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INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Empirical study

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Abstract

Communication in higher education is an extremely important process because the internal and external relationships in higher education institutions are determined by the way in which communication takes place. The internal communication is between the academic management and its staff but also its students, whereas the external communication involves the potential students as well as the academic stakeholders. Consequently, this paper aims at presenting the internal and external communication in higher education institutions. The results show that both forms of communication are very important for ensuring the higher education institution's visibility on the market.

Introduction

Over the last years, universities have greatly developed their communication system by massively employing modern technologies in order to meet the ever evolving knowledge needs on the market, mainly because "fulfilling their mission and objectives largely depends on achieving communication objectives". (Popescu I.C., 2002). As a result, at internal level, communication supposes establishing some optimal communication relationships with the academic staff, the higher education management but also with the current students. The external communication is done by sending messages to the market and the potential students, by collaborating with different institutions and organizations and it also consists of the university's aggregate of public relations.

1. Problem statement

In my opinion communication is the most important life aspect of individuals and organizations. In its absence no human activity is possible. "Communication includes a series of phenomena which take place between a sender and a recipient, but also the usage of various symbols, words, gestures, signs or any manifestations which bear meaning - this exerting a conscious or unconscious influence upon the recipient with the purpose of satisfying the sender's conscious or unconscious interests." (Papuc M., 2007) The process of communication represents an essential element: the internal communication has the purpose of informing employees about the organization, while the external one sends messages to different audience categories which are outside the organization. (Tourani A. and Rast S., 2012) Communication can only take place when there is a free exchange of information regardless of the means used for it. (Ramachandran, M. T. , 2010).

In order to analyse as well as possible the problem of this research it is important to identify the main targets of the internal and external communication process in higher education institutions. The communication process is the link between the university and the various audience categories. *The internal communication* takes place mostly with the academic staff and the current students. This does not really differ from the external communication as it comprises a series of tools which are also used by the latter. The internal communication involves various elements such as complex rules, values, the internal climate and objectives, and thus the communication message turns into a multidimensional construction. (Ashfaq M., et al. 2012).

Several specialized literature authors researched the problem of employees' performance by taking into consideration the communication with them. Moghimi et al (2013) think that the improvement of employee performance is the most important aspect of internal communication. At the same time, they identify several important aspects of communication: *gaining communication skills, developing management skills, self-openness* – which involves information about one's self, *empathy* - the capacity to relate to someone else's experience, *offering support* by efficient communication with the others, *positivism, social skills* - the ability to communicate with the rest, *influence and inspiration* - through thoughts and ideas, *intellectual stimulation* - activities which promote individual and collective initiative and creativity, developing thus a model for the influence of communication skills on employee performance. Neves P. and Eisenberger R. (2012) analysed the impact of the management communication process on employee performance, and Tsai M. et al (2009) identified that direct communication between employees and managers leads to an improvement of work relations and organizational performance. It follows that an efficient internal communication is the foundation of success of any company, and in higher education institutions this is of great importance as the academic staff is the one directly interacting with different audience categories, especially with students, who are the main consumers of higher education services. The personnel promote externally the image of the university they represent. "The most important objective of the communication policy is building and strengthening a positive image among the target audience, while the concept of image is organically bound to the one of communication." (Popescu I.C., 2002).

The internal communication process largely contributes to motivating and retaining employees as "the employees, regardless of the field of activity, are considered to be the foundation of society", (Ashfaq M., et al, 2012). Therefore, in higher education they are the cornerstone of academic success, as the quality of the education process and the scientific research depend on them.

The external communication in higher education involves a larger audience because it comprises all the messages the higher education institution sends externally and to the environment it operates in. Communication with the stakeholders involved in higher education represents a major step in establishing competitive advantages by identifying their needs and finding the necessary means to satisfy them. (Mainardes E.V. et al, 2010).

There is an immense communication potential with the stakeholders. Therefore, Rowley, J. (1997) identified a series of academic stakeholders as the main communication potential of higher education institutions: the current and potential students, their families and relatives, the local community, society, the government, the management team of the higher education institutions, the local authorities, the current and future employees. At the same time, Licata, J. and Frankwick, G. (1996) identified as academic stakeholders: the current students, the graduates, the business environment, society as a whole, the academic staff and the related-academic staff. The higher education institutions establish communication relationships with all these audience categories as they not only assert themselves through their specific features, but also "through their social and trustworthy image in their relations with other organizations, institutions and current and potential consumers. In this case, an essential role plays the existent image in the collective mind, an image characterized by continuity and consistency. The institutional elements, the academic environment specific services must meet the expectations of the consumers and organizations they cooperate with and relate to." (Nedelea M.O. and Nedelea A., 2007) Thus, every communication framework, internal or external, is made of several actors among which a series of links is established as per figure no. 1.As competitiveness is growing and the expectations of the target audience are increasing - students, their families, employees and employers, the academic staff, the government, companies, etc. – and while the access to information is easier, "higher education institutions in the entire world have to evaluate and coordinate their activities according to the external environment influences, they have to make contact with the real market needs and include them in their daily agenda, which actually refers to adopting the communication techniques, tools and strategies of higher education marketing." (Daj A. and Chirca A., 2009). Having efficiency, quality and competition as starting points, universities concentrate more and more their external communication efforts on attracting students who are perceived as consumers. (Conway, T. et al, 1994; Newson J., 2004; Cardoso S. et al, 2011).

Schüller D. and Chalupský V. (2011) consider that the potential students are the main external communication target of the higher education institutions because through this process universities try to fulfil their knowledge needs as well as their expectations. Ramachandran, M. T. (2010) analysed the way in which the academic management uses service quality as a useful communication means with the students and how improving higher education service quality leads to a change in this communication. At the same time, Jongbloed, B. et al (2008) identified that students are both an internal and external communication target. The authors assert that the higher education stakeholders are divided into two categories which correspond to the two internal and external communication targets. Therefore, at internal level there are: the students, employees, the research teams, the academic management, whereas at the external level, the graduates, the business environment, society, the government and the professional associations. Matlay, H. (2009) identifies two other categories of academic stakeholders which aim at the two communication targets. In other words, in the author's opinion, at an internal level there are: the students, the academic staff and the researchers, the related-academic staff and the institutional management, while at an external level: the students' families, the business environment, the professional entities, the government and the society as a whole.

If follows that the more efficient the internal and external communication process, the better and more visible the academic image is among the audience and on the market.

2. Research methodology

This study focuses on the internal and external communication in higher education institutions. In order to accomplish this desideratum we analysed students' perception from three different higher education institutions regarding the importance and impact of the internal and external communication on the academic visibility on the market. The study supposed analysing the answers received from 246 respondents. The data was collected in the second half of 2014 in Bucharest. The chosen variables look at: *the internal communication* – seen from four perspectives: the current students, the academic staff, the related-academic staff and the academic management while the *external communication* was analysed through the process of academic communication with the potential students, graduates, the business environment, the public institutions and society as a whole. (Licata, J. and Frankwick, G., 1996; Rowley, J, 1997; Jongbloed, B. et al, 2008; Matlay, H., 2009; Schüller D. and Chalupský V., 2011). The *academic visibility* on the market includes the higher education *institution image*, i.e. "the sum of the audience's perceptions, ideas and impressionsabout the university, by referring to names, architecture, range of offered products, traditions, ideology, as well as to the impression regarding the quality communicated by each person

that interacts with the institution's consumers". (Weiwei T., 2007)

Research objectives

1. Identifying the main targets of the internal communication in higher education institutions.
2. Determining the main targets of the external communication in higher education institutions.
3. Identifying the frequency of course attendance.
4. Determining the frequency of using the university website for informative purposes.
5. Identifying the links between the university and its environment.

Research hypotheses:

H1 – Over 20% of the respondents use the university website for informative purposes at least twice or three times a week.

H2 – Over 50% of the respondents attend every course.

H3 – The most important aspect of internal communication is communication with students.

H4 – The most important aspect of external communication is communication with the business environment.

H5 – Higher education institutions provide study programmes according to the labour market needs and this is the most important aspect of academic visibility on the market.

H6 – The internal communication has a stronger impact than the external communication on the academic visibility on the market.

3. Obtained results

For identifying the impact of the internal and external communication on the academic visibility on the market, I will firstly illustrate the structure of the sample used as per graphic no. 1.1.The analysis shows that 56.5% of the respondents come from the University of Bucharest, 22.8% from Bucharest University of Economic Studies and 20.7% from the Romanian-American University.

As regards the correlation between the frequency of course attendance and that of visiting the university website, the results are presented in table no. 1.1.1.

Based on the data analysis, 66 out of the total of 246 respondents go to the university website to get informed twice or three times a month, while 60 subjects visit it twice or three times a week. Out of these, 53 attend courses daily and 215 respondents out of the total of 246 attend courses regularly. Only

19 respondents of the total of 246 visit daily the university website to stay informed.

As regards the variables referring to the internal and external communication and the academic visibility on the market, several items presented in table no. 1.1.2. The *internal communication* variable looks at four items related to the communication process inside the university. By analysing the average values of these variables we obtained some remarkable results as per graphic no. 1.2.The analysis shows that the highest average is scored by *communication with students* with a value of 5.89 on a scale from 1 to 7, followed by *communication with the academic management* with a value of 5.79. *Communication with the academic staff* scores closely with a value of 5.76.

Next we will analyse the *external communication* variable with its six items as per graphic no. 1.3.The study shows that the variable *communication with the business environment* represents the most important aspect of the external communication of the higher education institutions, the average value being 6.13, followed by *communication with potential students* with an average value of 6.04. Another important aspect of the external communication is represented by *communication with graduates* with an average value of 5.98.

The third analysed variable was the academic visibility on the market. The average values of the items comprised by this variable are presented in graphic no. 1.4.The study indicates that the variable *the university provides study programmes according to the labour market needs* scores the highest average value (6.41), which means that through the communication process, higher education institutions manage to promote their study programmes among the audience as well as the professional opportunities after graduation.

Next, with the help of regressions, we will analyse the impact of the internal and external communication on the academic visibility on the market. The model of simple linear regression is represented in the following equation: $Y = \alpha + \beta X + \varepsilon$

By looking at the results of the model of simple linear regression regarding the impact of the *internal communication* on the academic visibility on the market, we can see that the model is valid. The value of R of 0.579 indicates a good correlation between the variables. The value of R^2 of 0.336 shows the fact that the variation of the internal communication accounts for 33.6% of the variation of the academic visibility on the market. The *standard error of estimate* indicates the accuracy of the prediction model. The lower the error of estimate, the more accurate the prediction is. In this case the

prediction is 0.56142. The value of the Durbin Watson test – used for detecting the autocorrelation – is 1.697 which is quite close to 2. In this model of simple linear regression, the value of F is 123.337 whereas Sig. is 0.000. These results allow us to state that there is a linear association between the variables and that the model is valid.

By looking at the results of the model of simple linear regression regarding the impact of the external communication on the academic visibility on the market, we can see that the model is valid. The value of R of 0.463 indicates a good correlation between the variables. The value of R^2 of 0.215 shows the fact that the variation of external communication accounts for 21.5% of the variation of the academic visibility on the market. The prediction is 0.61043. The value of the Durbin Watson test – used for detecting the autocorrelation – is 1.696 which is quite close to 2. In this model of simple linear regression, the value of F is 66.714 whereas Sig. is 0.000. These results allow us to state that there is a linear association between the variables and that the model is valid. In table no. 1.1.3 the values of the regression model coefficients are presented. As one can observe, the regression model coefficients (B) are significantly different from zero.

After analysing the impact of the internal and external communication on the academic visibility on the market we will proceed to validating the obtained model based on the non-standardized regression coefficients as per figure no. 2.

After validating the model regarding the impact of the internal and external communication on the academic visibility on the market, one can see that the variables of the internal communication exert a great influence on the academic visibility on the market, the value of the regression coefficient being 0.411 as compared to 0.329 which corresponds to the external communication. This proves that the internal communication items are more appreciated by respondents for ensuring an increased academic visibility on the market.

Conclusions

In the light of this research both types of communication - internal and external - are extremely important in any higher education institution, but the internal communication elements exert a stronger impact on the academic visibility on the market than the external communication. This is due to the fact that the academic staff and the current students represent those people that make direct contact with various audience categories and are directly responsible for externally promoting the academic image. At the same time, *communication with students* is the variable with the highest average value

(5.89). The external communication also plays an extremely important role, the variable with the highest average value being *communication with the business environment* (6.13).

All the hypotheses of this research have been confirmed. Therefore, the internal and external communication in higher education institutions represent extremely important processes for ensuring the visibility of the higher education institution on the market, but also for attracting good students in order to successfully carry on its activity on a highly competitive market. In addition to this, communication contributes on the one hand to the external promotion of a positive academic image, especially through the staff and the current students, and on the other hand it makes possible the exchange of messages with the external environment regarding the study programmes, their alignment to the labour market needs and the professional opportunities after graduation.

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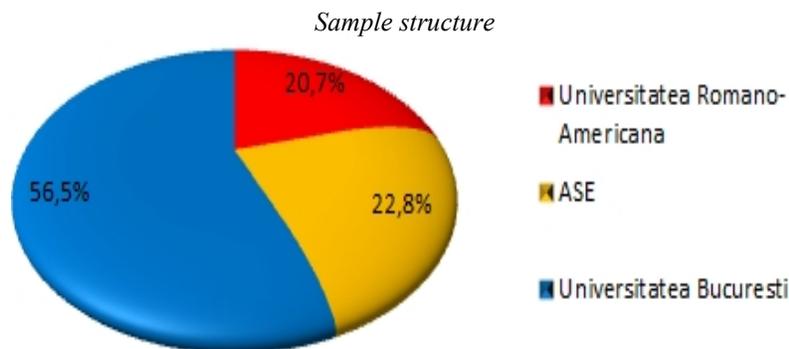
[21]http://www.iisd.org/sdcn/webworks/strategies/engaging.htm

Appendices

Appendix A,
Figure No. 1
Links between internal and external communication

Internal
- ✓ Staff
- ✓ Top management
- ✓ Board of Directors

Identify needs
Identify tools
Build awarness

External
- ✓ Other partner org's
- ✓ General public
- ✓ Funders

Note. http://www.iisd.org/sdcn/webworks/strategies/engaging.htm

Appendix B
Graphic no. 1.1.

Sample structure

20,7% ■ Universitatea Romano-Americana

22,8% ■ ASE

56,5% ■ Universitatea Bucuresti

Note. personal research carried out with the help of SPSS Statistics 19 program and Excel

Appendix C
Table no. 1.1.1
The correlation between course attendance and the frequency of visiting the university website

How often do you come to the university?	The frequency of visiting the university website					**Total**
	Daily	Once a week	2-3 times a week	2-3 times a month	Several times per semester	
Every time I have courses	18	40	53	59	45	215
1-2 times per week	1	4	5	6	9	25
1-5 times per month	0	0	0	0	2	2
Several times per semester	0	0	2	1	1	4
Total	19	44	60	66	57	246

Note. personal research carried out with the help of SPSS Statistics 19 program
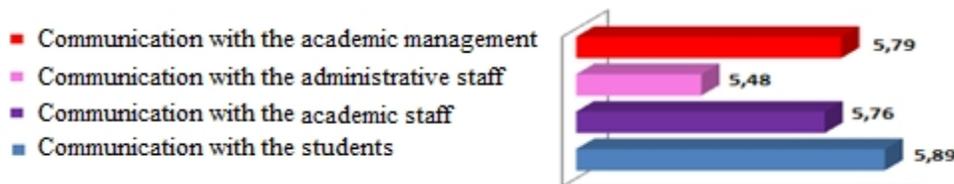
Appendix D
Table no. 1.1.2
Analysed variables

Analysed variables	Type of communication
Internal communication	Communication with the students
	Communication with the academic staff
	Communication with the administrative staff
	Communication with the academic management
External communication	Communication with potential students
	Communication with graduates
	Communication with the business environment
	Communication with the government
	Communication with the public institutions
	Communication with the society as a whole
Academic visibility on the market	The university benefits from a positive image among the public
	The university benefits from its reputation
	The university provides study programmes according to the labour market needs

*Note.*personal research carried out with the help of SPSS Statistics 19 program
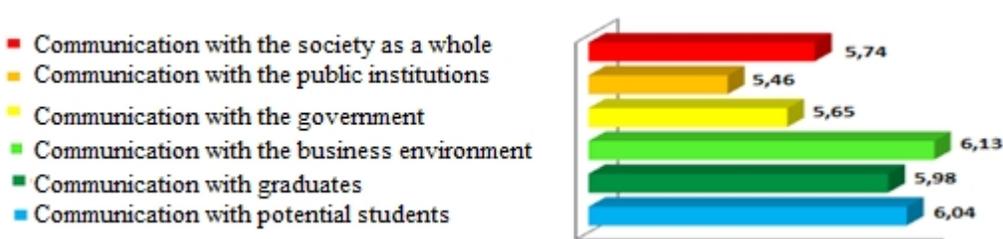
Appendix E
Graphic no. 1.2
Internal communication

- Communication with the academic management — 5,79
- Communication with the administrative staff — 5,48
- Communication with the academic staff — 5,76
- Communication with the students — 5,89

*Note.*personal research carried out with the help of SPSS Statistics 19 program and Excel

Appendix F
Graphic no. 1.3
External communication

- Communication with the society as a whole — 5,74
- Communication with the public institutions — 5,46
- Communication with the government — 5,65
- Communication with the business environment — 6,13
- Communication with graduates — 5,98
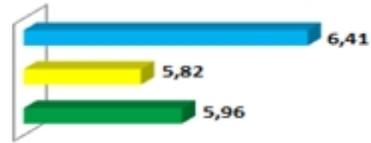- Communication with potential students — 6,04

*Note.*personal research carried out with the help of SPSS Statistics 19 program and Excel

Appendix G
Graphic no. 1.4
Market visibility

- The university provides study programmes according to the labour market needs — 6,41
- The university benefits from its reputation — 5,82
- The university benefits from a positive image among the public — 5,96

*Note.*personal research carried out with the help of SPSS Statistics 19 program and Excel

Appendix H
Table no. 1.1.3
Linear regression coefficients, Y – academic visibility, X = internal/external communication
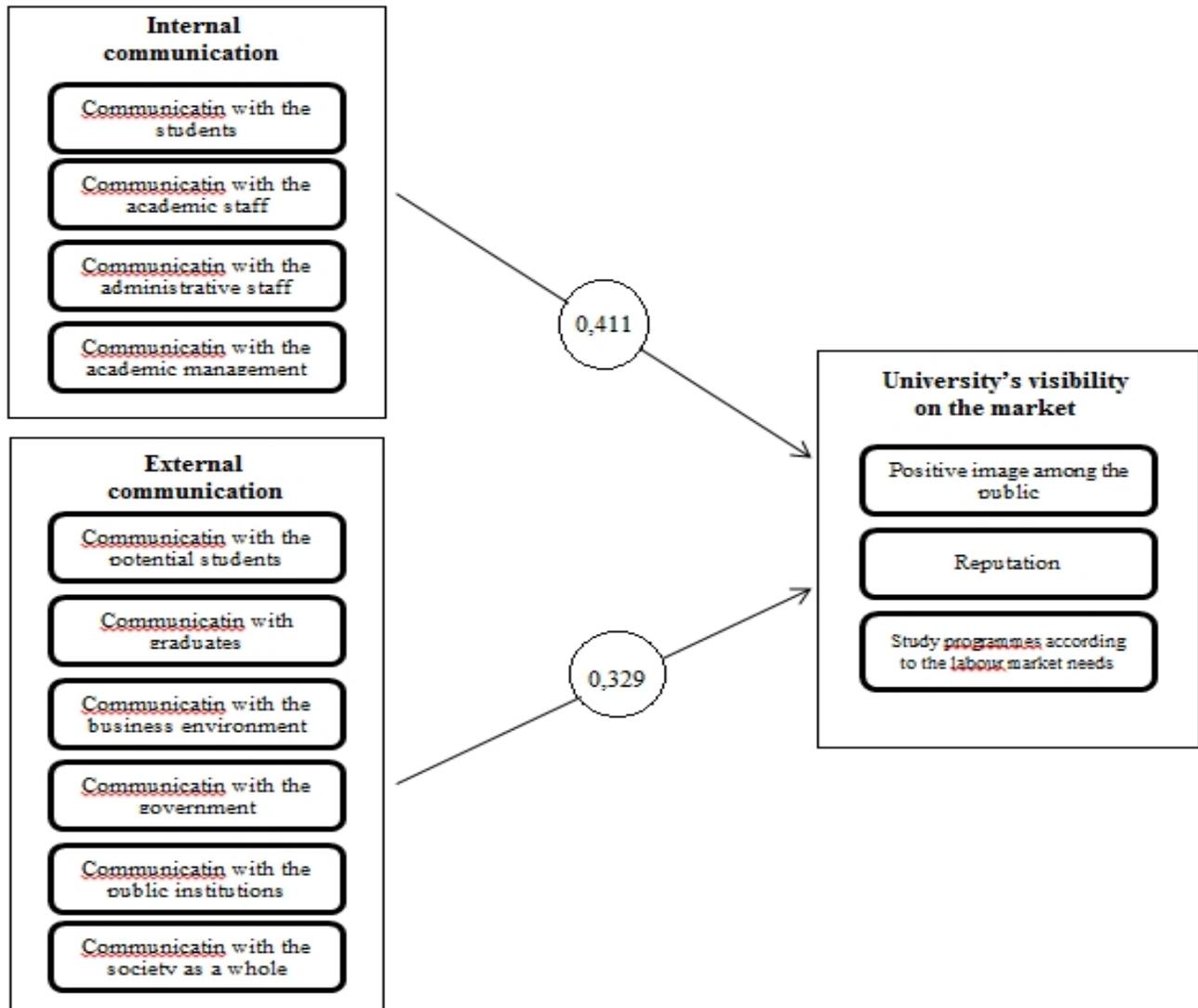
	Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
	Analysed variables	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1.	Internal communication	0,411	0,037	0,579	11,106	0,000
2.	External communication	0,329	0,040	0,463	8,168	0,000

*Note.*personal research carried out with the help of SPSS Statistics 19 program and Excel

Appendix I
Figure no. 2
Validating the model regarding the impact of the internal and external communication on the academic visibility on the market

Note. personal research carried out with the help of SPSS Statistics 19 program