

University Internal Communication in the Digital Era: Finding a Systemic Approach

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Abstract

In the fast changing conditions of the external environment imposed by the globalisation and global digitalisation, as well as the recent COVID19 pandemic, universities worldwide have at a greater extent to rely on something seemingly more sustainable than the world outside – they have to rely on their internal environment, with its sustainability directly depending on their internal communication (IC). The paper is conceptual in nature and presents the author's concept of the university's sustainable development primarily depending on its internal processes and the university internal communication (UIC) being the core of the university's sustainable development. The employed methodology is based on a systemic approach and includes an extensive literature review observing and analysing the prior research on the given topic, and component modelling. The applied methodology aimed to reduce bias and provide a more comprehensive body of knowledge on the current developments in UIC in the digitalised environments, and produced systematic research results. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview and synthesis of ideas regarding IC development of the organisation in the era of digitalisation, which are discussed in the literature. While focusing primarily on IC in business organisations, many of the ideas presented in the reviewed research papers, about the increasingly digitalised (ICs) developed in business organisations, are relevant to universities' development as well. As part and a result of this integration, a model of UIC is presented, which highlights the specificity of university internal environment distinguishing universities from other types of organisations. The paper argues that the digitalised internal environment should contribute to employees' inclusion in the UIC at all levels of the university. Finally, the article lays ground for further development of UIC theory and discusses the necessary developments in research on IC in general and UIC in particular among both researchers and practitioners.

Keywords: University internal communication, strategic communication management, digital environment, systemic approach.

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1. Introduction

The importance of organisational communication (OC) has been increasingly recognized since the 1950s, with IC gaining the attention of researchers in the 1970s and emerging as an independent research branch in the 2000s (Tariszka-Semegine, 2012). The processes of globalisation and digitalisation that have swept the world since the end of the 20th century have contributed to fundamental transformations in human communication in principle and in OC in particular, transforming IC means and channels and significantly influencing its contexts.

Therefore, OC has been the focus of numerous researchers on all continents, who have studied to a greater or lesser extent its many aspects, as well as IC relationships and interdependencies with productivity, power, leadership, interrelatedness of organisational experiences, identity and many others. To date, the research of OC continues intensively in several research paradigms simultaneously including post-positive, post-modern, interpretive, critical, discursive, and systemic paradigms (Jo & Shim, 2004).

This paper is deemed to be of conceptual character and therefore, is supposed to be able to “bridge existing theories in interesting ways, link work across disciplines, provide multi-level insights, and broaden the scope of our thinking” (Gilson & Goldberg 2015, p. 128).

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview and synthesis of ideas regarding UIC development in the era of digitalisation, increasingly discussed in the research literature. While focusing primarily on the IC in business organisations, many of the ideas presented in the reviewed research papers, concerning the increasingly digitalised IC, though developed in business organisations, are relevant to universities' development as well.

The core idea of the research is the idea of UIC currently developing in an increasingly digitalised environment influencing the staff both positively and negatively (in the absence of strategies), both shaping and shaped by its transforming structure and changing relationships challenged by global shocks and transformations.

The scope of reasons stipulating the need for the research includes the recently shaken university sustainability, currently changing UIC, advantages and disadvantages of acute digitalisation, transforming university structures and changing relationships, as well as the Russian government's plans for digitally-prompted disruption of the national HE system and finally, for forced digitally-supported "distantisation" of the Russian HE system, i.e. transferring it to a distant format to a much larger extent.

As part and a result of this integration, a model of UIC is presented, which highlights the specificity of university internal environment distinguishing universities from other types of organisations, and argues that the digitalised internal environment should contribute to employees' inclusion in the UIC at all levels of the university. Finally, the article discusses the necessary developments in research on IC in general and UIC in particular among both researchers and practitioners.

Taking into account the above considerations, the paper provides a springboard for further research intending to fill the knowledge gaps identified in the course of the study.

2. The University in the Digital Era

The modern digital era, which has intensified communication interactions between people, including those between employees of companies, has been affecting the speed, frequency and efficiency of interaction, changing the channels, formats and contexts of personal communication and those of OC, primarily including IC.

Digitalisation has transformed the global economy, turning it in large part into digital through e-commerce, online shopping and the Internet of Things. Universities, to a greater extent than many other organisations (for example, schools), have undergone digitalisation, which laid the foundations for a new paradigm for the development of education, Education 4.0, and changed universities' development strategies.

2.1 Global Digitalisation Affecting Universities

In modern conditions of the highly digitalised external environment, digital communications are novel and efficient ways to expand IC. Over the past decade, commercial companies have been actively using social networks, in particular, to attract new customers and retain old ones. In addition, many commercial companies (for example, banks) develop and actively use mobile applications.

European universities are increasingly using social networks, but mostly for external communication – to attract new students, including foreign ones. Some universities develop and actively use mobile applications, but they often have very narrow functionality, for example, to control the timetable, which partly facilitates IC between students and teachers.

Also, universities, in addition to the long-established traditional email for IC purposes, often use instant messengers, with the help of which the heads of departments increase the effectiveness of IC, quickly spreading information in the groups of their subordinates using messengers and chats.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, video platforms have acquired greater relevance, with the help of which not only distance learning is provided, but also research-to-practice conferences, department meetings, etc.

2.2 Recent Developments in University Internal Communication

The lockdowns and temporary ‘distantisation’ of higher education imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic have seriously shaken most national systems of higher education. The recent changes in the level of university digitalisation, along with recent transformations in the formats of teaching / learning have affected the IC between and among all the UIC stakeholders, including teachers ↔ students’ communication, administration ↔ teachers, teachers ↔ supporting staff, teachers ↔ technical staff, administration ↔ students, students ↔ supporting staff, students ↔ technical staff, administration ↔ supporting staff, and administration ↔ technical staff, as well as inside each group of IC stakeholders – administration ↔ administration, teachers ↔ teachers, etc.

The need for a new approach has been driven by a number of factors, including sporadic attempts by shaken universities to rapidly digitalise their internal environments, largely replacing face-to-face communication with distance teaching and learning practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also due to the dramatically increased importance of students and university administration, as well as supporting and technical personnel and the declining importance of teachers in higher education systems in some countries, including Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, which is associated with the potential threats of ousting many teachers from universities, up to a strategy of displacement of the majority of teachers from national university systems, replacing them with recorded lectures and online classes with a large number of passive listeners.

3. Synthesizing Current Views on University Internal Communication

Much has been written about IC, its developments and changes in the digital age. However, previous research has largely lacked a systems perspective that would otherwise have provided wider horizons and different angles of systems vision. Most of the applied research has focused on the study of IC processes in specific companies, aimed at identifying the synchronous state of affairs and / or highlighting the problems or achievements of IC.

When it comes to IC in the university environment, oddly enough, research is really scarce and is following in the footsteps of previous IC research in the corporate environment.

3.1. Literature Review Outline

The study described in the article consists of two parts: the first presents the results of a systemic literature review based on a content analysis of research articles, monographs and monograph chapters, as well as Internet resources. The systemic review of the scientific literature aimed to structure the literature on IC research and especially UIC in order to highlight the main contributions and gaps of the selected studies, identifying employed theoretical and practical approaches and the researched theoretical constructs.

In the second part of the article, the author’s component model of UIC is presented, which aims to emphasize its specific features that distinguish UIC from IC of commercial companies, the study of which seems to have taken the maximum amount of research efforts.

The worth of publications has been assessed according to three main criteria: the employment of a systemic approach to research, the adequacy of the methodology applied, and the contribution of the research to theory and practice (including its novelty & significance). Both fundamental and recent publications were selected for analysis. The earliest trend-setting articles on OC in the university setting were written by Gratz & Salem (1981) and Thornhill,

Lewis, & Saunders (1996), with the latter focusing on the role of employee communication in achieving both commitment and quality in higher education.

As a result of the preliminary assessment, it was decided to select no more than 30–40 publications that contribute to the theory of IC; and, due to the lack of the research on UIC, it was decided to analyse as much research as possible developing the IC theory applicable to the university. As a result of the selection, 137 publications on IC as well as 18 UIC publications were analysed and evaluated. Finally, 40 publications on IC were selected, including 12 monographs and 5 chapters in monographs, 23 research articles, as well as 10 articles devoted to UIC.

Limitations of the literature review included personal bias based on the researcher's educational background and prior personal and professional experience.

3.2. Conceptual review results

The performed systemic literature review has yielded the following results. First, it highlighted 3 leading regions in which researchers have made the greatest contribution to the study of IC – the United States, Western Europe, and South-Eastern Asia (mostly China, India and South Korea, with South Korean articles exceeding those by other South-Eastern Asian authors for quality).

Secondly, the literature review has pinpointed 9 theoretical approaches applied in IC studies in general and UIC studies in particular, namely: a critical perspective (Jakubiec, 2019; Ruck (Ed.), 2019), a co-creational perspective (Botan, 2018), a systemic approach (Hoogervorst, 2004; Yue, Men & Ferguson, 2020), a symmetrical communication approach (Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men, 2014; Men & Stacks, 2014), a strategic approach (Barton, 2014; Conrad & Poole, 2012; Cowan, 2017; Dewhurst & FitzPatrick, 2019; Hartman & Lenk, 2001; Johnston & Taylor, 2018, Kim & Rhee, 2011, Quirke, 2008), a comparative approach (Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Dewhurst & FitzPatrick, 2019; FitzPatrick & Valskov, 2014; Lipiäinen, Karjaluoto & Nevalainen, 2014; Mazzei, 2014; Whitworth, 2006; Zaremba, 2010), a de facto communication approach (Keenan & Hazelton, 2006), a stakeholder approach (Neill, 2015; Welch & Jackson, 2007), and a strategic management approach (Men & Bowen, 2017).

Thirdly, the conducted content analysis based on the conceptual literature review has identified 17 constructs, including organisational culture (Hoogervorst, 2004; Yue, Men & Ferguson, 2020); IC leadership (Ruck (Ed.), 2019), IC value (Levenshus & Lemon, 2017), effective IC (Ruck & Welch, 2012); employee behaviour (Hoogervorst, 2004; Mazzei, 2010); employee engagement (Lemon & Macklin, 2021), IC strategic role (Neill & Jiang, 2017), organisational change (Whitworth, 2006); company leaderships (Men, 2014; Men & Stacks, 2014), employee engagement (Field, 2021; Verčič & Vokic, 2017; Vora & Kishore Patra, 2017), employee advocacy (Thelen & Men, 2020), knowledge & allegiance (Mazzei, 2010), communication capital (Malmelin, 2007), IC integral function (Lemon & Towery, 2020), IC influence (Lemon & Towery, 2021), trusting relationships (Jo & Shim, 2004), company effectiveness & employee job satisfaction (Hargie, 2016), and enhanced performance (Farrent, 2003).

The research on each of the IC constructs seems to have developed in parallel and independently to a large extent, but the review has highlighted major themes across research and practices that can be used as standpoints and platforms for further research and development of the IC domain, both in theory and practice.

The analysis of the selected UIC research, firstly, has revealed the main research trend in this IC subdomain – that is, following the IC research patterns in the corporate environment, for example, employee satisfaction (Bakanauskienė et al., 2010), symmetrical communication (Campbell, 2018), efficiency of communication (Iordache-Platis & Josan, 2009), employee

engagement (Koszembar-Wiklik & Krannich, 2016), and identified several investigational constructs that differentiate UIC research from the IC domain, including academic visibility (Avram, 2015), employee voice & silence and organisational power (Gan, 2020), enablers & inhibitors of communication process (Gizir & Simsek, 2005), email management (Pignata et al., 2015), communication satisfaction (Rodrigues et al., 2018), communication channels & support mechanisms (Uslu, 2018).

Finally, the conceptual review helped to pin down several knowledge gaps, including a lack of research in UIC, a lack of relevance to the university as a system, the dependence of research in UIC on corporate IC developments, and a lack of a systemic and comparative approach to the study of UIC.

4. A Component Model of University Internal Communication

Universities differ from commercial companies in a number of characteristics, including mission, functions, contribution to the local and regional community, as well as to the national economy as a whole. But their main difference is the creation of the human and intellectual capital of the nation, as well as the change in attitudes and priorities in society. These differences cannot but affect UIC, but within the framework of this article, for a start, it was decided to identify the specifics of the component composition of UIC, which largely determines the specifics of universities' functioning.

A component model is an abstract, generalized view of the structure of a system that provides an overview of its functionality. Component Models help developers imagine and understand the big picture of the system, and then design and implement the solution and understand the big picture of the system design (Walderson, 2009). The value of a component model lies in simplifying the perception of a complex system and in depicting the dynamic behaviour of its components, helping to understand how they interact to perform the required functions. Component models are believed to be useful in companies where systems live for decades (ibid.), which is considered to be the case of the average university in Europe.

The structure of the developed model contains architecturally significant core elements as inputs and deems to be stable and coherent, with a focus on the right levels of abstraction, depicting in parallel relationships and interactions between the elements thus presenting the researched phenomenon systemically and holistically. The proposed model is believed to be consistent with the real systems of most universities functioning in a majority of countries.

The purpose of the proposed component model is to present the IC of the university in the form of a system in the aggregate of all its constituent parts and relations between them, to help understand the complexity of the system and each of the solutions concerning both the system as a whole and each of its components, as well as to ensure that complex solutions are managed properly to successfully achieve the set goals and overcome possible obstacles.

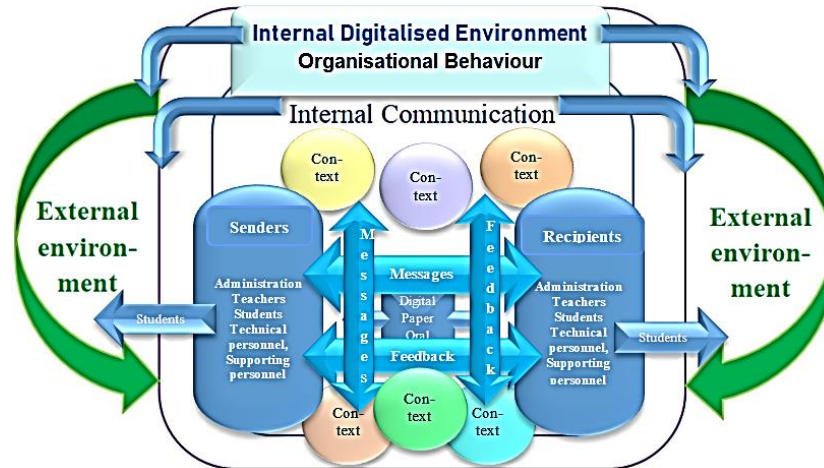


Figure 1. Component model of university internal communication

Source: the author's own elaboration.

UIC is viewed as part of university organisational behaviour within its internal environment, which is largely digitalised in the three universities taken as samples for the model – the University of Vaasa, Finland, Carinthia university of Applied Sciences, Austria and Lipetsk State Pedagogical University, Russia.

The scope of the components of UIC includes two basic groups of senders and receivers uniting administrators (top and linear managers), teachers, students, supporting personnel & technical staff. Traditionally, administrators occupy a superior position in relation to teachers, taking decisions about hiring and promoting teachers, and if in Western universities teachers are positioned inferior to top managers (but comparable in their importance for universities), then in Russian universities teachers are positioned inferior to both top and linear managers who do not always strive to facilitate teachers' life, but are guided by some "superior external goals."

According to a number of researchers, the management reforms both implemented at universities and on-going, that aimed to organise hierarchically decision-making processes, have questioned "the collegial and academic oriented decision-making that has traditionally shaped universities" increasing the power of executives and "ultimately enhancing a stronger leadership" (Bleiklie and Kogan, 2007). However, the latter statement by Bleiklie and Kogan (2007) does not sound justified, since stronger executives' power does not mean stronger leadership. In the opinion of Ljajić & Pirsl (2021), management reforms (including those sporadically launched during the COVID-19 pandemic) introduce a higher level of formalisation through reporting duties, accountability requirements, and the strengthening of administrative offices that oversee and implement central decisions, rather than supporting individual academic initiatives.

According to Maassen et al. (2017) formalization refers to "the degree to which communication and procedures are written and filed" (Maassen et al., 2017, p. 245), implying a continuum between legal requirements and spontaneous intentions and actions. This means that the higher the level of formalization, the lower is the likelihood of employees' spontaneous reactions and initiatives and consequently, the lower the level of voluntary participation of university subordinates in the processes of the university transformation.

Therefore, in quite a number of European universities, the messages and feedback are only ideally involved in truly bidirectional processes – top-down and bottom-up coming from administration including top managers, to teachers, students, supporting and technical staff and the other way round. In practice, they do not function well enough in both ways at every

university – at some universities and even in some countries including Russia, the process is unidirectional only – going top-down from top and linear managers to the other participants in UIC, with university teachers being the most vulnerable team members having the least rights and the least opportunity to be heard.

In the opinion of Louise Simpson, director of The Knowledge Partnership, a marketing and communications consultancy, “universities don’t tend to regularly monitor their internal communications” (Anyangwe, 2012). The communications between staff and students are important, but in different ways, so they need to be kept separate. According to research from world-class universities, staff participation appears to be highly valued by most world-class universities, but performance is patchy in some unexpected areas, and indicators of best practice that can improve performance (e.g. regularly assessing communications and having a strategy for it) are estimated as being of low importance (ibid.). However, depending on the internal culture of the university and the strategy of top managers, reflecting their attitude to human capital in a particular university and its further development, teachers may be positioned inferior even to students and supporting / technical staff.

The subgroup of students constitutes a specific component and stakeholder of both groups (Senders and Receivers) in the IC of any university. Students, on the one hand, are full participants in the UIC throughout the entire period of their study (3.5–4 years of Bachelor’s programmes and/or 2–2.5 years of Master’s programmes) but, on the other hand, their temporary status in many cases determines their temporary and even partial commitment to the university and its IC – again, depending of the strategy and communication culture of a particular university.

Thus, students willingly discuss the university affairs in external (mainly digital) media exchanging messages and feedback and creating new external contexts. So, students, as well as teachers, administrators, supporting and technical staff are both senders and receivers of messages and feedback, creators and contributors of contexts and users of various media – digital, paper, oral. But, unlike participants in IC in corporate environments, students are distinguished by their temporary status and tend to behave as members of the external environment to a lesser or greater extent, in many cases not so much committed to the interests of the university as an organisation, and sometimes contradicting the interests of the other participants in UIC – teachers, administrators, and other staff.

Moreover, in the era of growing consumerism, students in many universities around the world are considered and, therefore, consider themselves to be universities’ ‘main customers’ and ‘trendsetters of taste and custom’ (Pasternak, 1941). Coupled with the increasingly devalued importance of teachers, UIC may be getting increasingly distorted, and universities become increasingly vulnerable to both external shocks and challenges and their own internal instability, as temporary customers, however highly valued, should not determine present and future strategies for the development of universities, which otherwise become highly unsustainable from the inside.

6. Conclusions and Discussion

Based on a comprehensive conceptual review, the paper has identified the main trends in IC research in general and UIC research in particular, aimed at a better understanding of the highlighted constructs, as well as pinpointing gaps in previous research that need to be addressed in order to correctly understand the complexity and significance of the university in modern society and to change the strategies and tactics of the management of many universities, especially in Russia, where the human, intellectual and communication capital of universities is deliberately devalued as a result of shifting goals and / or strategic mistakes.

The original contribution of the author is the proposed component model of UIC based on a systemic approach, encompassing the variety of its participants and highlighting their specific character, along with the complexity of their relationships and interactions.

Since component models reflect the structure of researched systems, their value may decay rapidly enough – with every new component introduced and/or relationships / interaction changed in some aspects. At some point, component models stops accurately reflecting the current functional design of the systems they represent. However, to date the proposed model appears coherent and useful for a systemic representation of UIC and further research of its stakeholders' relationships and interactions.

This research also attempted to highlight the importance of studying IC in the contemporary increasingly digital university environment as UIC is core to universities' visibility on the national and international markets and its quality is key for universities' success and competitiveness. Besides, the paper offered new insights on university sustainability highlighting the core role of UIC for university sustainable development and aspired to start a conversation on the issues of university sustainability in general and the role of IC in its maintenance and development.

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