email's objective, which could be reading, or clicking a link and going to another digital asset. The best way to measure the former is to include links and track the CTR. Industry advice for encouraging CTR includes: ensuring email copy complements the subject-line (since a subject-line that promises what an email does not deliver will cause recipients to bounce); keeping copy to a minimum, and ensuring the most important content is in the top third of the email, especially important if recipients may be using an email client with a preview pane—most likely the case since the most popular email clients allow inboxes to receive email from multiple other clients, including a university LMS; making emails mobile friendly, which means making the links visible; using video, as industry research shows that messages delivered using video have a higher CTR (Wong, 2016); and encouraging clicking by writing click-text that piques readers' interest—for example, in a mass email designed to deliver course content to students, link-text might say the following: 'Need to know concepts for assessment 4'. It is accepted in the industry that optimised link text can significantly impact on engagement—for example, one commercial source claims that an optimal headline can be 'the difference between 1000 or 1,000,000 people reading your story' (Walgrove, 2015). These are all simple tactics that (according to research) university mass emails are overlooking.

Crucial to the comprehensive implementation of mass email tactics is reference to data benchmarks. Obviously, benchmarks help gauge an individual email's performance. But also, an awareness of benchmarks is necessary for a genuine understanding of the capabilities of mass email more generally. It appears from industry data, and the small amount of academic data (see Inkelaar & Simpson, 2015), that engagement with mass email at university is low relative to the number of students emailed. Not many students open mass emails, and even less read them or click on links—and, according to MailChimp's data, it is the same for other industry sectors. University specific benchmarks need to be more firmly established. In addition, the low engagement of mass email highlights the absolute importance of following best-practise guidelines in order to minimise opportunities for non-engagement. If it is the case that only a small percentage of students are likely to engage with optimised email, it is highly likely that few students, if any at all, will engage with anything less than an email produced according to best-practise guidelines; for example, one that gets to the point; that displays correctly on mobile; and arrives in students' inboxes at the ideal time.

Crucial too is the need for demonstrated acceptance that students are first and foremost internet users, and that the industry has valuable lessons to teach about communicating with students today. Current academic research into email optimisation does not suggest this is happening. Existing insights from sociology and pedagogy (Huett et al., 2008) need to be combined with industry-based copywriting and web writing. In other words, university staff need to address students as industry would address an online target audience. Part of this includes an awareness of usability and user experience design (UX)—of how students read online, which includes how they read emails (see, for example, Hodgekiss, 2011). It goes without saying that workload time needs to be allocated in order to do this, and other technological initiatives (see Howell, Roberts, Seaman, & Gibson, 2018).

There is also value in changing the broader approach to mass email at university. Many students feel saturated by too many emails (Sapleton & Lourenço, 2016; Straumsheim, 2016). Students receive emails from every course they undertake, as well as multiple administrative

and social emails from their universities. Anecdotally, it appears academic teaching staff coordinating courses are taking a siloed approach to email communication. Future research could investigate the value of a non-siloed, university-wide email approach strategy, with the aim of reducing the total number of mass emails sent to students. This is another lesson that could be learned from industry approaches to email communication, and as the example noted above proves, the gains from a more streamlined organisation-wide approach to mass email could be significant (Eckerle, 2015b).

It needs to be noted, however, that optimal mass email at university is completely dependent upon the technology used. This is mentioned because BB, for example, typically one of the top learning management systems (LMS) in the educational space in Australia (see Fenton, 2018), has several limitations regarding its email capabilities. BB restricts the design and layout of emails to simple plain text; test emails cannot be sent to email clients in order to check the design and layout; and it is not specified in BB documentation that emails are responsive to mobile and tablet layout (Email, n.d.). In terms of reporting, BB does not provide data on open rate or CTR of emails, and neither is there data on soft bounce. Other issues include an inability to A/B test, and restrictions on changes to email subject-lines (the default subject-line BB includes the course name). It is crucial, therefore, that universities are equipped with the appropriate technology for sending optimal mass emails. When this is not possible, third party ESPs such as MailChimp could be used as alternatives—with some difficulty. From personal experience at my institution, I can identify the following areas of concern with using a third-part ESP: (a) technical support; (b) data storage and retention and (c) operational complexity.

## Conclusion

With mass email, one message can be sent to hundreds (and, potentially, thousands) of students, instantly. That is why it is an embedded technology at university, and a default communication channel for most academics. In addition, emails can be read at any time, and with smart phone technology, from anywhere—which is why email remains popular with students. Preliminary benchmarks suggest engagement with mass email at university is low relative to the number of students on the list, but at the same time, the ROI of mass email is potentially high, given that regularly engaging even a small number of students simply involves taking a strategic approach based on best-practice techniques and tools.

Published research is the front-line of cutting-edge developments and innovation in higher education, and since the research findings in this study demonstrate a basic understanding of sending and receiving mass email at university, it is reasonable to conclude that a strategic approach to mass email is not common for most academics. A strategic approach involves: understanding how users/students engage with email (i.e. 'reading' an email involves receiving an email, opening an email and clicking on email content); and understanding how to improve email, in terms of testing and optimisation, which involves knowledge of *what* to test (send time, subject-line, copy, link text) and *how* to test (for example, A/B testing). Indeed, relatively big gains can be made to the effectiveness of an email campaign with small changes. Minor changes to the content of emails have been proven to result in an increase in engagement by more than half in some cases (Eckerle, 2015b).

Research also identifies how universities are lagging behind industry use of email due to issues with technology, including: the technological environment of email, in terms of smart

phone usage and the concomitant need for responsive email templates; different email clients and the potentially varied ways email displays in each—including the impact of the technological environment (e.g. preview panes) on the accuracy of email data; and the technological capability of a university's LMS required for optimal design, layout and analysis of mass email.

Of course, academics need support to better send and analyse mass email. Even though only a basic level of skill is required to fill and format an email template, and only a basic level of analysis is required to interpret data in email reports, this is a basic level missing for many academic teaching staff, and this is a reasonable assumption given documented concerns teaching staff have expressed about interpreting data and accessing professional development about 'learning analytics' (see Rogers, Colvin, West, & Dawson, 2015). Change, however, is on the horizon; soon there will be no real alternative to academics mastering these digital production skills themselves. It is fair to say in the not-so-distant-future that it will be accepted (and expected) that academic staff work 'in tech'—just as journalists were confronted with this paradigm shift years ago (Royal, 2014; see also Dawkins, 2016).

In sum, this study has made clear that evaluating and optimising mass email at university is still in its infancy. Moving forward, a testing and optimisation paradigm needs to drive mass email use at university.

## Notes

1. Note: this study does not consider the use of mass email at university by non-academic /administrative/professional staff.
2. For these and other 'industries' in Australia, see the Australian Government's Job Outlook website (Explore Industries, n.d.).
3. This estimate is because MailChimp, the 'world's leading marketing automation platform', was founded in 2001 (About MailChimp, n.d.).
4. Note: MailChimp also launched a freemium service in 2009, growing its user-base to 450,000 (MailChimp, n.d.).
5. A CTA is defined as a line of text that prompts the reader to take action and makes clear why they should click the link and what they should get in return (Mineo, 2013).
6. A learning management system (LMS) is software used by educators and administrators to 'develop and assign course content, track student progress and measure and report student outcomes' (Fenton, 2018).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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