



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 can be added to course sites as an **External** tool in learnonline **Add an Activity**.

OnTask sources student data from your course site and matches it with course enrolment data. This enables you to send tailored email messages to the students enrolled in your courses based on:

1. their interaction with your learnonline course site, and/or
2. additional course related data you manually add to the tool.

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

OnTask can be used for both on-campus and online teaching. The tool links with several University databases, which means that much of the required data can be auto populated from course enrolments and your course site. This does not mean that your face-to-face teaching experiences are precluded, however any data coming from these spaces will need to be manually uploaded to the tool. The more robust your course site design, the richer your dataset.

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

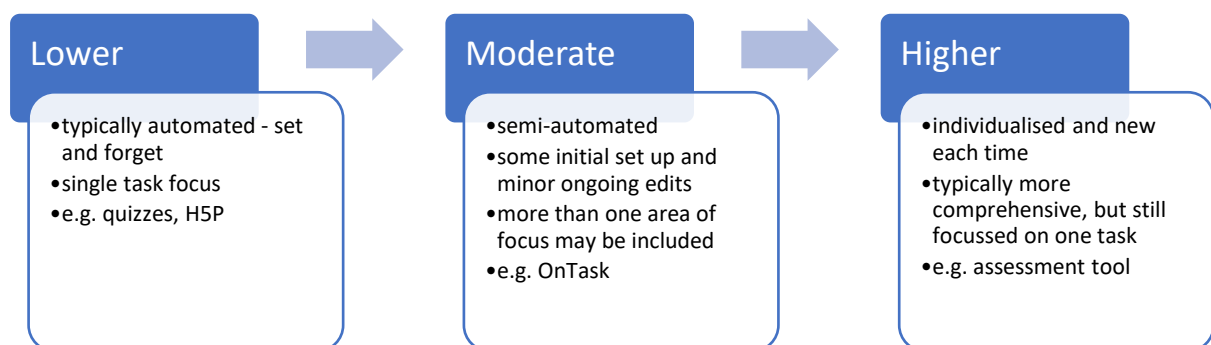
What is OnTask and what can it do?

OnTask allows for targeted communication and feedback to be given to students about how they are tracking in your course. It is often promoted as being useful for interacting with larger cohorts, where it can be tricky

to provide personalised and meaningful feedback. This is not to say the tool cannot be used with smaller cohorts; you would need to weigh up the time involved in setting up the tool against the time to interact with your 'smaller' group in other ways.

If we compare OnTask with the suite of available tools for **communicating with students**, OnTask sits somewhere between the catch-all announcement/Q&A forums and individual private messages in terms of **the level of ongoing support required** to use it.

The graphic below shows examples of tools available for providing feedback to students, ordered by the level of involvement by teaching staff. Ideally a mix of these strategies are needed to balance out teaching workload and support students' learning and sense of connection with the teaching team.



OnTask enables you to target messages to different student groups such as those who have or have not accessed a key resource. You may wish to send different messages to 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 this tool in their courses like that they are able to contact and support those students who are struggling but can also reach out to those doing well and encourage them to continue 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. For example consider:

- **how** the tool might be used in your course (is it the best tool for the job?);
- **when** 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?).

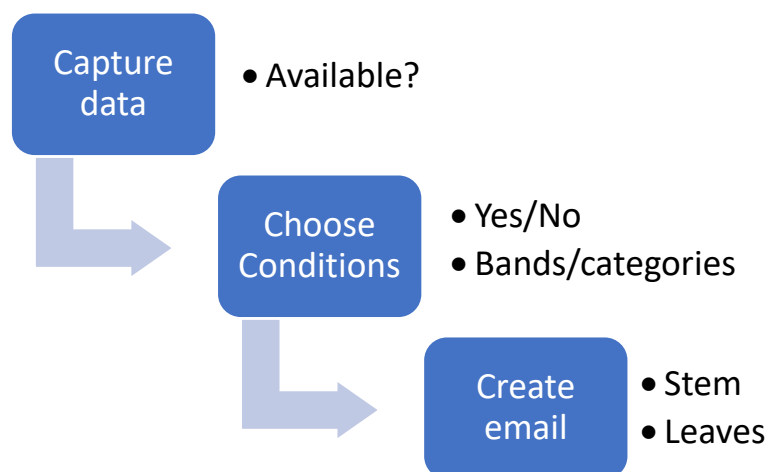
OnTask is one tool which will be used along with others in your overall course feedback/communication strategy. This tool is not a solution for every challenge you have but, when used in a strategic and targeted manner, OnTask can be very powerful!

Some examples of how staff currently use OnTask in courses are:

- 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 patterns of engagement with the course materials that are clearly related to students' learning outcomes and associated with good learning strategies (e.g. participating in key learning activities for a topic).

Creating your email messages

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



- 1) **Capture data:** 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.
- 2) **Choose conditions:** If the data is available and usable, you then need to consider how you will use that data to create the 'conditions' (or groups) that are used by OnTask to determine which students get what parts of the message.
Are you looking at completion of a task (a yes/no situation)? Or grouping students into bands/categories (high/med/low)?
- 3) **Create email:** Create your email message with some text being part of the "stem" that is sent to everyone; e.g. the greeting and setting scene for message. Then the other text is the "leaves" of the message that are only sent to students who meet the chosen condition; e.g. "Remember, the quiz is due on Friday!" OR "Great work completing the quiz with plenty of time to spare".

You'll need to think through the logic of your overall message to make sure that each of the leaves sit within the stem message and make sense. Start simple with just one activity/task and make sure you test your message before sending!

Below are a few screenshot examples of email messages sent to students. You'll notice the formatting of the message is a little different in the editor compared to how emails usually appear. The curly brackets {} and their arrangement is important. This is how the OnTask tool recognises which parts of the message are intended for which students.

NOTE: The messages have been colour-coded to make the different parts easier to see – when you use the editor yourself you will only see black text. The tool populates the text editor with these brackets, so you won't need to create that text. Check the help resources (link at end of guide) for more detailed instructions.

Example #1

In this first example, students are grouped according to completion and performance of a task. In this case each student can only belong to one group and so will only receive ONE of the leaves shown in green text. The black text is the stem of the message that all students receive.

Dear {{STUDENT_FIRST_NAME}}

Welcome back after the mid-break. I hope you are now working hard towards the completion of this course. Over the next few weeks we will be concentrating on completing your Group Project tasks as well as your XXXX Blogs.

{{Not completed:True}} : { I note that you have not yet completed the Excel Basics Quiz which is due this coming Sunday, 29th April. Please log in and complete this as soon as possible as we will be using the results of this quiz to customise our teaching next week when we look specifically at the use of Spreadsheets for decision making. }}

{{Completed but needs work:True}} : { I see that you have been proactive and completed the Excel Basics Quiz due this week, well done. Your result of the quiz shows that there are some areas that you need to work on to improve your use of MS Excel. We will be working on these in our internal workshops and external virtual classrooms next week so please come with your questions. }}

{{Completed HD:True}} : { I see that you have been proactive and completed the Excel Basics Quiz due this week, well done. Your result of the quiz shows that you have a very good knowledge of MS Excel and may only have a couple of areas to look at. We will be working on these in our internal workshops and external virtual classrooms next week so please come with your questions. }}

{{Completed Full Marks:True}} : { I see that you have been proactive and completed the Excel Basics Quiz due this week, well done. Your result of the quiz shows that you have an excellent knowledge of MS Excel as shown by receiving full marks. As we will be working on these skills in our internal workshops and external virtual classrooms next week it will be a good opportunity for you to take up the learn-do-teach philosophy of improving your knowledge by training others. I will be looking for you to assist other students in your group with how to use MS Excel. }}

With respect to your Literature reviews for peer review, these will be accessible through the "Peer Review Workshop" link that you submitted to. Due to some illness there were a couple of extensions required and I am unable to transfer access for your peer reviews until all students have submitted. As such I have extended the time for peer reviews to be completed. You will have access from tomorrow afternoon (Friday 27th April) and will need to have your three (3) peer reviews completed no later than midnight on Sunday 6th May. Any reviews not completed by this time will result in a zero for the 10% component related to the peer review process. This is to ensure that all students can receive their feedback to enable this to be included in the Group Report assessment.

{{Not completed:True}} : { Please note: The information in this email is correct at the time of sending and does not reflect your activity after this time. }}

Example #2

This example has only two categories: those who have passed their quiz or those who haven't.

Hi `{{STUDENT_FIRST_NAME}}`

I just wanted to email you `{{Passed quiz:True}}` : {to say congratulations for your excellent grade in quiz 2! It's a testament to your hard work to pass the quiz, and it puts you in great stead for the rest of the course. Well done, and keep up the amazing work! As always, feel free to contact me at anytime if you'd like to discuss your progress in the course.} `{{Passed quiz:False}}` : {to see how you're going with the course? I've had a look at your results for quiz 2, 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.}}

Example #3

The final example shows a message being built in the text editor window in OnTask.

Create Email Template

Email Subject:

Week 9 - the beginning of the end!!

From Email Address:

@unisa.edu.au

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Hello `{{STUDENT_FIRST_NAME}}`,

Welcome to Week 9! We're almost there. The end is in sight!!

This will be our **last email update for** [REDACTED] We hope you've found them useful :) If you've any thoughts or suggestions relating to these emails, feel free to reply to this address. We're always keen for feedback.

`{{ActivityLOW:True}}` : {At this pointy end of the study period, it's now more important than ever to regularly check in on your LearnOnline page for [REDACTED] Assessment details, questions from classmates on forums, and exam revision stuff will all start appearing. **Make sure you're there when it does!**

`}}`

`{{ActivityMID-HIGH:True}}` : {At this pointy end of the study period, it's now more important than ever to regularly check in on your LearnOnline page for [REDACTED] Assessment details, questions from classmates on forums, and exam revision stuff will all start appearing. **Keep doing what you're doing so you're there when it does!**

`}}`

And if you're finding things tricky, remember your Course Coordinator, [REDACTED], and your tutors are there to help. Get in touch ASAP if you need to!

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Tips for Using OnTask

The timing of OnTask messages across your course is important. We live on email, but our students often don't. Save these messages for the information that is really important, so students engage when messages arrive! Be strategic around those key sticking points in your course where targeted communications would really benefit students – don't overdo 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 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).

- Online T&L Guide – [Online student engagement: an overview](#)

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 them at their own pace and is engaged because the course design allows them this pattern of online behaviour and still succeed. On the other hand, Student B logs in several times a day because they have forgotten 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 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 work although mainly offline) while Student B is told they're doing great work and engaging (even though they're disorganised and anxious)?

The take-home message here is, that the **design of your course** will help you 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.

- Learnonline help - [OnTask](#)

If you would like to ask online teaching and learning questions related to your course, you can look through our [FAQs](#), write to TIU@unisa.edu.au, have an [online consultation with a member of the TIU](#) or complete the online modules as part of [*Introduction to Engaging Learners Online*](#).

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.

Pardo, A, Bartimote, K, Buckingham Shum, S, Dawson, S, Gao, J, Gašević, D, Leichtweis, S, Liu, D, Martínez-Maldonado, R, Mirriahi, N, Moskal, ACM, Schulte, J, Siemens, G & Vigentini, L 2018, 'OnTask: Delivering data-informed, personalized learning support actions', *Journal of Learning Analytics*, vol. 5, no. 3, 12/11, pp. 235–249.