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# Lost in Communication in Higher Education

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## Abstract

The bureaucratic and academic nature of higher education institutions (HEIs), coupled with their complex organisational structures, extensive vertical hierarchies and large numbers of staff in need of communication, are believed to often hamper their internal communication processes. This is, to a great extent, also the case in the South African higher education arena. This article reports on a study that aimed to undertake research that would direct the development of a framework for improving internal communication at South African multi-campus universities. The framework would not only boast of features which are regarded as good practice by companies in the corporate sector, but also features based on the recommendations and suggestions of communication executives from seven multi-campus universities in South Africa. A mixed methods research design was employed. The research indicates that communication should be established as a core business value, and be advocated on all levels. The findings also suggest that management should be evaluated on their communication skills; regular monitoring of the effectiveness of communication at main and distance campuses should take place; whilst communication channels for feedback should be established. The internal communication framework outlined in the article may aid multi-campus universities to attain higher levels of excellence, which will subsequently result in greater business impact and more funding opportunities.

**Keywords:** internal communication framework; multi-campus universities; South Africa; higher education; massification

## Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are often referred to as “professional bureaucracies” (Lewington 2017, 1), “leave us alone” (McKenna 2018, 1) and “ivory-tower” (Venter 2006, 18) institutions. These institutions do not enjoy a reputation for good management of resources and “commerce generally sees them as extravagant and unbusinesslike” (Tomaselli in Tsiu 2003, 10) due to their academic nature. Universities are also characterised by extensive vertical hierarchies and have numerous policies and procedures that need to be adhered to in the execution of operations (Greenberg 2014). The fact that HEIs are academic, bureaucratic and complex in nature has an impact on their internal and external communication practices. As such, a qualitative case study by Gizir and Simsek (2005) has confirmed that alliances; lack of motivation; high individualism; inadequate exchange of scientific knowledge; competition; and criticism are seen as factors negatively influencing communication at an HEI. According to Miller (in Holtzhausen 2002), communication in bureaucracies is characterised by vertical communication; autocratic communication styles; and formal communication channels; while Rabah (2015) adds that communication is characterised by a lack of positive and timely feedback from top management; and departmental isolation, with no connection to the whole.

Post-1994, South Africa’s higher education landscape was restructured radically in order to become stronger, more focused and more efficient (Ramrathan 2016), as well as to make it more accessible to students; promote equity; and redress staff and student inequalities (Lategan 2005; Leslie 2003). The number of HEIs was reduced through mergers and campus incorporations, and in some cases, by combining formerly “white” and “black” institutions, universities and technikons. All former teacher training colleges were incorporated into existing universities (IEASA 2007).

The mergers had a direct impact on the internal communication functioning of HEIs, as they had to change their organisational structure and culture. Many of these institutions are diverse in terms of post levels, organisational hierarchy, qualifications, language and culture. They also vary in nature and, since the mergers, have different identities, for example, “technikons” changed to “universities of technology”. The new higher education dispensation coupled with growing student numbers challenges South African HEIs to revisit their internal communication practices in order to communicate effectively with a more diverse and fragmented internal community. Furthermore, growing competition, massification, globalisation and diversification have made the role of communication in HEIs imperative.

Unfortunately, internal communication is an underdeveloped function at most universities (Anyangwe 2012) – mainly because of their complex and bureaucratic nature (Hollingsworth 2017; Tahir 2010; Tomaselli 2018). There also seems to be a “sceptical academic mindset” regarding the issues and methods of communication in higher education (CASE n.d., 7). Universities tend not to regularly monitor the effectiveness of their internal communication (Anyangwe 2012). Studies and research

to improve internal communication at multi-campus universities are very limited, and a need exists among multi-campus universities to find means of communicating more effectively with their diverse internal audiences.

The aim of the current study was to undertake research that would direct the development of an internal communication framework for multi-campus universities in South Africa. This would answer the research questions: “What are the issues regarding internal communication at multi-campus universities in South Africa?” and “What should the features of an effective internal communication framework for multi-campus universities be?” Such a study could contribute to the knowledge base underpinning internal communication at South African HEIs and subsequently inform the internal communication function at these institutions to be more focused and efficient. Effective internal communication cannot only improve the image of an institution, but can also lead to an improvement in its operations, according to the first white paper on the issues of communications in higher education and research (CASE n.d.).

The significance of the study concerned the development of a framework which is aimed at improving the effectiveness of internal communication at South African multi-campus universities. The framework is based on various practices following national and international communication tendencies and corporate communication models that have been successfully employed by the South African corporate business sector as well as directives from the empirical investigation.

The article commences with an overview of the literature review with the focus on various internal communication models. The research methodology section explains the nature of the research paradigm and design employed in the study. The findings are then presented and discussed in terms of the five main concerns or issues identified in contemporary literature reviews, as well as the empirical investigation to which participants from seven South African multi-campus universities contributed. In the conclusion, the implications of the research for HEIs are argued and possible foci for further research identified.

## Literature Review

Since the post-1994 restructuring of South Africa’s higher education landscape, the country has 26 public universities in total, following the launch of three new HEIs since 2014 (BusinessTech 2015). This includes nine universities of technology focused on vocationally oriented education; six comprehensive universities offering a combination of academic and vocational diplomas and degrees; and 11 traditional universities offering theoretically oriented university degrees. According to Mentz and Mentz (2006), the restructuring of the higher education landscape has challenged these institutions in the sense that indirect discrimination in the structures, infrastructure, admission criteria, resource allocations and physical environments had to be removed. For example, some disadvantaged institutions were merged with more affluent institutions, such as the former University of the North-West and the former

Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, to form the new North-West University. Many of these institutions transformed into multi-campus universities with campuses situated geographically apart, which subsequently challenged the internal communication function.

In realising the aim of the study, an extensive literature review of internal communication models was undertaken. Models employed by the corporate sector and other HEIs were also examined and evaluated in terms of their essential features or indicators of good practice. Six internal communication models were studied, namely: the Conglomerate Communication Model (Power and Rienstra 1999); the Model of Internal Communication (Asif and Sergeant 2000); the Top Management Communication Outcomes Model (Pincus, Rayfield and Cozzens 1991); the Twente Organisational Communication Model (TOCOM) (Van Gemert and Woudstra 1999); the Integrated Communication Management Model (Claassen and Verwey 1998); and the Strategic Employee Communication Model (Barrett 2002). Although some of these models were developed quite a number of years ago, they boast features or indicators of good practice that are still considered relevant to the higher education sector (multi-campus universities in particular):

- Communication is depicted as a two way-process, both horizontally and vertically (Claassen and Verwey 1998; Pincus, Rayfield and Cozzens 1991; Power and Rienstra 1999).
- Formal and informal communication tools are used (Asif and Sergeant 2000).
- The importance of feedback is emphasised (Asif and Sergeant 2000).
- An integrated and open-system approach is followed in respect of internal communication (Barrett 2002; Claassen and Verwey 1998; Van Gemert and Woudstra 1999).
- Communication is depicted as a strategic management tool (Barrett 2002; Van Gemert and Woudstra 1999).
- The communication manager fulfils an important strategic role pertaining to communication (Claassen and Verwey 1998).
- Provision is made for interpersonal communication (Barrett 2002).
- Targeted messages are used: Messages are simplistic, relevant, meaningful and consistent in nature (Barrett 2002).
- Effective media include communication via e-mail, new media, and face-to-face communication (Barrett 2002).
- Various mediums or communication channels should be utilised to inform employees (Barrett 2002).
- Regular measurement of the effectiveness of an organisation's communication processes is required (Barrett 2002; Power and Rienstra 1999).

## Best Practices from Communication Models Employed by the Corporate Sector

Three communication models were studied, namely: the Internal Communication Model of Absa Retail Bank that realises the important role of internal communication, and where communication is treated as a core business value (Zibi, pers. comm.); the 5M-Communication Model, which was successfully implemented and maintained in a Northern Free State Gold Mine in the late 1990s (Coetzee in Ferreira 2003); and INVOCOM, a communication methodology that was implemented at Country Bird, a significant player in the food production industry in South Africa (Ferreira 2003). It was developed by Operational Improvement Management (OIM 2017) International, which has been widely acknowledged as a leader in the development of employee involvement and communication methods. Features of best practice include the following:

- appointing a communication manager (Zibi, pers. comm.);
- using an array of communication channels (Zibi, pers. comm.);
- decentralising communication across the organisation (Zibi, pers. comm.);
- treating communication as a core business value (Zibi, pers. comm.);
- depicting communication as a two-way process (Landes in Ferreira 2003);
- processing elements (message, motive, market, media and monitoring) (Coetzee in Ferreira 2003);
- stressing the importance of feedback (Barret in Ferreira 2003);
- emphasising the importance of staff involvement (OIM 2017);
- regular monitoring and evaluation of internal communication (Barret in Ferreira 2003).

Since the aim of the research was to develop an internal communication framework for multi-campus universities in South Africa, the author deemed it necessary to also study the Higher Education: Leading Internal Communications (HEliX) framework, that is, the evaluation and benchmarking system for good practice in internal communication for the higher education sector. HEliX (The Knowledge Partnership 2017) is a collaborative project led by the University of Leicester together with the universities of Bristol, Oxford Brookes and Edge Hill. The project is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, while The Knowledge Partnership is the specialist higher education consultancy supporting the project and conducting the field work (University of Leicester 2009). A set of indicators or statements of good practice include the following:

- Communication is depicted as a two-way process (vertical and horizontal communication is advocated) (The Knowledge Partnership 2017).
- The use of various media to communicate with staff is encouraged (University of Leicester 2009).
- The strategic importance of internal communication is articulated (University of Leicester 2009).
- Feedback from staff is encouraged (University of Leicester 2009).

- Leadership, management practice and staff engagement are seen as critical contributors to effective internal communication (The Knowledge Partnership 2017).
- A range of tools for evaluating, monitoring and benchmarking the effectiveness of internal communication is used (The Knowledge Partnership 2017).

## Methodology

### **Research Design and Method**

The author chose to follow a post-positivist rather than an interpretive perspective, where researchers “focus on establishing and searching for evidence that is valid and reliable in terms of the existence of phenomena rather than generalisations” (Nieuwenhuis 2007, 65). Thus, the empirical investigation in the study should be regarded as an evaluation study where the intention is to improve a current practice (i.e. internal communication at multi-campus universities). McMillan and Schumacher (2001) purport that evaluation research is aimed at evaluating the merit or worth of a particular practice (in this case internal communication at multi-campus universities in South Africa) and whether the practice works, in other words, whether it does what it is intended to do.

As evaluation research can be qualitative and/or quantitative in nature, a mixed methods design comprising qualitative as well as quantitative methodology was deemed most suitable for the empirical investigation. The research was conducted in two phases, namely, an interview-type survey regarding internal communication at seven multi-campus universities in South Africa (Phase 1); and an inter-institutional evaluation and subsequent refinement of the proposed framework that was developed to improve the effectiveness of internal communication at South African multi-campus universities (Phase 2).

### **Phase 1: Interview-Type Survey**

Phase 1 of the empirical investigation entailed an interview-type survey regarding internal communication at seven multi-campus universities in South Africa, namely, the University of the Free State (UFS); Vaal University of Technology (VUT); University of Johannesburg (UJ); North-West University (NWU); Tshwane University of Technology (TUT); Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT); and Durban University of Technology (DUT). This phase included two sub-phases: (1) telephonic interviews with communication executives regarding the nature and practices surrounding internal communication at their institutions; and (2) a qualitative e-mail survey comprising a list of open-ended questions to gain important perspectives on the communication executives’ concerns, issues and perceptions regarding the effectiveness of internal communication at the campuses concerned. Within the pragmatic and functionalist approach adopted in the study, the information gathered by means of

telephonic interviews and e-mail surveys was regarded as sufficient for the purposes of the empirical investigation.

## **Phase 2: Inter-Institutional Evaluation and Subsequent Refinement of the Proposed Framework**

Phase 2 of the empirical investigation comprised an inter-institutional evaluation and subsequent refinement of the proposed framework to improve the effectiveness of internal communication at multi-campus universities in South Africa. The inter-institutional evaluation was in the form of a survey that was administered at the same seven multi-campus universities mentioned in Phase 1, namely, UFS, VUT, UJ, NWU, TUT, CPUT and DUT.

The inter-institutional evaluation of the proposed framework incorporated an embedded mixed methods design (i.e. a quantitative survey which included open-ended questions). Whereas the quantitative component of the survey focused on specific questions regarding the proposed framework, the qualitative component, focusing on the participants' perception of the framework, allowed the participants to evaluate the framework by means of a complete, detailed description.

Communication executives from the seven multi-campus universities were asked to evaluate the proposed framework by making use of three documents, namely:

1. a one-page document summarising the key features of the framework;
2. a PowerPoint presentation illustrating the five main communication issues and various suggestions on how to address these issues;
3. a seven-page electronic questionnaire requiring the participants to evaluate certain aspects of the proposed framework.

The five main issues identified were:

1. the bureaucratic nature of HEIs;
2. the academic nature of HEIs;
3. the organisational structure of HEIs;
4. the communication process;
5. communication from management.

The seven-page electronic questionnaire was a self-constructed questionnaire consisting of five short sections pertaining to the five issues mentioned above regarding internal communication at multi-campus universities in South Africa. Each statement/suggestion referred to a possible feature of the proposed framework. Each suggested feature had to be rated in accordance with its suitability for inclusion in the intended internal communication framework (Essential feature = 1; Useful feature = 2; Not necessary = 3). Besides the structured questions, each section also included an open-ended question to add some qualitative enhancement to the study. The open-ended questions would indicate the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed framework and



provide the author with suggestions as to how the framework could be adjusted or improved.

### **Population and Sampling**

Purposive sampling of the communication executives was employed as a strategy to select small groups of individuals likely to be knowledgeable and informative about internal communication practices in higher education. The participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- They had to be full-time employees of multi-campus universities in South Africa.
- They had to be employed in the Communication Department – dealing with internal communication practices.

In Phase 1, eight participants from the seven multi-campus universities were interviewed telephonically in order to obtain more information about their internal communication practices (Sub-phase 1). The sample included two participants from NWU and one each from the other six institutions. The reason why two participants from NWU took part in the research can be ascribed to the fact that both staff members were both responsible for internal communication at the institution. In order to gain more insight into staff members' perceptions of internal communication at their respective institutions, the same eight participants were asked to respond to a qualitative e-mail survey comprising a list of open-ended questions (Sub-phase 2). The participants were chosen according to the criteria of their expertise. Although these individuals did not interact with one another, they were likely to be informative about the research foci and phenomenon being studied – in this particular instance, internal communication at South African multi-campus universities.

Phase 2 of the research entailed an inter-institutional evaluation by means of an electronic questionnaire distributed via e-mail to 16 purposefully selected communication executives from the seven identified multi-campus universities. The sample included three respondents from UFS, two from VUT, one from TUT, two from UJ, one from DUT, five from NWU, and two from CPUT. The number of respondents from each institution depended on how many staff members were directly involved with internal communications at their respective universities. One of the e-mails sent to a respondent from NWU was returned, whilst the author also learned that one of the respondents from CPUT had meanwhile resigned. Thus, from a total of 14 questionnaires that were sent out, nine completed questionnaires were returned.

### **Data Analysis**

The qualitative data was analysed by means of thematic analysis. The respondents' answers to the open-ended questions were reviewed and grouped into themes.

## Ethical Considerations, Validity and Reliability

Ethical considerations were considered throughout all the planning and data-collection phases of the study. As such, the author informed all participants about the purpose of the research and the methods used. The participants were given a choice whether to participate or not. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed by ensuring that the data could not be linked to individual subjects by name. Therefore, the data was collected anonymously.

The sample was appropriate in that it consisted of participants who best represented or had knowledge of the research topic. The different data collection techniques and multiple data sources employed in the mixed methods design broadened the author's understanding of the phenomenon of interest – in this particular instance, internal communications at multi-campus universities – and added to the extent of objectivity, reliability and validity achieved in the study as a whole.

## Findings and Discussion

### The Bureaucratic Nature of HEIs

**Concerns:** During the inter-institutional survey, many of the respondents indicated that they did not have a formal communication model, policy or plan in place. This can be ascribed to the bureaucratic nature of HEIs (Hollingsworth 2017; Tahir 2010; Tomaselli 2018). In these institutions the content of communication is task-related, whilst social communication and innovation are discouraged (Miller in Holtzhausen 2002). Another concern tabled during the empirical investigation was that communication is not regarded as a core business value. One of the communication executives responded: “It is perceived as a nice to have, rather than as an essential part of an institution’s building blocks.” This notion mirrors that of Anyangwe (2012) that internal communication is an underdeveloped function at most universities.

**Table 1:** Rating of suggestions on the bureaucratic nature of HEIs (N = 9)

	<b>Suggested features</b>	<b>Essential 1</b>	<b>Useful 2</b>	<b>Not necessary 3</b>
1	A policy needs to be drafted, incorporating the principles of this framework.	8	1	0
2	Personal matters, such as congratulatory messages, messages of support, and so on should also be communicated.	6	3	0
3	Social communication and innovation should be encouraged.	6	3	0
4	Communication should be established as a core business value.	7	2	0
5	Internal communication should be advocated at all levels.	9	0	0

6	An open-system approach to communication should be followed.	8	1	0
7	A communication manager should be appointed at managerial level.	8	1	0

**Features/Indicators of good practice:** All the suggestions in this category were rated essential or useful by the majority of the respondents. Besides the fact that an internal communication policy needs to be drafted, social and personal communication should be encouraged. However, some caution is needed when communicating messages of this nature. “Clear guidelines must be set or this will get out of control very easily,” stated one of the respondents. Communication should be established as a core business value (feature related to ABSA’s Internal Communication Model). Comments such as “very important” and “only way to enforce buy-in” were received from the respondents to the inter-institutional survey. Table 1 provides evidence of full agreement among all nine respondents on advocating internal communication at all levels. One of the respondents remarked: “Communication on all levels is core business.” Views from the literature review indicated that an open-system, integrated approach to communication should be followed to address the issue of communication not being integrated (Barrett 2002; Claassen and Verwey 1998; Van Gemert and Woudstra 1999). This is an important feature, since communication not only enables coordination and cooperation within and among organisational components, but also enables response to the environment. Furthermore, a communication manager should be appointed at managerial level. This feature corresponds with the Integrated Communication Management Model (Claassen and Verwey 1998) and ABSA’s Internal Communication Model (Zibi, pers. comm.). One of the respondents remarked that “the communication manager should preferably report directly to the Vice-Chancellor’s office for optimal effectiveness”.

### The Academic Nature of HEIs

**Concerns:** During the inter-institutional survey, most of the respondents indicated that limited shared ownership existed with regard to internal communication at their institutions. At several HEIs, internal communication is not regarded as a strategic management tool, but rather as a “nice to have”. Many of the respondents indicated that their universities lacked adequate human and financial resources to effectively facilitate internal communication, since the primary focus of HEIs is on matters of an academic nature. These institutions are discipline-orientated and are known for their academic nature (Gizir and Simsek 2005), as was confirmed in the literature review.

**Table 2:** Rating of suggestions on the academic nature of HEIs (N = 9)

	<b>Suggested features</b>	<b>Essential 1</b>	<b>Useful 2</b>	<b>Not necessary 3</b>
1	Interpersonal communication training should be offered for all staff.	7	2	0
2	Measurements should be put in place to increase ownership of internal communication.	2	7	0
3	Communication effectiveness should be evaluated as part of each employee's individual performance appraisal, with the appropriate recognition for exemplary performance.	2	7	0
4	Employee communication should be strategically positioned to facilitate change.	7	2	0
5	Provision of adequate human and financial resources to fully optimise the internal communication function is required.	8	1	0

**Features/Indicators of good practice:** In keeping with Barrett's (2002) strong focus on interpersonal communication in the Strategic Employee Communication Model, interpersonal communication training should be offered to all staff, with a specific focus on hands-on and practical training. It may be useful to put steps in place to increase ownership of internal communication. Interpersonal communication should be incorporated into every staff member's key performance areas (KPA's). Communication effectiveness should then be evaluated as part of each employee's individual performance appraisal, with the appropriate recognition for exemplary performance. TOCOM, the Strategic Employee Communication Model and HELiX boast features relating to the strategic importance/positioning of internal communication, which can be applied to address the concern that "communication is not regarded a strategic management tool". In TOCOM, communication is depicted as a management tool – implying that communication can be directed and controlled (Van Gemert and Woudstra 1999); in the Strategic Employee Communication Model, employee communication is strategically positioned to facilitate change (Barrett 2002); while HELiX also stresses the strategic importance of internal communication (University of Leicester 2009). Internal communication is indeed an instrument of strategy since it can aid an organisation in sharing its vision, mission and core business values with employees, whilst also creating a sense of community. Adequate human and financial resources should be provided to fully optimise the internal communication function. Staff members should be trained to use new technologies for communicating with one another. Similar to HELiX that accentuates the use of various media, the proposed framework advocates the use of multimedia when communicating with staff. Communication with other campuses should in particular be encouraged by making use

of new media and digital technologies, such as teleconferencing, videoconferencing, Skype, webcams, and so forth.

### The Organisational Structure of HEIs

**Concerns:** With regard to organisational structure, HEIs are not only large organisations, but consist of complex and diverse systems and multiple operations where the organisational structure and extensive vertical hierarchy comprise many staff members (academic and support services staff) who have to communicate with one another on a regular basis. Multi-campus communication is a concern, as many of the respondents to the inter-institutional survey indicated that the communication function is not aligned between all the campuses and the institutional office. Some of the respondents felt that there was no coordination in the integration of the campuses. One of the respondents remarked that staff at campuses situated away from the Vice-Chancellor's office could continuously be marginalised: "The solution up till now has been to either shuttle staff between campuses, or to have meetings on different campuses. The next step is to broadcast the speeches via video-conferencing." Another respondent remarked that the scattered campuses posed a threat to effective and timely communication. She added that the effectiveness of the institution's communication needed to be measured (audited) formally and frequently, campus-wide, against clearly defined goals.

**Table 3:** Rating of suggestions on the organisational structure of HEIs (N = 9)

	<b>Suggested features</b>	<b>Essential 1</b>	<b>Useful 2</b>	<b>Not necessary 3</b>
1	Decentralisation should be applied (authority should be dispersed downward in the hierarchy).	7	2	0
2	A communication coordinator should be appointed on each campus.	6	2	1
3	Special attempts should be made to make staff on distance campuses feel part of the main campus's functioning.	8	1	0
4	Special channels for feedback from distance campuses should be created.	8	1	0
5	Regular monitoring of effectiveness and satisfaction of communication at main and other campuses.	7	2	0
6	The communication function should be aligned on all the campuses and the institutional office.	8	1	0
7	Creative use of technology should be encouraged.	8	1	0

**Features/Indicators of good practice:** Decentralisation, which is characterised by a narrow span of control, may effectively address this issue related to the multi-dimensional flow of information through an extensive vertical hierarchy. When decentralised networks are applied, authority is dispersed downward in the hierarchy (Zibi, pers. comm.). Although the majority of the respondents to the inter-institutional survey indicated the suggestions as either being essential or useful, it is interesting to note that they had particularly strong feelings about multi-campus communication, which was raised as the second concern. The specific respondent who indicated that it was not necessary to appoint a communication coordinator on each campus commented: “No – staff should communicate with the Corporate Communication Manager and his staff only; otherwise they talk at cross purposes.” Although an important notion, the author deems the appointment of a communication coordinator on each campus necessary, as it is just not possible for one person alone to execute communication functions on the main campus and the distance campus simultaneously. Special efforts should be made to make staff at these campuses feel part of the university community; to encourage feedback from them; and to create communication channels that will best convey messages to them. The Model of Internal Communication, the 5M-Communication Model, and HEliX boast features related to the importance of feedback, while the Internal Communication Model incorporates various channels to convey messages. In the literature review, the regular monitoring and evaluation of internal communication was emphasised (Barret in Ferreira 2003; The Knowledge Partnership 2017). With regard to monitoring the effectiveness and satisfaction of communication at main and other campuses, comments, such as “monitor and implement corrective measures continually. Often monitoring stops just there and is not used to adjust what we do”, should be noted. Eight of the nine respondents to the inter-institutional survey indicated that it is essential to align the communication function on all the campuses and the institutional office. Furthermore, multi-campus universities should explore the creative use of technology. This is an important feature since HEIs, which are on the cutting edge of technology, are often reluctant to adopt new practices. In South Africa in particular, HEIs have not fully come to terms with the myriad benefits which the digital revolution, and especially social media, has to offer. Examples of advanced technologies include teleconferencing, videoconferencing, Skype, webcams and WhatsApp.

### **The Communication Process**

**Concerns:** A concern raised by the respondents to the inter-institutional survey was that internal communication is viewed by some as one dimensional, for example, internal newsletters only. The respondents indicated that employees were not always the first to be informed of important organisational information before it becomes general news. From the results of the inter-institutional survey, it became evident that downward communication seemed to be more prevalent than upward and horizontal communication. Thereby, feedback is not always encouraged. The respondents indicated a need for more e-mail communication, new media (computers and smartphones) and interpersonal (face-to-face) communication.

**Table 4:** Rating of suggestions on the communication process (N = 9)

	<b>Suggested features</b>	<b>Essential 1</b>	<b>Useful 2</b>	<b>Not necessary 3</b>
1	More than one medium should be explored to communicate important information.	8	1	0
2	Implement SMSs to communicate relevant information to part-time staff and service workers.	5	4	0
3	More than one language should be used.	3	4	2
4	Information from top management, for example the Vice-Chancellor, should be communicated as soon as possible.	9	0	0
5	Communication channels for feedback from all staff, especially support services staff and service workers, should be established.	9	0	0
6	Messages should be considered in terms of what employees <b>need</b> to know (job-related information), <b>want</b> to know (motivational information), and <b>have</b> to know (organisational information).	8	1	0
7	E-mail communication should be extended, especially to part-time staff and service workers.	4	5	0
8	More technological communication and new media should be introduced.	6	3	0
9	More opportunities for face-to-face communication should be explored.	6	3	0
10	Regular evaluation (campus-wide) of effectiveness of the communication process.	8	1	0

**Features/Indicators of good practice:** Table 4 makes it abundantly clear that all nine respondents to the inter-institutional questionnaire regarded most of the suggested features as essential. However, there were some differences of opinion with regard to aspects, such as: the language of communication (feature 3); technological communication (features 2 and 8); and e-mail communication (feature 7). In addressing the first concern, more than one medium should be explored to communicate important information (including face-to-face communication) – features that are accentuated in both the Strategic Employee Communication Model and HEliX. Universities could really tap into the variety and speed social media has to offer – examples include Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Instagram and YouTube. A Vice-Chancellor’s communiqué may address the second concern where important information is communicated without delay. This communiqué could either be in printed form or a video extract. Also, by implementing formal and informal communication tools (Asif and Sargeant 2000) directed at informing employees of important organisational news, the issue may be resolved. SMSs in various languages may be a valuable tool to reach part-time staff and service workers. However, one of the respondents remarked that

information overload and the irritation factor needed to be considered. Communication channels for feedback should be established, especially for feedback from part-time staff and service workers. In the literature review, the Model of Internal Communication, the 5M-Communication Model and HEliX stressed the importance of feedback in a communication situation. One of the respondents remarked that staff were encouraged to be part of the development of internal media by contributing ideas, stories and pictures to be published in their internal newsletter and other internal media. In this regard Social Networking Sites and Web 2.0 applications offer a variety of platforms which can assist universities in creating opportunities for feedback. By encouraging feedback, upward communication is addressed. In addressing the concern “information is incorrect, not comprehensive and not always understandable”, key features of the Strategic Employee Communication Model (Barrett 2002) apply. Messages are simplistic, relevant, meaningful and consistent. The five process elements of the 5M-Communication Model (Coetzee in Ferreira 2003) also apply, namely: message, motive, market, media and monitoring. Furthermore, the author suggests a filtering technique to channel messages to employees. A distinction should be made between what employees **need** to know (job-related information), **want** to know (motivational information) and **have** to know (organisational information). Features 7 to 9 are related to those in the Strategic Management Communication Model. Participants from both surveys indicated that the relevance and content of e-mails should be considered so as to prevent information overload. Lastly, the communication process should be measured or evaluated constantly. This feature is related to the Conglomerate Communication Model and the Strategic Employee Communication Model.

### **Communication from Management**

**Concerns:** During the inter-institutional survey, the respondents indicated that communication from management was not satisfactory. One of the respondents remarked that “management do not value communication, in fact, administrative staff appears to be a poor cousin of the academic sector”. Other concerns included staff members not being encouraged to become involved in decision-making; poor communication with lower-level staff; and a lack of two-way communication between management and the rest of the staff.



**Table 5:** Rating of suggestions on the communication from management (N = 9)

	<b>Suggested features</b>	<b>Essential 1</b>	<b>Useful 2</b>	<b>Not necessary 3</b>
1	Internal communication should be incorporated in management's KPAs, and be given reasonable weight in total performance evaluation.	9	0	0
2	Seek all staff involvement and problem-solving via the communication media efforts.	3	5	1
3	Reward and recognition system which recognises management's communication performance – based on staff evaluations.	5	4	0
4	Management (Vice-Chancellor and other top management) should be encouraged to visibly communicate with staff via all communication media.	9	0	0
5	Timelines should be attached to communication between different managerial levels.	7	2	0
6	Opportunities for two-way symmetrical communication should be encouraged, stressing the importance of feedback.	8	1	0

**Features/Indicators of good practice:** One of the methods to address the concerns related to communication from management is to implement a quality assurance system where internal communication is incorporated in management's KPAs, and given reasonable weight in total performance evaluation. In studying Table 5, it becomes clear that all the respondents to the inter-institutional survey deemed this feature essential. One of the respondents remarked: "Fantastic suggestion. Then everybody will at least know what is going on." Management communication is extremely important as can be seen from the results. Meintjies and Steyn (2006, 154) remark rightfully that "higher education institutions should realise that the secret to increasing productivity and organisational effectiveness through communication lies in the hands of the managers". In addressing the concern related to staff members not being encouraged to become involved in decision-making, key features of INVOCOM and HELiX apply. Both models place a high premium on staff involvement in problem-solving and decision-making. The more employees participate in organisational decision-making, the more likely they are to develop an understanding and appreciation of the problems of the organisation and the role of management.

A reward and recognition system which recognises management's communication performance based on staff evaluations, may address the concern "MANCOM did not make an effort to communicate with lower-level staff members." Top management must be encouraged to communicate visibly with staff via various communication media. It is worth mentioning that seven of the nine respondents indicated that it was essential to attach timelines to communication between different managerial levels. One of the

respondents commented: “This would ensure that time is not wasted in meetings; all too often there is no action after meetings.” By providing appropriate and reasonable timeframes for communicating information from the top to the lowest levels of the organisational hierarchy establishes a quality assurance system that will, to some extent, ensure the timeous communication of information. Two-way symmetrical communication could enhance management-employee relationships and effectively address the concern pointing to a lack of two-way communication between management and the rest of staff. The Top Management Communication Outcomes Model (Pincus, Rayfield and Cozzens 1991); Integrated Communication Management Model (Claassen and Verwey 1998); Conglomerate Communication Model (Power and Rienstra 1999); 5M-Communication Model (Landes in Ferreira 2003); and HEliX (The Knowledge Partnership 2017) stress the importance of two-way communication where vertical and horizontal communication are advocated. Asif and Sargeant (2000) mention that, historically, internal communication tended to be unidirectional and seen as a process where information was disseminated from top-level organisational members to bottom-level employees. In recent times, however, organisations have learned that managers can tap into the expertise of their staff by allowing communication from the bottom upwards by utilising communication tools such as questionnaires and suggestion boxes, thereby encouraging the all-important aspect of feedback.

## Conclusion

The article was concerned with answering the research questions: “What are the issues regarding internal communication at multi-campus universities in South Africa?” and “What should the features of an effective internal communication framework for multi-campus universities be?” The proposed framework was presented by bringing together the challenges, concerns and issues identified in the empirical investigation and the perspectives gained in the literature review. The evaluation of the proposed framework, together with suggestions for improvement thereof, provided valuable insights into the final refinement of the framework aimed at improving the effectiveness of internal communication at multi-campus universities in South Africa. By studying the respondents’ answers, it became evident that most of the features of the proposed framework were regarded as either essential or useful. The following are some of the key aspects of the framework:

- Clear guidelines must be set when messages of a social or personal nature are communicated.
- It is not essential, but nevertheless useful, to put measurements in place to increase ownership of internal communication.
- It is not essential, but nevertheless useful, to evaluate communication effectiveness as part of each employee’s individual performance appraisal.
- Management need to be evaluated on their communication effectiveness.

- The effectiveness and satisfaction of communication at the main and other campuses should be monitored regularly and enhanced by implementing corrective measures.
- When communicating via SMS to part-time staff and service workers, aspects such as information overload and the irritation factor, need to be taken into consideration.
- It may be useful to use more than one language.
- E-mail communication should be extended, especially to part-time staff and service workers, but once again relevance and sensitivity to information overload should be taken into consideration. In cases where it is not possible to provide service workers or part-time staff members with e-mail facilities, alternatives need to be explored, such as SMSs, notice boards, electronic notice boards, or a decentralised system where the supervisors or line managers of these people will inform them of important organisational news.
- It may be useful, but not essential, to seek all staff involvement and problem-solving via the communication media efforts.
- It may generally speaking be useful, but not essential, to establish a reward and recognition system which recognises management communication performance.

It is important to note here that, although there may be more issues relating to the academic nature of universities (such as research, inquiry, discourse, learning facilitation and community service), the author only mentions those she considers essential from a communication point of view. Researchers who are interested in further exploring this topic may consider indicating how the complexity of a university, its complex organisational structure and the complexities of academic work and life come together to provide challenges to a communication framework.

The author believes that South African multi-campus universities have the capacity to explore and invest intellectually in their internal communication practices. The days are long gone where internal communications were viewed as one-dimensional and produced by a single person. Internal communications should become more dispersed, more democratic, less hierarchical, more dynamic, less bureaucratic, more fun, yet more professional. HEIs are no longer regarded as centres of academic excellence or knowledge-production only, but are businesses in their own right. The practice of effective communication can aid a university to attain higher levels of excellence, which will subsequently result in greater business impact; more collaborations with industry; higher student numbers; and more funding opportunities. With the necessary commitment and enthusiasm from staff, students and especially management, as well as the provision of adequate human and financial resources, multi-campus universities will be able to bring a dazzling new dimension to their internal communication function.

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