

Recommendation by the  
33rd General Assembly  
of the HRK  
on 10 May 2022  
in Leipzig

## **University communication as a strategic task**

### **HRK** German Rectors' Conference

The Voice of the Universities

post@hrk.de  
<https://www.hrk.de/home>

Tel.: +49 30 206292-0  
Fax: +49 30 206292-15

post@hrk.de  
[www.hrk.de](http://www.hrk.de)

post@hrk.de

Tel.: +49 228 887-0  
Fax: +49 228 887-110

post@hrk.de  
[www.hrk.de](http://www.hrk.de)

## Table of Contents

Summary	3
Preliminary remarks	5
Basic remarks	7
1. Background: Developments and challenges in recent years	7
2. University communication as a central part of governance	8
3. Actively managing tensions between interests	10
4. Clarifying the tasks and structure of professional university communication	11
5. Responsibility for teaching communication skills	12
Special communicative fields	14
6. Fundamental strength through internal communication	14
7. Political communication: Safeguarding interests and responsibility	16
8. Preparing for crises, dealing with risks	17
Funding and outlook	19
9. Continuously developing the quality of communication	19
10. Looking ahead: What does university communication of the future need?	20

### Summary

- When universities and their members decide on the content, organisation, and formats of their communication, they are guided by their **responsibility towards democratic society**.
- The communication strategy is a central part of the **governance** of a university. **All university members** should be encouraged to reflect on the social relevance of their university and of research, including their own academic work.
- A close relationship of trust is necessary between **university leaders and those responsible for communication**; the role and competences of the central communication units should be clarified and transparent. The same applies to the cooperation between **central and decentralised communication units**.
- Through professional expertise, comprehensibility, integrity and transparency, through the presentation of scientific methods and the disclosure of scientific processes and the interests or attitudes behind them, university communication should create **informed trust**.
- Good **internal university communication** takes into account all employees, students and academic staff. It is indispensable from the point of view of the target audiences and as a basis for any successful external communication.
- Medium- and long-term **political communication** safeguards interests in institutional existence and development.
- Universities should deal with ideologically or politically motivated **conflicts on campus** in a transparent, constructive, and exemplary manner.
- Universities should proactively prepare for **crisis situations** with the involvement of staff responsible for communication. However, conflict-prone topics must not be pushed out of university communication.
- As places of education and qualification of academic staff, universities are particularly challenged in the training and **development of communicative competences**. The foundation for this should be laid in undergraduate degree programmes. From graduate programmes onwards, competence in science communication and addressing target audiences should be taught explicitly and in a differentiated way.
- Universities should explicitly formulate **quality goals** and indicators of good university communication and anchor them in the mission statement of their institution. Quality assurance includes the

sovereignty to responsibly decide whether, when and how the university responds to social media debates and activities in particular.

- Universities should clarify how they intend to and are able to deal with target audiences that are remote from academia, and increasingly implement mechanisms to bring their competences into societal debates in **a way that is timely and appropriate to the respective target audience.**
- With the help of the academic competences available at universities, they should advance the establishment and expansion of a **democracy-friendly digital media landscape** and strengthen the promotion of media competence and the capabilities for protection against misinformation in society as a whole.
- A greater **appreciation for and recognition of communication activities and achievements** should be developed, also in awareness of the positive repercussions for science itself.
- The financial, technical and personnel **resources** of communication departments, which are appropriate for the specific university, must correspond to the central role of communication in the development of the institution and ensure its ability to act even in possible crises. This must be supported by sufficient publicly funded basic resources.

### **Preliminary remarks**

Universities are the central and, due to their wide range of tasks, the most complex institutions of the research system. In accordance with their public mandate, they have an obligation to society and its democratic constitution. Universities and their members must be guided by this obligation in their strategic orientation, and in the decisions deriving from it, regarding the content, organisation, and formats of their communication.<sup>1</sup>

Their field of activity includes study, teaching, research, innovation, the promotion of academic career paths and transfer. This radius of action is also reflected in university communication. Against this backdrop, this recommendation sheds light on the special features of communication at, through and with universities by addressing self-image and external perception, goals, strategies and demands of the university as an institution. In this sense, the recommendation follows an organisational sociological perspective and defines the term "university communication" more narrowly than is predominantly common.<sup>2</sup> The HRK understands university communication as a constitutive factor for the existence and development of a university and appreciates this organisational communication in its entire breadth, both internally and externally, in both formal and informal form, as a continuous, dialogue-based process open to societal discourse.

The starting point for the following recommendations is the special responsibility that universities have as central educational, research, innovation, and cultural institutions. This must be reflected in their communication strategies, which in turn requires systematic planning and support. University leaders bear decisive responsibility for conception, organisation, and scope. The personnel professionally entrusted with

---

<sup>1</sup> Die Hochschulen als zentrale Akteure in Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft. Eckpunkte zur Rolle und zu den Herausforderungen des Hochschulsystems ["Higher education institutions as key players in science and society. Key considerations on the role of, and challenges facing, the higher education system"], resolution of the HRK Senate, October 2016 (available only in German): "Higher education institutions are places of dialogue and intellectual debate. They promote and develop the character and teach both the approach of relying on the power of objective argument and using it and the ability to do so. As centres of democratic culture, they contribute (in terms of a Third Mission) to fruitful debate on tackling the great social challenges. In addition, higher education institutions offer various programmes to all sections of the population and use innovative approaches to do so: from events for political education to workshops on Social Entrepreneurship through to children's university. What is more, they work against xenophobia and marginalisation in a targeted and sustained manner." (courtesy translation; URL: <https://www.hrk.de/positionen/beschluss/detail/die-hochschulen-als-zentrale-akteure-in-wissenschaft-und-gesellschaft-eckpunkte-zur-rolle-und-zu-d/4/4/2022>).

<sup>2</sup> Although university communication can be understood as a special form of science communication, its nature, its challenges, and its different forms can only be comprehensively understood if it is understood as communication that takes place in the context of the university as a specific type of organisation. Fähnrich, Birthe et al. come closest to the understanding of the term "university communication" used here: Introduction. In: Fähnrich, Birthe et al. (eds.): Forschungsfeld Hochschulkommunikation, Wiesbaden 2019, pp. 1-21 and Schwetjke, Thorsten / Hauser, Christiane / Leßmöllmann, Annette: Hochschulkommunikation erforschen. Hochschulkommunikatoren als Akteure: Ergebnisse einer Online-Befragung – 2. Welle. Project report. Karlsruhe 2017. URL: <https://wmk.itz.kit.edu/downloads/Projektbericht-Hochschulkommunikation-er.pdf> (4/4/2022, available only in German).

communication at universities are to advise and support them in this and are responsible for implementation. At some universities, communications directors are themselves part of the university leadership. In principle, however, all university members are consciously or unconsciously actors in university communication. In connection with their educational mandate, universities also have a special responsibility for developing the communication skills of students and academic staff. This topic therefore takes on a special role in these recommendations.

Different developments in recent years have presented new challenges for science communication and university communication and have significantly increased their importance. Universities have made enormous efforts to develop the quality of their communication, which is reflected both in a significantly expanded portfolio and in the improved resources of the corresponding organisational units.

Now, a cross-university reflection and re-adjustment of the understanding of university communication as a strategic management task seems to be indicated.

## Basic remarks

### 1. Background: Developments and challenges in recent years

The HRK sees three central development strands that determine the challenges for contemporary university communication at present and in the coming years.

Firstly, on the one hand, science has come strongly into general awareness, especially as a policy advisor in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the climate change debate. It meets with a stable, high level of trust in society<sup>3</sup>, which must be confirmed and maintained. On the other hand, populist movements and political groups that deliberately arouse and promote scepticism about science have gained considerable influence, and this not only in Germany. They attempt to deprive social debates of their scientifically based factual references or to delegitimise academic institutions or methods as well as standards in research and thus pose serious challenges that threaten democracy.

Secondly, the German research and higher education system as a whole is now very clearly committed to an open dialogue with society. This manifested itself for the first time, among other things, in the PUSH Memorandum<sup>4</sup> that was signed by all major science organisations in 1999 and continued most recently with the "10-Point Plan for Science Communication"<sup>5</sup> adopted by the Alliance of Science Organisations in Germany in 2020. At the same time, expectations of the ability and willingness of individual researchers to engage in communication activities appropriate to the respective target audience have increased. Particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, researchers from various disciplines have impressively demonstrated their willingness to engage in intensive, time-consuming science communication with the public; at the same time, the public's awareness of the importance of science has increased.

And thirdly, since the turn of the millennium social media have greatly changed the media landscape as well as the form and the character of public communication. The specifics of social media communication in real time that blurs the roles of sender and receiver, the dissemination of posts / contributions that is usually controlled by non-transparent platform algorithms, the juxtaposition of facts, opinions and sometimes also of misinformation that can often only be curated to a limited extent, the tendency towards communication styles that are sometimes highly emotionalised, the highly individualised, personalised (network) audien-

---

<sup>3</sup> See Wissenschaft im Dialog: Science Barometer 2020. Berlin 2020. URL: <https://www.wissenschaft-im-dialog.de/en/our-projects/science-barometer/science-barometer-2020/> (4/4/2022).

<sup>4</sup> Memorandum "Dialogue between Science and Society". Bonn 1999. URL: <https://www.hrk.de/positions/decision/detail/memorandum-dialogue-science-and-society> (4/4/2022, available only in German).

<sup>5</sup> Alliance of Science Organisations in Germany: 10-point plan for science communication. Internal agreement to develop the communication of the Alliance and its members. s.l. 2020. URL: [https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/10\\_Punkte\\_Plan\\_Allianz\\_2020.pdf](https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/10_Punkte_Plan_Allianz_2020.pdf) (4/4/2022, available only in German).

ces and so on require continuous adjustments in the understanding of public communication. Print media, radio, and television as well as related online offerings are no longer exclusive forums and drivers of public debate.

As relatively new actors, so-called science influencers, for example, have established themselves in social media with sometimes considerable numbers of users, primarily reaching young target audiences. They are often, but by no means always, journalistically or scientifically versed. At the same time, the traditional mass media remain essential for mediating between science and the public, especially as they are increasingly strengthening their reach through digital offerings.

In turn, the communication units of university press and public relations offices assume a coordinating function in internal and external communication more than ever before. Researchers are all potential communicators, especially through social media, with the associated opportunities to influence public debate but also the associated expectations and risks. For citizens, the concert of individual voices means new opportunities for direct and comprehensive information and opinion-forming, but it also makes orientation more difficult. Journalism and professional public relations have gained new importance in the course of this. At the same time, quality journalism is in a serious economic crisis with declining market shares and diminishing resources.

Universities should face up to these changed conditions at various levels. In addition to continuously upgrading their communication units, it is important, for example, to impart the necessary high level of media and data competence to students and young academics and to generally set an example of responsibility, commitment, and mutual support. In university administrations and especially in their legal departments, sufficient expertise on social media should be built up beyond data protection issues to be able to fulfil the need for advice in this area.

## **2. University communication as a central part of governance**

Due to their direct relation to the profile, tasks and mission of the institution, communication and communication strategy are important, central aspects of the governance of a university. The HRK underlines the statement of the German Council of Science and Humanities that the leaders of scientific institutions are responsible for the quality of institutional communication, including the content communicated.<sup>6</sup>

The mission of university communication is to make the university visible in the public sphere as a reliable point of contact for research topics and questions of academic education, to position it as a social institution and to promote a lively internal and external dialogue. Securing adequate public funding for the growing tasks of higher education institutions also requires that they make their performance and reliability visible to society. This cannot be thought of as simply sending out information and

---

<sup>6</sup> See Wissenschaftsrat [German Council of Science and Humanities]: Wissenschaftskommunikation (position paper; print no. 9367-21). Kiel 2021, p. 48. URL: <https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/2021/9367-21.pdf?blob=publicationFile&v=10> (4/4/2022, available only in German).



messages. What is needed is a fair, recursive dialogue, a permanent invitation to diverse social groups to exchange ideas.

The management levels have the task of creating a positive, motivating climate for communicative engagement, taking into account the cultures of different disciplines in science and humanities. It should be clear to all university members that the media, social and political environments have great (albeit changing) importance for all disciplines and for the institution itself. They should be able to reflect not only on the scientific, but also on the social and communicative relevance of scholarly work. Students can be motivated to participate in these processes and get actively involved through integrated or specific study programmes, but also through creative competitions and similar measures.

A close relationship of trust between university leaders and those responsible for communication is indispensable, because communication strategies and measures should be derived directly from the university's profile, mission and strategic goals. The responsibility for strategic development in this regard should therefore ideally be anchored in the governing body with its own departmental responsibility.

Part of good governance is to create a framework in which university communication succeeds in the interplay of centralised and decentralised responsibilities. The aim is for all those involved to understand the goals and tasks of the university, to know and take into account which communication units are active in the university, its institutes and its projects, and how they organise dialogue, coordination and cooperation. In particular, the role and competences of the central communication unit need to be clarified. In case of doubt, it is up to this unit to agree on the necessary coordination in the interests of the profile, reputation, and communicative efficiency of the institution as a whole. Such coordination processes should be handled flexibly and take place at an early stage in order to avoid loss of time and inefficiency. The innovation potential and competences of the decentralised units should be used in this process and their specific needs should be taken into account.

The efficient use of limited resources must be ensured through a systematic, coordinated, and transparent prioritisation of goals and measures. As a rule, a well-founded concentration is preferable to a broad distribution. Bundling the capacities of several universities for external communication can also be useful in terms of increasing efficiency, especially but not only for smaller universities.

Identity formation is a central and integral part of a successful university strategy and a complex, permanent communicative process in which as many university members as possible should be involved. Such a process takes place in organised formats and informally, in internal procedures and in exchange with the university environment. Examples include systematic reflection on the institution's self-image and mission within the framework of the development or rewriting of a common mission

statement or the active, university-wide engagement with the history of the institution. A communication culture that is attuned to the self-image and specific conditions of the university and integrates all university members forms the basis for this and should therefore be systematically encouraged by the university leadership.

### **3. Actively managing tensions between interests**

Universities are a working environment and a sphere of activity for a variety of member groups, each with their own perspectives. Ideally, they form a community whose heterogeneity offers unparalleled potential for creativity by enabling the identity of the institution as a point of reference while continuously helping to shape it.

There is an inherent ambivalence in these processes that is characteristic of university communication. Universities are places of open academic (and thus also societal) discourse, where teaching staff and researchers, subject groups and communities must be able to develop and evolve independently. As organisations, however, universities do have hierarchical structures; moreover, internal conflicts of interest go far beyond purely academic issues. This tension between individual freedoms and legitimate interests of the institution, which is inherent in higher education institutions, should be made productive in a creative process. Consideration for institutional interests should be actively negotiated and demanded, but of course cannot be imposed. For university communication, this means that the clearest possible agreements are needed for dealing with this tension in order to avoid misunderstandings and reduce the potential for conflict.

All members of the university, especially those engaged in research and professional communicators, should be aware of their responsibility for the credibility of science and the building of trust. The "Guidelines for Good Science PR"<sup>7</sup> – by now widely discussed and widely accepted – should apply to the communication of scientific content, as well as the "Guideline on Science Communication" of the German Public Relations Council (DRPR)<sup>8</sup>, which has so far only been published in draft form. It is of essential interest for academia as a whole and for the individual university that these basic rules are respected and adhered to. Individuals bear responsibility not only for their own institution, but for the higher education and research system as a whole. Exaggerated or even erroneous communication of scientific successes or the communication of erroneous research results, for example, damages science as a whole. Institutional communication units have an important moderating function here.

---

<sup>7</sup> Guidelines for good science PR. Berlin 2016. URL: [https://www.wissenschaft-im-dialog.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Ueber\\_uns/Gut\\_Siggen/Dokumente/Guidelines\\_for\\_good\\_science\\_PR\\_final.pdf](https://www.wissenschaft-im-dialog.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Ueber_uns/Gut_Siggen/Dokumente/Guidelines_for_good_science_PR_final.pdf) (4/4/2022).

<sup>8</sup> German Public Relations Council: DRPR Guideline on Science Communication. Berlin 2022. URL: [https://drpr-online.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/2022-02-24\\_DRPR\\_Richtlinie-Wissenschaftskommunikation.pdf](https://drpr-online.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/2022-02-24_DRPR_Richtlinie-Wissenschaftskommunikation.pdf) (4/4/2022, available only in German).

An essential factor for communication by individual university members is clarification and conscious handling of their own roles. Teaching staff, researchers and officials in particular should always be aware of their responsibility towards the institution. They should make clear whether they are expressing a personal assessment, for example as a (specialist) scientist, as a representative of the institution, as a private person or as a member of another interest group; this also applies to their activities on social media.<sup>9</sup> The university leadership should ensure that the basic rules for dealing with the different roles as clearly as possible are laid down and communicated in appropriate guidelines. In principle, every member of the university should be aware that even as a private person, one's own public statement is often attributed to the institution or can at least have repercussions for the institution.

#### **4. Clarifying the tasks and structure of professional university communication**

A core task of university communication is trust-building. Trust in the sense of "informed trust"<sup>10</sup> does not only arise from the comprehensibility of what is communicated and the professional expertise of the communicators. Integrity and transparency are also important, including through process communication, the communication of scientific methods and how they are consistently followed, and the disclosure of vested interests.<sup>11</sup> Corrections and failures should also be communicated. Informed trust also arises, above all, when motives are made comprehensible (what is done and why, and why is it communicated in the way it is?). In university communication, it is essentially a matter of ensuring a common goal orientation internally as well as public acceptance and social legitimacy in the long term.

There is no ideal type of organisation for the design of university communication. The existing diversity is justified as long as it corresponds to the diversity of the institutions and their specific tasks and objectives as well as to appropriately evolved structures. In view of the diversity of higher education institutions (types, sizes, range of subjects, etc.), there can be no standard model for the organisational location of the central communication areas. The same applies to the integration of the various communication sectors (media relations, public relations, marketing, alumni care, university societies, event management, etc.).

---

<sup>9</sup> See Wissenschaftsrat [German Council of Science and Humanities]: Wissenschaftskommunikation (position paper; print no. 9367-21). Kiel 2021, p. 48. URL: [https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/2021/9367-21.pdf?\\_blob=publicationFile&v=10](https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/2021/9367-21.pdf?_blob=publicationFile&v=10) (4/4/2022, available only in German).

<sup>10</sup> See Bromme, Rainer: Verständlichkeit ist gut, aber es geht um *informiertes* Vertrauen ["Understandability is good, but it's about *informed* trust"]. In: wissenschaftskommunikation.de, 4/5/2020. URL: <https://www.wissenschaftskommunikation.de/verstaendlichkeit-ist-gut-aber-es-geht-um-informiertes-vertrauen-38231/> (4/4/2022, available only in German).

<sup>11</sup> See Wissenschaftsrat [German Council of Science and Humanities]: Wissenschaftskommunikation (position paper; print no. 9367-21). Kiel 2021, p. 48. URL: [https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/2021/9367-21.pdf?\\_blob=publicationFile&v=10](https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/2021/9367-21.pdf?_blob=publicationFile&v=10) (4/4/2022, available only in German).

However, when developing individual structures and setting priorities, it is important to think together about the various existing or planned sectors. Systematic linking creates synergies in staff and resources, supports creative dialogue and transparency in the division of tasks, and facilitates the necessary permanent adjustments.

At the same time, organisational charts do not always reflect the communication responsibilities actually practised.<sup>12</sup> Everyday work and traditional structures need to be regularly compared with the actual needs, priorities and goals of the institution and, if necessary, adjusted accordingly.

### **5. Responsibility for teaching communication skills**

Universities employ the majority of academic staff in Germany and are the places where this staff receives their qualifications. They play a special role in enabling this group to communicate science and in developing their understanding of their role within the scientific community.

Scientists need to understand why there is a legitimate societal interest in holding science to account. They should understand the mechanisms of public communication and how the media landscape works. They can damage their institution and science as a whole more quickly than in the past if they communicate clumsily or in a way that is negligently incorrect. It is the aim of the qualification process and the accompanying support from professional communication units to avoid such miscommunication as far as possible. Even though communication skills should be promoted in this sense, they should not be made a central quality criterion of academic work.

No one is as competent in terms of specialist knowledge as the communicating scholars themselves. The central (and, where appropriate, decentralised) communication units should support them in communicating about their subject and topics with target audiences outside their professional community. This support may consist of cooperation in concrete activities, qualification within the framework of further training offers or advice in individual cases. The content may range from teaching general media skills to practical advice on interview behaviour to strategic communication advice.

Skills training should develop an understanding of and competence in audience-appropriate communication and should include all media and formats, especially dialogue-based ones. It should enable individuals to reflect on their own roles and to differentiate between communication

---

<sup>12</sup> Schwetje, Thorsten / Hauser, Christiane / Leßmöllmann, Annette: Hochschulkommunikation erforschen. Hochschulkommunikatoren als Akteure: Ergebnisse einer Online-Befragung – 1. und 2. Welle. Interim or project report, project Exploring Higher Education Communication; funded by the Federal Association of Higher Education Communication. Karlsruhe 2017. Interim report (1st wave), URL: [https://www.wmk.itz.kit.edu/downloads/Zwischenbericht\\_Hochschulkommunikation\\_e.pdf](https://www.wmk.itz.kit.edu/downloads/Zwischenbericht_Hochschulkommunikation_e.pdf) (4/4/2022, available only in German); Project report (2nd wave), URL: <https://www.wmk.itz.kit.edu/downloads/Project-Report-University-Communication-er.pdf> (4/4/2022, available only in German).

as a private person, as a scholar and as a member of the university. Individuals should acquire an enhanced understanding of general social, regional, group-specific and other interests as well as of the mechanisms of directing attention in today's media landscape and the "algorithmic" character of modern media. The qualification process should raise awareness of the pitfalls of communication, including possible technical mistakes or potential for scandalisation.

The ideal is the communicating university that offers its members the necessary freedom and latitude and enables them to communicate beyond their own subject and research about science and scientific work in general, to think in interdisciplinary contexts and to include social references in communication. In this context, formats such as debating clubs, which are not very widespread in Germany, could play an important role, especially with regard to students. University leaders should strive to create a motivating, communication-friendly culture throughout the institution.

In the case of students, the foundations for general communication skills should be laid in undergraduate programmes. This necessarily includes, firstly, reflection on the subject content taught in the degree programme, its methods, questions, paradigms, and social references, and secondly, the development of presentation and media skills. Throughout the study programme, changes of perspective should be systematically practised and an appreciation for communication, communicatively active and successful academics, and professional communication should be taught. Separate study programmes (modules, continuing education programmes, master's programmes, etc.) qualify students for the professional fields of university and science communication.

From postgraduate programmes onwards, science communication and target audience competence can also be taught explicitly and in a differentiated way. Students on a master's programme should, for example, practise presenting research projects in which they are involved to a non-specialist audience.

Science communication in the narrower sense, which is closely related to research and includes an already acquired solid foundation of specialist knowledge, is only carried out by scientists with their own research projects, i. e. usually from the doctoral phase onwards. Qualification opportunities for science communication should be offered from this point on. Finally, communicative competences facilitate interdisciplinary exchange, so that supporting these skills also represents a contribution to scientific development as a whole.

Basically, university (science) communication is a cross-cutting issue derived from the core tasks in teaching and research. There should be no additional burdens associated with the acquisition of communicative competences, which works best when it is an integral part of the academic education process. The motivation to acquire competences

should primarily be promoted by a communication-friendly climate, incentives, and attractive qualification opportunities.

Following this principle, the following options may be considered:

- The promotion of science-related communication skills is systematically integrated into existing programmes, especially for students and doctoral candidates.
- Possibilities for such integration are taught within the framework of teaching qualifications.
- More in-depth content is taught within the framework of optional courses.
- Separate study programmes (modules, master's programmes, modules in graduate schools, etc.) qualify students for the professional fields of university and science communication.

All the competences and resources available at the university should be used for qualification purposes and these should be networked and, if necessary, other external training opportunities should be included according to need or created jointly.

In particular, the central communication department should be involved here in an appropriate way. It can support the teaching of communicative competences (e. g. media training), depending on the possibilities and needs. When selecting external training opportunities, it can assess their quality and suitability and coordinate their conception and organisation with internal training options. If there is sufficient capacity, it can offer qualification courses itself. Above all, however, it should communicate the institution's own policy and strategy with regard to (science) communication. Decentralised communication units should be included with their potential in the spirit of a cooperative dialogue.

## **Special communicative fields**

### **6. Fundamental strength through internal communication**

Good internal communication is of great importance for the well-being, motivation, and identification of all university members, as well as the willingness and ability to achieve a high level of performance. As in every institution and every company, this also applies to employees in universities, but also to students and researchers.

Contemporary and effective internal communication is not a "one-way street" any more than communication with external target audiences. Discursive elements should be systematically integrated. Internal problem areas and needs can be identified and addressed on the basis of both positive and critical feedback. Lively internal communication can also stimulate scientific interdisciplinary dialogue. This may also apply to measures that are primarily aimed at external target audiences, such as an "Open Day" or a "Long Night of the Sciences". Overall, it is also true for internal communication that the form and scope of activities must be tailored to the needs and target audiences.

Open internal communication also needs protected spaces. Confidentiality is the prerequisite for communicating sensitive processes within the university, for example. This confidentiality should be actively communicated and its (added) value must be made clear.

The successful management of exceptional and crisis situations is essentially based on continuous communication between the university leadership and all university members, which is appropriate in terms of content, style, and media. However, experience gained with communication activities that were initiated and improved by the Covid-19 pandemic should be made fruitful beyond this crisis. For example, successfully established formats such as regular video blogs by the leadership should be continued permanently where appropriate.

Students should be systematically included as a target audience and reference group in internal communication. In this context, networking with student secretariats, international offices and so on, as well as cooperation with student representatives and student media, is of particular importance. But the university leadership itself should also seek direct contact with students in order to make decisions, developments and objectives comprehensible for the institution as a whole, to ask themselves questions about them and thus to strengthen students' identification with the university. Students should be able to develop and evolve their own cultures of communication in the higher education space, as long as they stay within the limits of political and religious activity that apply at universities. Last but not least, the basis for fruitful alumni work is laid through appreciative and needs-based communication with students at university and department/faculty level. Particularly distinctive forms of student participation are student magazines and student radio. Student networks and media – taking into account their respective autonomy – offer potential for project cooperation and topic setting. Sometimes student media have considerable influence on social media channels or local press. Continuous monitoring of student media (AStA magazine, campus TV, university or campus radio including their respective social networks) should be a natural part of internal communication. It can provide indicators of problem situations or a need for action and communication and thus help to prevent a crisis from developing.

Active internal communication should also be seen as the basis for successful external communication, because only well-informed university members are in a position to represent their institution convincingly in public. Internal communication strengthens the motivation, commitment and loyalty of employees and members of the organisation. It optimises organisational processes, facilitates the dissemination of information, and improves internal dialogue. In this way, internal communication creates an important basis for a successful strategic orientation of universities and promotes trust in and loyalty to

one's own institution.<sup>13</sup> The goal cannot be contradiction-free external communication, but identification with the institution as the basis for responsible external communication.

Internal and external university communication overlap in practice; dual functions should be considered: externally published products such as social media posts or press supplements are received attentively, especially by university members, while internally disseminated information hardly ever remains internal. But protected spaces for internal communication are also necessary and strengthen the institution.

## **7. Political communication: Safeguarding interests and responsibility**

Universities communicate in many ways in the political sphere. Three significant variants are examined in more detail below:

### **7.1 Safeguarding existing and development interests**

Universities are constantly in negotiation processes with different levels of politics, which mainly concern legal and organisational issues as well as financial questions. They should ensure that their achievements, potential and interests are recognised at all relevant political levels (local, state, national and European) and, as a result, are adequately promoted and taken into account while preserving their autonomy. They should develop their individual visions of the future at an early stage, work out the strategic steps necessary for this, introduce these into the political discourse in the run-up to decision-making processes and solicit the corresponding support.

A medium and long-term communication strategy is of particular importance in this field. Those responsible in the executive and legislative branches need a basic understanding of the workings and concerns of higher education institutions to be able to make competent decisions on individual issues. This is why there is a need for ongoing contact and, in addition to information, above all for active, personal dialogue. In addition to education and science policymakers, the target audiences are all those politically responsible who deal with issues relevant to higher education, such as health care or economic and financial policy. Among other things, the regular involvement of scientists raises awareness among those with political responsibility of the potential for competent scientific advice in almost all policy fields.

---

<sup>13</sup> "A functioning and trusting communication culture within the university forms an essential basis for sustainable and effective communication to the outside world as well. In the complex organisational form of a university, it is a particular challenge to include all groups in the multi-layered communication processes. Systematically designed internal communication should motivate university members to engage in communicative exchange, support the overarching goals of the institution and promote all actors in their ability to act internally and externally. Internal communication can thus strengthen identification with the university and the assumption of responsibility for the quality of performance and for a successful external image." (Excerpt from the call for entries for the "Prize for Higher Education Communication 2019"; courtesy translation).



Political communication, insofar as it is primarily aimed at the interests of the university, is an original management task. It requires a systematic conceptualisation that is not only oriented towards one's own interests, but also towards the target audience. At this point, those responsible for communication are often not yet sufficiently involved, or there is still a lack of appropriate know-how both at management level and in the communication departments and the university in general. Thus, the potential of digital instruments in political communication – regardless of the special situation of the pandemic – is often not yet systematically examined and used.

Joint communication may be more impactful in the external presentation, especially of the performance dimensions of the university, than the uncoordinated activity of individuals or exclusive mediation via the university leadership. Common interests should be represented by the universities in coordinated or joint communication processes.

### **7.2 Dealing with ideologically motivated conflicts on campus**

Conflicts regularly arise in universities due to ideological reasons (political correctness, religious practice on university premises, etc.). General and daily political events and developments (e. g. xenophobia, refugees, Brexit, gender and environmental issues) also affect universities. They are called upon to strive for a transparent and constructive approach to such issues, some of which are extremely controversial. They can thus set an example in their social environment thanks to the professional competences gathered in them and the rules of academic discourse. Freedom of speech and (party) political neutrality should apply equally. An appropriate overall academic framework ensures that appearances by individuals who are clearly party-politically located do not take place as election campaign or advertising activities, but serve the general political discourse.

### **7.3 Engagement in general policy issues**

Part of the identity formation and strategic orientation of a university is the question of how far the leadership in particular positions itself in its function as representative of the organisation in general and day-to-day political issues. In making this decision, the (in)direct institutional relationship to the issue/policy area in question can be a criterion that is comprehensible to university members and the public. Such points of contact can arise from the mission statement, academic profile and history of the university.

## **8. Preparing for crises, dealing with risks**

Good governance includes preparation for crisis situations. A trust that has grown through sustained transparency, seriousness and a culture of error is part of the basis on which successful crisis communication can fall back.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> On the importance of professional crisis communication by scientific institutions, see also Wissenschaftsrat [German Council of Science and Humanities]: Wissenschaftskommunikation (position paper; print no. 9367-21). Kiel 2021, p. 48ff. URL:

This includes good risk communication management, including competent issue monitoring by the central communication unit and early information from the university leadership to the communication management of emerging critical issues. Known potentially critical issues (e. g. animal testing) require a viable risk communication concept.

Crisis communication is to a large extent communication consequence management, i. e. universities have to deal with irritations and criticism due to their own or external communication activities. Crises often arise from more or less foreseeable risk situations; they are caused by technical breakdowns, misjudgements, diffusion of responsibility, scientific misconduct or other (individual) failures with media resonance up to and including scandalisation. It becomes disastrous when improper crisis management and communication such as understatement, exaggeration, concealment, or untruthful distortions are added to the mix. An appropriate culture of error – i. e. the willingness to admit and publicly reflect on mistakes – is the best prevention here.

In view of the necessary speed of reaction, crisis plans drawn up in advance for essential scenarios, incorporating potential communication measures that can be adapted to a given crisis at short notice, are indispensable. In view of the large number of possible problems, general procedures, processes and officials to be involved should be named and it must be ensured that these individuals can be contacted in the event of a crisis. It is essential that the role of the central communication unit be clarified in advance: how far does their say go and who has the final say in deciding on communication measures in a crisis? In any case, professional communication with clear rules and responsibilities is of great importance for crisis management.

Academics who engage in communication and contribute their scientific expertise to controversial social debates need and deserve support and the best possible protection from the institution. University leaders should encourage them to contact their communications departments early on in potentially risky or crisis-prone situations and offer advice and support. It is useful to explain the university's communication culture and strategy to newly recruited professors in particular, and to familiarise them with options in crisis situations. However, there can be no solidarity at any price for attacked academics if they are guilty of misconduct and if the institution itself is in danger of being permanently damaged as a result. Crises can also come from within, for example when criticism is publicly articulated before the arguments in question have been presented internally.

Efforts to prevent the emergence of crises must not, however, lead to conflict-prone topics and emphatic statements being pushed out of university communication.

---

[https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/2021/9367-21.pdf?\\_blob=publicationFile&v=10](https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/2021/9367-21.pdf?_blob=publicationFile&v=10) (4/4/2022, available only in German).

## **Funding and outlook**

### **9. Continuously developing the quality of communication**

Good university communication – in the sense of high-quality communication that meets the relevant goals and expectations and is as efficient, effective, and transparent as possible – is a cross-sectional task for which the university is centrally responsible, but which is also handled de-centrally and is thus a joint effort by the university and its members. In view of the significantly expanded communication activities at all levels in recent years, the focus should now be on their qualitative rather than further quantitative development.

Quality development in university communication does not merely extend to the follow-up evaluation (of the effectiveness) of individual activities but encompasses a continuous process of accompanying support and recognition measures.<sup>15</sup> Expressing and demonstrating appreciation for individual teaching staff and researchers contributes to quality assurance insofar as it is based on criteria that capture the institutional understanding of “good university communication.” Higher education institutions should explicitly formulate this understanding with quality goals and indicators and anchor it in the self-image of their institution. In this context, the concept of quality should encompass both formal and content-related aspects of university communication.<sup>16</sup>

#### **9.1 Promoting the quality of institutional communication**

The size, structure and organisational classification of departments that deal with communication – for example, as staff units directly assigned to the university leadership – reflects, among other things, the increased value placed on communication tasks. In addition, individual communication in and out of universities has increased in the course of the strongly growing use of social media. Universities are increasingly incorporating such forms of communication into their overall institutional communication, for example through concrete support and advice for their (communicating) academics. It is important to agree on the “general lines” of communication and to integrate them strategically.

#### **9.2 Promoting quality in science communication**

Individuals as well as institutions increasingly understand communication tasks and skills as part of their research funding and integrate them into research and teaching.

---

<sup>15</sup> See #FactoryWisskomm: Prospects For Action For Science Communication. An initiative of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. Berlin 2022, p. 21 ff. URL: [https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/shareddocs/downloads/files/factory\\_wisskomm\\_english.pdf?blob=publicationFile&v=6](https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/shareddocs/downloads/files/factory_wisskomm_english.pdf?blob=publicationFile&v=6) (4/4/2022).

<sup>16</sup> The Federal Association of University Communication supports its members in quality development through working groups and materials. For example, there is the Quality in University Communication (IQ\_HKom) initiative, which was founded more than 30 years ago.

In general research funding, incentive systems for communication activities have become so well established that an expansion hardly seems necessary at this point. Rather, the funding conditions should be systematically reviewed for their effectiveness with regard to the qualitative development of science communication. In this sense, for example, the subject-specific science communication research projects that are just starting up and made possible by the Volkswagen Foundation<sup>17</sup> are extremely useful as a means of exploring the impact of current practice and the appropriate further development of communication measures.

The communication mandate within the framework of third-party funding currently leads to mismanagement in many cases. The limited funding period and part-time positions make it difficult to deploy qualified staff and the naturally manageable funds for the individual project do not allow for adequate measures. The highly qualified staff required due to the demanding tasks mentioned can only be recruited with corresponding longer-term employment prospects.

Therefore, new models are needed so that resources for communication can be increased and used as efficiently as possible. One variant can be a pooling of project funds to enable the creation of longer-term science communication positions. In this way, permanent positions could also be created that are sufficiently attractive for suitably qualified staff. The holders of these posts could work more effectively and efficiently for the projects in question.

Communication performance is increasingly being taken into account in appointment procedures, but not yet in a systematic way. Universities should also open themselves up to journalistic services beyond traditional specialist communication to be able to adequately include forms of science communication via other media, channels, platforms, or events. They are also challenged to promote the individual communication of their teaching staff and researchers and to support them in their activities, and at the same time to avoid excessive demands – especially on academics in the qualification phase – and to reduce the workload where necessary.<sup>18</sup>

## **10. Looking ahead: What does university communication of the future need?**

### **10.1 Tasks**

Universities should clarify together with all other academic institutions how they aim to deal with target audiences that have not been reached

---

<sup>17</sup> Volkswagen Foundation: VolkswagenStiftung fördert mit 15 Mio. Euro vier neue Zentren für Wissenschaftskommunikationsforschung, press release 25/6/2021. URL: <https://www.volkswagenstiftung.de/de/news/pressemitteilung/volkswagenstiftung-foerdert-mit-15-mio-euro-vier-neue-zentren-fuer> (4/4/2022, available only in German).

<sup>18</sup> See #FactoryWisskomm: Prospects For Action For Science Communication. An initiative of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. Berlin 2022, p. 25 ff. URL: [https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/shreddocs/downloads/files/factory\\_wisskomm\\_english.pdf](https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/shreddocs/downloads/files/factory_wisskomm_english.pdf) (4/4/2022).

(structurally) so far, especially with science sceptics or opponents. They must face this question both in their own interests and out of a responsibility to a democratic society. The German Council of Science and Humanities rightly points out that although the inclusion of so-called science-remote target audiences is often declared a strategic goal, this seems to be difficult to implement in practice because the "exclusion factors" have to be dealt with in social and educational policy.<sup>19</sup> Here, the universities should look for ways – supported by social science research if possible – to use their specific bandwidth as educational institutions, employers, as places of innovation and as cultural sites.

In view of the subject-related and structural complexity of most higher education institutions, it is a particular challenge to bring the existing competences into social debates in a way that is timely and appropriate for the target audience. University communication should increasingly implement mechanisms that, firstly, identify the relevant topics and the essential discussion platforms and, secondly, recognise and activate suitable, especially scientific competences with potential debate contributions in the university.

Universities must be in a position to communicate quickly where necessary – in accordance with the practices of social media, but also over and above them – but should generally not be incited to publish theses and hypotheses without thorough examination. Universities must have communication sovereignty, which means they must use the freedom, born of a sense of responsibility, to decide when to respond quickly to social media activities and the like, or when to respond only after careful consideration (or not at all).

Those responsible for communication should identify or create the appropriate platforms and formats, increase the quality of science communication at all career levels in academia by offering further training, and support academics in their communication. Backed by the university leadership, they should encourage researchers to engage in public discourses. As competence centres for science communication, they should also expand their expertise to include participatory formats and promote the provision of experimental and dialogue spaces for participatory science communication together with other academic institutions.

Universities should not uncritically use the social media platforms that are constantly emerging and strongly shaping society. Formats and quality standards can emerge there that are at odds with expert organisations such as universities. It requires a difficult balancing act: universities should neither curry favour through their expert status, nor should they fall into self-trivialisation or exclude relevant platforms without compelling justification.

---

<sup>19</sup> See German Council of Science and Humanities: Science Communication (position paper; print no. 9367-21). Kiel 2021, p. 33 f. URL: <https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/2021/9367-21.pdf?blob=publicationFile&v=10> (4/4/2022, available only in German).

With the help of the academic competences available to them, universities should advance the establishment and expansion of a democracy-friendly digital media landscape and strengthen the promotion of media competence and the protection against misinformation in society as a whole.<sup>20</sup>

### 10.2 Recognition

The academic community as a whole should develop a greater appreciation for communication achievements.<sup>21</sup> To this end, it is important to raise awareness of the positive repercussions for science itself. These positive effects provide motivation for further scholarly work through positive feedback in science communication or learning effects for interdisciplinary dialogue and, above all, through recognition and appreciation within their own university. The recognition of communication achievements in connection with appointments needs to be increased – also to encourage the next generation of academics to become involved in science and university communication. Communication activities are neither to be considered and evaluated as an alternative nor as an add-on, but as an integral part of research and teaching.

### 10.3 Resources

University communication requires appropriate financial and technical resources, highly qualified, specifically competent personnel, and adequate organisational integration to be able to fulfil the defined communicative tasks and aims of a university and its reference groups in a way that is appropriate to the subject, the media type, and the target audience. It is difficult to name generally applicable, quantifiable standards for the appropriateness of these framework conditions, which must be ensured by the university leadership and funding providers. The constellations and needs of individual universities are too different for this.

It is clear that university communication is integral to self-perception and external perception, the continued existence and development, the profile and the functionality of a university and should be organised accordingly in a sustainable manner and equipped according to need. Sustainability means, among other things, that the resources provided are not only oriented towards regular operations, but also enable innovations and ensure the ability to act in a crisis as well as the central role of communication in general as a strategic task of the institution. This includes the sustained development of competences, the systematic further qualification of staff and support for young talent, for example in

---

<sup>20</sup> German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina / acatech – National Academy of Science and Engineering / Union of the German Academies of Sciences and Humanities: Digitalisation and democracy (statement). Halle / Munich / Mainz 2021. URL: [https://levana.leopoldina.org/receive/leopoldina\\_mods\\_00407](https://levana.leopoldina.org/receive/leopoldina_mods_00407) (4/4/2022).

<sup>21</sup> See See #FactoryWisskomm: Prospects For Action For Science Communication. An initiative of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. Berlin 2022, p. 25 ff. URL: [https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/shreddocs/downloads/files/factory\\_wisskomm\\_english.pdf](https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/shreddocs/downloads/files/factory_wisskomm_english.pdf) (4/4/2022).

the context of traineeships. The increasingly demanded communication services in strategic projects and change processes (e. g. sustainability communication, European University, digitalisation, campus design, etc.) must also be taken into account.

Efficient university communication is elementary for positive institutional development; where there are structural, financial or personnel deficits, it has a correspondingly negative effect. The importance of its strategic integration and thus the connection between university communication and institutional strategy is correspondingly high.

Taking university communication seriously as a strategic task means continuously adapting its goals, forms, and structures to changing requirements and developing them further with self-awareness and in a manner appropriate to the individual institution. The efforts of individual universities must be supported by sufficient publicly financed basic funding, by promoting communication research and by ensuring a media landscape that fulfils the needs of democracy.