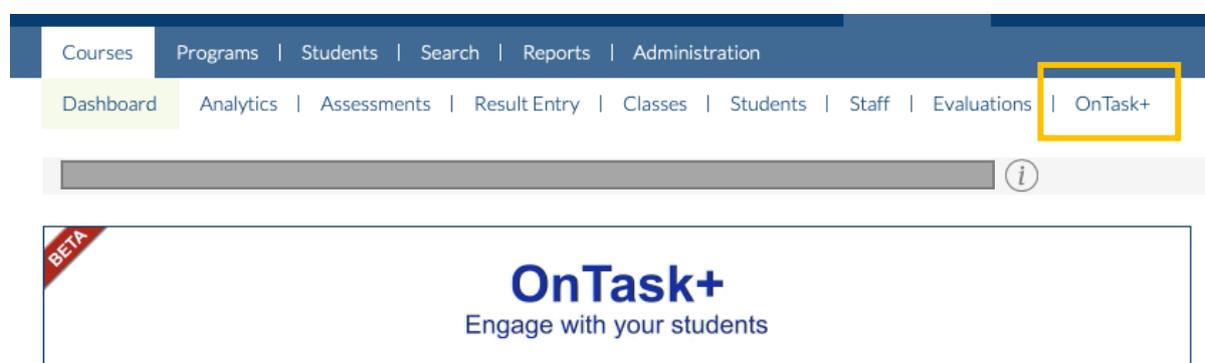


Using OnTask+ to Improve Student Engagement

OnTask+ is a communication tool designed to improve the academic experience of students through the delivery of timely, targeted, and actionable student feedback throughout their participation in a course (Pardo *et al*, 2018). This tool is available to staff at UniSA and is available through the teaching dashboard for your course.



NOTE: OnTask+ is a different tool to the original OnTask that was added to your course site as an external tool.

OnTask+ sources student data from your learn**online** course site and matches it with course enrolment data. This enables you to send purposeful tailored email messages¹ to the students enrolled in your courses based on their interaction with resources and activities on your course site.

Used in this way, you can tailor messaging to different sub-sets of students based on how they are interacting with the course site or performing in activities/assessments.

OnTask+ can be used for both on-campus and fully online teaching. Given it links with several university databases, much of the data are auto populated from your course enrolments and your course site. This does not mean that your face-to-face teaching experiences are precluded,

¹ NOTE: Guidelines on Electronic Communications with Students:

https://i.unisa.edu.au/siteassets/policies-and-procedures/docs/guidelines_electronic_communications_with_students_fp.pdf

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however in the current version of OnTask+, additional external data (e.g., class attendance) cannot be added. The more robust your course site design, the richer your dataset.

This Guide will explain what OnTask+ can do to improve the effectiveness of your communication with individual students – and what it can't. We will also touch on the need for planning how you'll use the tool and where you can go for additional support and information!

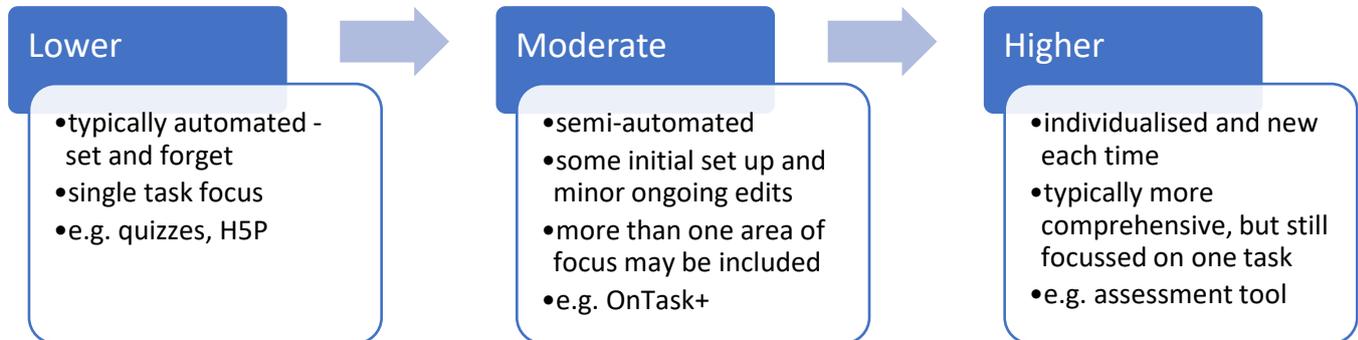
What is OnTask+ and what can it do?

OnTask+ allows for targeted communication and feedback to be given to students about how they are tracking in your course and is often promoted as being particularly useful for interacting with larger cohorts, where providing personalised and meaningful feedback can be tricky. This is not to say the tool cannot be used in smaller cohorts, you'd just need to weigh up the time cost involved in setting up the tool against the time it may take you to interact with your 'smaller' group in other ways.

In terms of where this tool sits in the suite of available tools **for communicating with students**, OnTask+ is somewhere between the catch-all announcement/Q&A forums and individual private messages.

This tool also sits somewhere in the middle in terms of **the level of staff input required** to use it. The graphic below shows a few examples of tools available for providing feedback to students and is arranged in order of ongoing involvement from teaching staff for providing students with feedback. Ideally, you'll want a mix of these tools to balance out teaching workload, supporting students' learning strategy development,

and students sense of connection with the teaching team.



OnTask+ enables you to send messages to different sub-sets or groups of students, such as those who have or have not accessed a key resource. Or perhaps those who have performed particularly well in an assessment as compared to those who have done moderately well, or those who have struggled.

Staff who currently use OnTask+ in their courses report that a key benefit of this tool is that they are not only able to contact and support those students who are struggling but *can also reach out to those doing well* to encourage them to keep doing what they are doing!

Before you start...

Like any new tool or technology, when using it for the first time, take some time to consider what you want to achieve and how this tool will enable you to do this: *Pedagogy before technology*.

While this tool can be a time saver for communicating with your students once set up, careful planning and consideration needs to be given before you start including:

- **how** the tool might be used in your course (is it the best tool for the job?),
- **when** are the best times to message your students would be (where are your sticking points or times students would really benefit?), and



- **what** needs to go into your message to get students moving in the direction you want (what data/metrics can you use and what behaviours/strategies do you want to encourage?)

OnTask+ should be integrated into your overall course feedback and communication strategy. This tool is not a solution for every challenge you have, but when used in a strategic and targeted manner, OnTask+ can be very powerful!

Some examples of how staff are currently using OnTask+ in their course include:

- *Reminding* students to complete assessment tasks (e.g. quizzes) and *congratulating* those who already have completed the task;
- Providing targeted support resources for sub-groups of students based on their performance in particular sections of assessments;
- Encouraging particular learning strategies or patterns of engagement with the course materials that are clearly related to students' learning outcomes (e.g. activity participation when central to the learning for that topic).

Creating your email messages

There are currently two message types available with OnTask+, including Basic Email and Simple Activity. The two types of messages vary on what data are available for filtering, and incorporating into, your intended messages. As shown in the screenshot below, Basic emails only use student name and course name data, while Simple Activities will allow you to target your messages to different student groups based on their interaction or performance in a range of resources from your course site, for example, Moodle activities and assessments, or Panopto videos.



Send Basic Email

Purpose: Ideal for welcoming messages to all students.
All students will receive an email.

Data: Student Name, Course Name

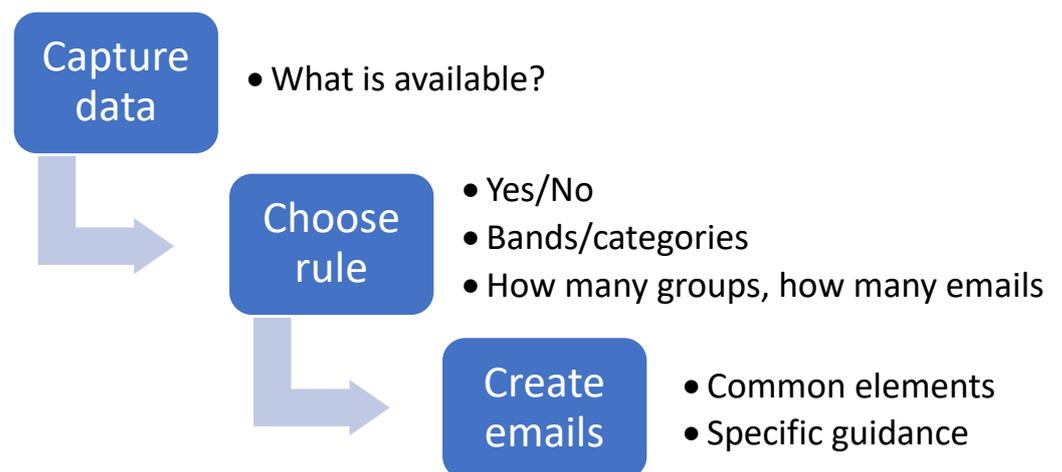


Simple Activities

Purpose: Simple rules for emailing students around online engagement.
Only students who meet the select rule will receive an email.

Data: Student Name, Moodle, Panopto, eReserve

There are a few stages to creating your email messages to students in OnTask+.



- 1) You need to determine whether OnTask+ is capturing the data you need, and that the data is presented/made available to you in a way you can use. You may need to explore this by setting up an email and clicking the Preview button to see what data appears.
- 2) If the data is available and usable, you then need to consider how you will use that data to create the 'rules' (or email groups) that are used by OnTask+ to determine which students get what message. *Are you looking at completion of a task (so a yes/no situation)? Or grouping students into bands/categories (high/med/low)?*
- 3) Create your email message and consider whether you want to email:



- a. all students but separated into different groups* relating to a task or category; e.g., “Remember, the quiz is due on Friday!” OR “Great work completing the quiz with plenty of time to spare”, or
- b. targeting only one group within your cohort; e.g., students who are repeating the course.

**NOTE: If you are wanting to email all students separated into groups, you will need to create a separate email message for each group. If you are wanting to alter only a small part of the message for each group, we recommend planning and creating your message texts in a separate document, and copy/pasting relevant parts into your OnTask+ message for each group.*

Below are a few screenshot examples of email messages sent to students.

Check the help resources (link at end of guide) for more detailed instructions.

Example #1

In this first example, the message is shown in the OnTask+ editor. Students are grouped based on whether they have submitted their assessment or not. Each student will only belong to one group and so will only receive ONE of the messages shown below. In the examples below you will see containing text that is common to both messages that all students receive, while the sections specific to that group are indicated in a green box.



Email Template

Send From:

Send Summary Email: ?

Email Subject:

sans-serif 13px B I U A

Hi {STUDENT_NAME},

Welcome to Week 2 of {COURSE_LINK}.

First, well done on submitting {ASSESSMENT_NAME}, well before the due date {STUDENT_DUE_DATE}. It's great to see you being proactive and getting your submission in with plenty of time to spare! Keep up the great work!

Also, now is about the time to start thinking about your group assessment - I hope you have made contact with your group members. If you have not yet selected a group, please visit your assessment page and self-select into your group ASAP. Follow the course link above.

See you online soon!

Cheers,

{USER_NAME}

(and the teaching team!)

Note - The data used to inform this email was last updated at {DATA_LAST_UPDATED}

Design </> HTML

General Merge Tags

Course Name

Course Name With Link

Subject Catalog

Student First Name

User First Name

Data Last Updated Date

Rule Specific Merge Tags

Assessment Name

Student's Due Date

Email Template

Send From:

Send Summary Email: ?

Email Subject:

sans-serif 13px B I U A

Hi {STUDENT_NAME},

Welcome to Week 2 of {COURSE_LINK}.

First, a quick reminder about {ASSESSMENT_NAME}, this submission is due {STUDENT_DUE_DATE}. Make sure you leave yourself enough time to complete and review your assessment before the due date. And please get in touch if you have any questions or concerns in the lead up - the Assessment Forum is a great place to start. Not long to go now!

Also, now is about the time to start thinking about your group assessment - I hope you have made contact with your group members. If you have not yet selected a group, please visit your assessment page and self-select into your group ASAP. Follow the course link above.

See you online soon!

Cheers,

{USER_NAME}

(and the teaching team!)

Note - The data used to inform this email was last updated at {DATA_LAST_UPDATED}

Design </> HTML

General Merge Tags

Course Name

Course Name With Link

Subject Catalog

Student First Name

User First Name

Data Last Updated Date

Rule Specific Merge Tags

Assessment Name

Student's Due Date



Example #2

This example has only two options; students passed their quiz or they didn't. Rather than just restate the grades though, this message is used to invite students to reach out for more support.

Passed:

Hi {STUDENT_NAME},

I just wanted to email you to say congratulations for passing {ASSESSMENT_NAME}! It's a testament to your hard work to pass the quiz, and this puts you in good stead for the rest of the course. Well done.

As always, feel free to contact me at anytime if you'd like to discuss your progress in the course.

Cheers,

{USER_NAME}

Note - The data used to inform this email was last updated at {DATA_LAST_UPDATED}

OR, Not Passed:

Hi {STUDENT_NAME},

I just wanted to email you to see how you're going with the course? I've had a look at your results for {ASSESSMENT_NAME} and I can see that you haven't done too well. This topic is fundamental to developing a good foundation in this course.

Can I encourage you to contact me so we can arrange a time to chat, so I can give you some feedback on where you're struggling? You can reply to this email if you'd like.

Cheers,

{USER_NAME}

Note - The data used to inform this email was last updated at {DATA_LAST_UPDATED}



Example #3

Our final example shows how the repeat/not repeat filter can be used to send a targeted message to any students who may be returning to your course after an unsuccessful prior attempt. This message will only go to those students who are flagged as repeating.

Dear {STUDENT_NAME},

A quick email to say welcome back to {COURSE_LINK}. You're getting this email as, according to our records, you are repeating {COURSE_NAME} this study period.

I wanted to take the opportunity to reach out and invite you to book a time to come have a chat with me about your past experiences learning in this course, and how we might set you up for success this time around!

Please reply to this email and we'll find a time to chat!

Cheers,

{USER_NAME}

Your placement of OnTask+ messages across your course is important. We live on email, but our students often don't. You'll want to save these messages for the information that is really important, so students engage when messages arrive! Be targeted and strategic around those key sticking points in your course where targeted communications would really benefit students – don't overdo it on the messaging.

When writing your OnTask+ email messages, consider the following points:

- *Write for your audience* – these are your students, not another academic or journal article. Keep your messages conversational, brief and to the point.
- *Invite conversation* – ask questions, make suggestions, congratulate good learning strategies/performance, let students know how to contact you or other supports.
- *Include a call to action* – be specific about what students should do next and why it's important that they do. Reminders about assessments are pretty obvious (you can hyperlink direct to the

page if you want), however when encouraging changes in learning strategies or behaviours it's important you articulate why students should do what you're suggesting beyond 'it will help you learn'.

What can't OnTask+ do?

Importantly, OnTask+ cannot allow you to comment on students' learning behaviours that you don't have data on. This seems obvious, but a common mistake people make when using learning analytics data is **extrapolating too far** from what the data can actually tell you (additional information available in [earlier learning guides](#) on Online Student Engagement).

For example, let's consider students' log in data as a metric for "engagement with the course". Student A may only log in once a week, while Student B logs in several times a day. It's easy to assume that Student B is more engaged as they are logging in more regularly, however what isn't captured in this engagement metric is that Student A *only needs* to log in once.

Student A downloads all resources, works through at their own pace, is engaged and the course design allows them to have this pattern of online behaviour and still succeed. On the other hand, Student B logs in several times a day because they forget where they've saved their files, is anxious they're missing something, and doesn't necessarily do much on the course site when they're logged in.

Can you imagine then sending a message to these two students where Student A is told they aren't doing enough and will struggle (even though they're doing great) while Student B is told they're doing great and engaging (even though they're disorganised and freaking out!)?

The **design of your course** will help you to determine whether logging in once a week is enough, or whether students should be logging in more regularly. Context is important when interpreting what your course data is telling you.

So, what do students think?

When OnTask+ is used effectively and integrated into a course to support students at key times in their learning, the feedback from students is very positive (Lim *et al*, 2020). Many existing users at UniSA have reported that students regularly reply to these OnTask+ email messages thanking them for the reminders and/or the ‘high-fives’ where success is acknowledged.

Help and support

If you’re keen on learning more about the tool and how it might fit into your course and interactions with your students, check out the existing staff help resources available on the **learnonline** OnTask+ help.

- Ask **learnonline** help - [OnTask+](#)

If you would like to ask online teaching and learning questions related to your course, you can visit our [Teaching Innovation Website](#) or write to TIU@unisa.edu.au, have an [online consultation with a member of the TIU](#) or complete the [online modules](#) as part of your ongoing Professional Development as a teacher at UniSA!

References

Lim, L-A, Dawson, S, Gašević, D, Joksimović, S, Pardo, A, Fudge, A & Gentili, S 2020, 'Students' perceptions of, and emotional responses to, personalised learning analytics-based feedback: an exploratory study of four courses', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, pp. 1–21.

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