

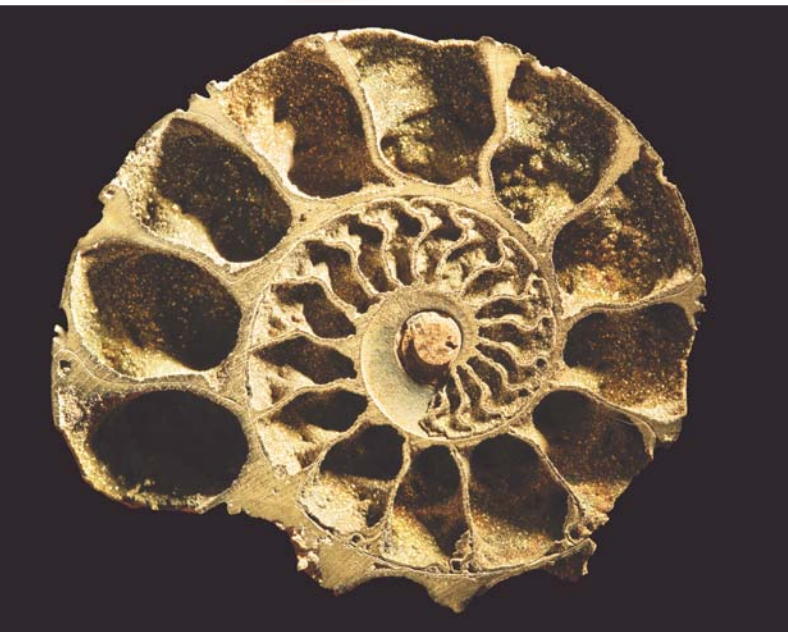


University of  
**Leicester**

# HELIX

## HIGHER EDUCATION: LEADING INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Summary Survey Findings: Scoping Internal Communications in Higher Education, Autumn 2008



University of  
**BRISTOL**

**OXFORD  
BROOKES  
UNIVERSITY**



Edge Hill University



Marketing, strategy and communications for an educated world





## Contents

### 1 Introduction

- Project background
- Audience and coverage
- Aims
- Defining good communications
- The phases of HELIX
- Project support

### 2 Methodology and survey response

- The sample
- Responses

### 3 Perceptions of internal communications in higher education

- Prioritization by Leaders
- Leaders' views
- Directors of Communications' and Human Resources' views
- Comparing attitudes

### 4 The managing and financing of internal communications

- Senior management commitment to internal communications
- Strategic planning and assessing internal communications needs
- Crisis communications
- Websites, newsletters
- Responsibility for internal communications
- Budget

### 5 Staff development and training

- Responsibility for training
- Recruitment and induction
- Communications training

### 6 Perceived barriers and critical success factors

- The role of leaders
- Main barriers according to directors

### 7 The impact of good communications

- Sector-wide examples of good practice
- Benchmarking
- Researching the impact of good internal communications
- Perceived return on investment

### 8 Desired improvements and future directions

- Leadership
- Directors of Communications
- Directors of Human Resources

### 9 Conclusions

### 10 Next steps and information sources

- Conference

# 1 Introduction



## Project background

In 2007 the Higher Education Funding Council's (HEFCE) Leadership, Governance and Management (LGM) Fund gave approval to HELIX, a project led by the University of Leicester. This project is designed to scope internal communications issues in higher education and develop a benchmarking and evaluation toolkit to aid HEIs in their internal communications work.

A key outcome of HELIX is to develop an internal communications model of good practice that HEIs can use to evaluate, measure and benchmark their internal communication and staff engagement strategies. <sup>(1)</sup>

## Project support

Alongside funding from HEFCE LGM fund, we have had generous professional support from UUK, the Leadership Foundation, CASE, the CIPR Education and Skills Sectoral Group, Professor Anne Gregory, HEERA, EUPRIO, UPA, Guild HE, UMF, AUA and CIPD. We would also like to thank all the project partner universities for their support, time and expertise, as well as all the universities that have taken the time to fill in the survey, and share their own experiences with us.

## Definition and scope of the project

For the purposes of HELIX, the definition of internal communications is:

'The communication that takes place between managers and staff and between colleagues within the same institution (whether on or off campus).'

The scope of HELIX will cover:

- The processes of staff engagement amongst all staff; from part-time lecturers, to desk security, to the Vice-Chancellor.
- How colleagues communicate with each other, when and how often.
- How information is cascaded (this will cover not only the vehicles of communication such as newsletters and websites but also the culture/structures that help facilitate or impede internal communication).

HELIX deliberately omits communications with current students. Despite being integral to the university, students can be classified as a customer group, subject to different information needs, and are not part of the employee contract. HELIX also excludes alumni and governor relations. Although these are very important groups, they hold a distinctly separate status mid-way between an internal and external audience.



## Aims

The aims of the project are:

1. To understand current practice and attitudes towards internal communications in the sector.
2. To identify and define best practice, drawing on case studies from across the sector, internationally and, where appropriate, from business and industry.
3. To create a benchmarking and evaluation toolkit that HEIs can use to evaluate and improve their internal communication and staff engagement activity.
4. To explore the impact of internal communications on staff attraction, recruitment and retention.
5. To develop training resources to facilitate improvements identified by the model.

## Defining the role of effective internal communications

An underlying purpose of HELIX is to raise recognition of the strategic importance that effective internal communications can have upon an organisation's success.

The HELIX project therefore proposes that effective internal communications is concerned with the communication of strategic vision and objectives, as well as news and operational information. It is concerned with the role of leaders, managers, processes and structures in facilitating communication. When these are effective, research from outside of the sector suggests that organisations are enhanced. (2/3)

The core proposition, therefore, is that not only is the concept of effective internal communications applicable to higher education, it is especially applicable because of the centrality and importance of people to the core mission and operation of HEIs. (4) HEIs are fundamentally about the skills, qualities and abilities of those who work in them.

## The phases of HELIX

The project is intended to span approximately 18 months, from spring 2008 to summer 2009. There are four phases, detailed below. This report concerns the first of these phases:

1. UK staff survey of Vice-Chancellors, Directors of Communications, and Directors of Human Resources (spring-summer 2008).
2. Development of good practice benchmarking and evaluation toolkit for higher education internal communications.
3. Reporting conference on internal communications.
4. Development of training module and resources for internal communications.

“Effective internal communication is concerned with the communication of strategic vision objectives.”



- (1) A survey by Watson Wyatt showed that firms that communicate effectively are 4.5 times more likely to report high levels of employee engagement compared with firms that communicate less effectively. Watson Wyatt, **Effective Communication: A Leading Indicator of Financial Performance 2005/6 Communication ROI Study**
- (2) In 2008 a study of 90,000 employees by New Towers Perrin found that companies with the highest levels of employee engagement achieve better financial results and are more successful in retaining their most valued employees than companies with lower levels of engagement. <http://www.towersperrin.com>
- (3) Proudfoot Consulting calculated the cost in productivity to German companies in terms of poor communications as 14.9 per cent of the gross domestic product. (Untapped Potential, 2002, Proudfoot Consulting)
- (4) UK higher education institutions' staff costs account for the bulk of their expenditure. Total staff spend was £12.2bn in 2006/07, 58% of the sector's total expenditure. HESA, **HE Finance Plus 2006/07**

*Richard Taylor, Project leader; Director of Marketing and Communications, University of Leicester*

*Louise Simpson, Project consultant; Director, The Knowledge Partnership*



## 2 Methodology and survey response

HELIX's first phase constituted a major survey of institutional leaders, HR Directors and Directors of Communications. The purpose of this survey was to establish the extent to which HEIs have engaged with internal communications from a management perspective. Is it embedded within the culture of the organisation? Is it measured and, if so, how frequently? Are there formal policies underpinning internal communications? Is best practice followed? HEIs have a clear view of good practice. How is it defined? Who is responsible for internal communications?

The project consortium developed three separate questionnaires to be sent independently to institution Leaders (VCs), Directors of Human Resources (DHRs) and Directors of Communication (DOCs).

The question topics for institution leaders were:

- Importance of internal communications
- Managing internal communications
- The role of leadership
- The impact of internal communications

Directors of Human Resources were asked about:

- Evaluating internal communications
- Managing internal communications
- Staff development
- The impact of internal communications



The Directors of Communication questionnaire covered:

- Evaluating internal communications
- Managing internal communications
- Staff development
- Internal communications tools
- The impact of internal communications

All of the questionnaires contained a mixture of both quantitative and qualitative questions.

170 HEIs from across the UK were invited to participate in the survey, between 28 January 2008 and 11 April 2008

## The sample

The following three key groups in HEIs were asked to complete the survey:

- Vice-Chancellor or designated head of the institution (described for the purposes of this report as Leaders)
- Head or Director of Communication (or nearest equivalent title)
- Head or Director of Human Resources/Personnel

HELIX was interested not only in their views, but also in the degree to which there was consensus between these different stakeholder groups in their approaches and attitudes to internal communications.

## Responses

Of the 170 HEIs written to, replies were received from:

- 58 Leaders out of a potential 154 (38% of the sector)
- 86 Directors of Communications out of a potential 168 (51% of the sector)
- 75 Directors of Human Resources out of a possible 153 (54% of the sector)

These were encouraging returns, producing what is probably the first full-scale survey of internal communications in higher education in the UK.

### 3 Perceptions of internal communications in higher education



#### Leader perceptions of the importance of internal communications

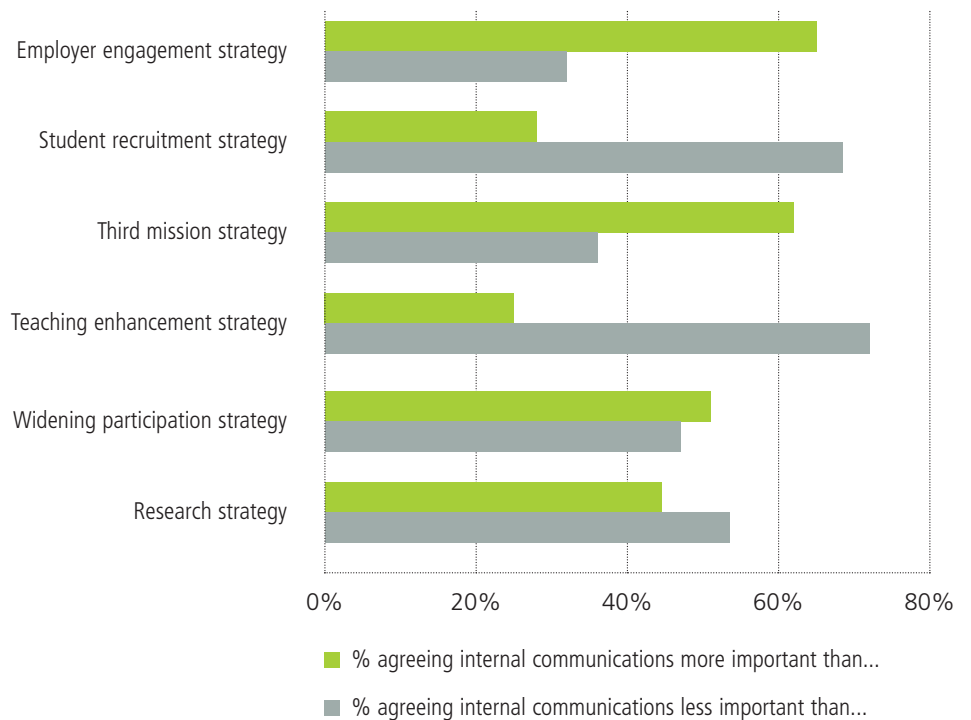
65% of leaders believe that internal communications is as important as external communications.

In order to gauge their view of the importance of internal communications, leaders were then asked how important a strategy for internal communications would be when compared with other institutional strategic areas.

Respondents believed an effective internal communications strategy was more important than the emerging employer engagement agenda, third mission strategy and widening participation. That is not to say leaders viewed these agendas as unimportant, but rather that they saw a strong internal communications strategy as essential to success in these other areas.

Only core mission strategies (student recruitment, teaching enhancement strategy and research strategy) emerged as other areas more important than internal communications. Even so, a significant proportion still viewed internal communications as a critical pre cursor to success in these.

Leaders' prioritisation of internal communications compared with other key areas

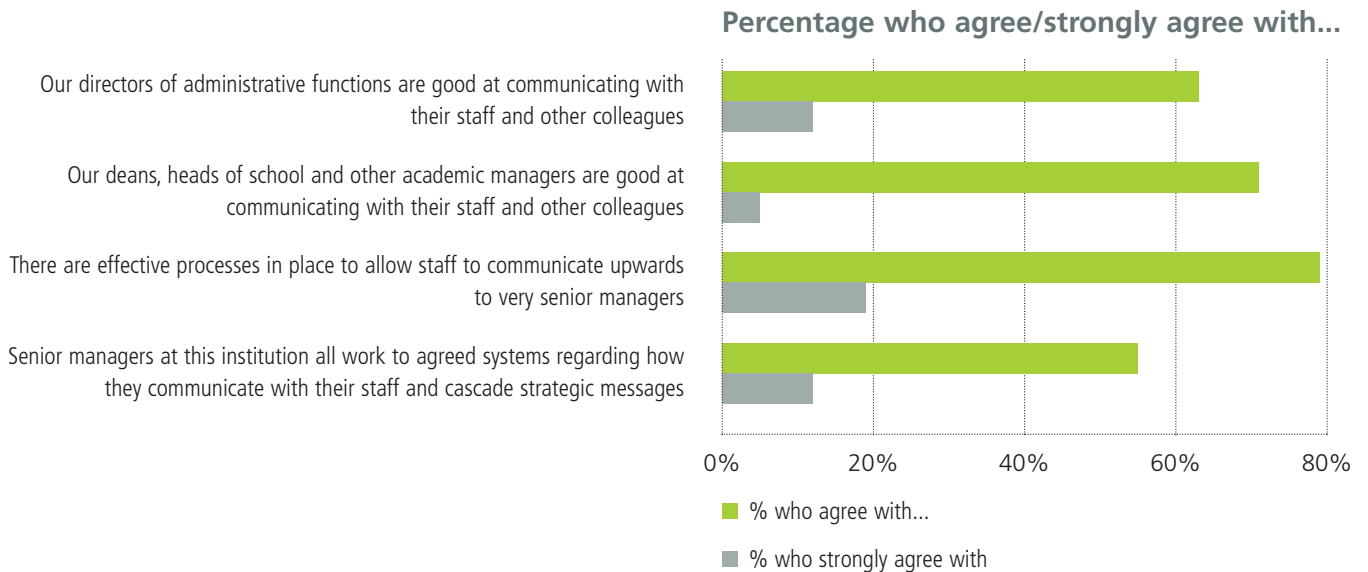




### Leader perceptions of the current performance of internal communications

Leaders have a fairly positive view of their structures and staffing in terms of message clarity, consistency and delivery of internal communications.

- 75% agreed or strongly agreed that their directors and deans were good, or very good at communicating with staff and other colleagues
- 98% agreed or strongly agreed that there were effective processes in place to allow staff to communicate upwards to very senior managers
- 67% agreed or strongly agreed that senior managers work to agreed systems regarding how they communicate with staff.
- *A separate question revealed that 74% of leaders think that universities are as good as private sector businesses at employee engagement*





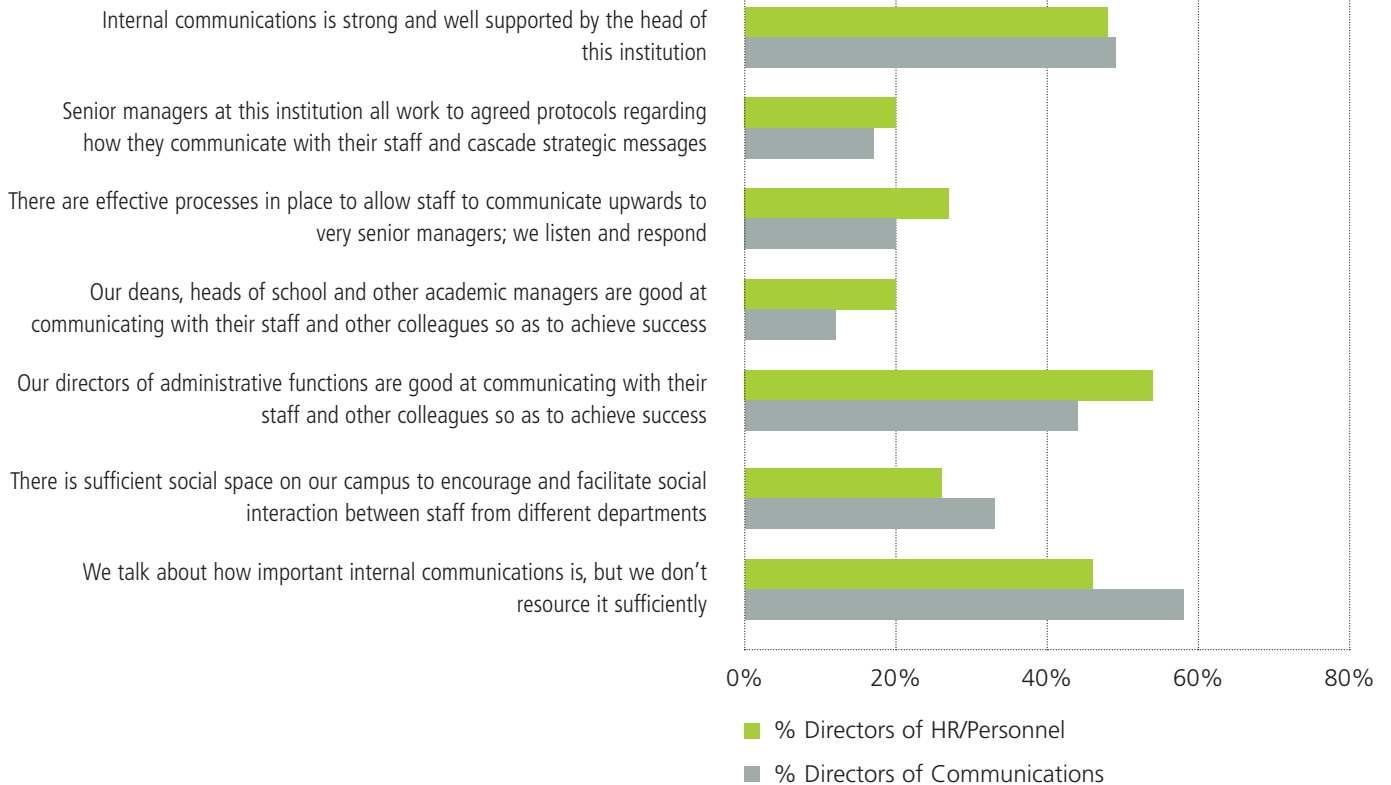
## Director perceptions of the value placed on internal communications

The Director samples were asked some different questions from those put to the Leaders, although some questions were the same to provide a comparison of attitudes (see section below). The Director sample was asked to rate the value attributed to and effectiveness of current internal communications at their institution. The results in this section combine the responses from both Directors of Communications and Directors of Human Resources.

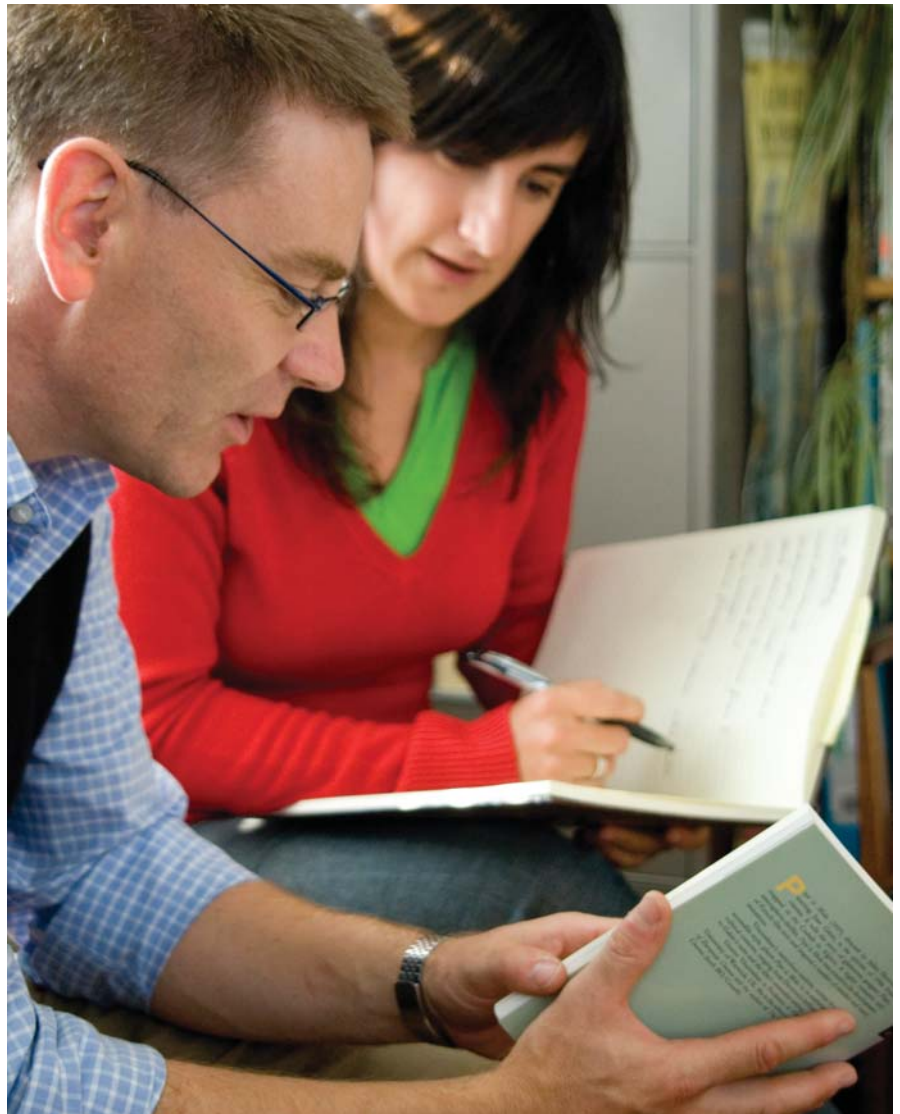
This sample was more pessimistic about the value placed on internal communications and the quality of current internal communications activities at their HEIs than the Leader sample.

- Only half of the Director sample felt that the Leader strongly supported internal communications.
- Only 20% of Directors of Communications and 17% of Directors of Human Resources thought senior managers were working to agreed protocols to communicate with staff, and cascade strategic messages
- The sample thought academic managers were much weaker at communicating than administrative staff.
- Neither group of Directors felt that there was enough social space to encourage staff interaction (only 26% of Directors of Human Resources and 33% of Directors of Communications thought social space was sufficient).
- 49% of the sample said that internal communications was supported but not well resourced.

Leaders' prioritisation of internal communications compared with other key areas



“71% of Institution Leaders agree or strongly agree that Academic Leaders are good at communicating.”



### Comparing attitudes

Leaders have a more positive view of staff's abilities to communicate. Directors of Communications and Directors of Human Resources take a more pessimistic view, especially of academic leaders.

% who agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements	Directors of Communications	Directors of Human Resources	Leaders
Senior managers work to agreed protocols regarding internal communications	17%	20%	55%
Academic managers are good at communicating	12%	20%	71%
Directors of Administration are good at communicating	44%	53%	63%

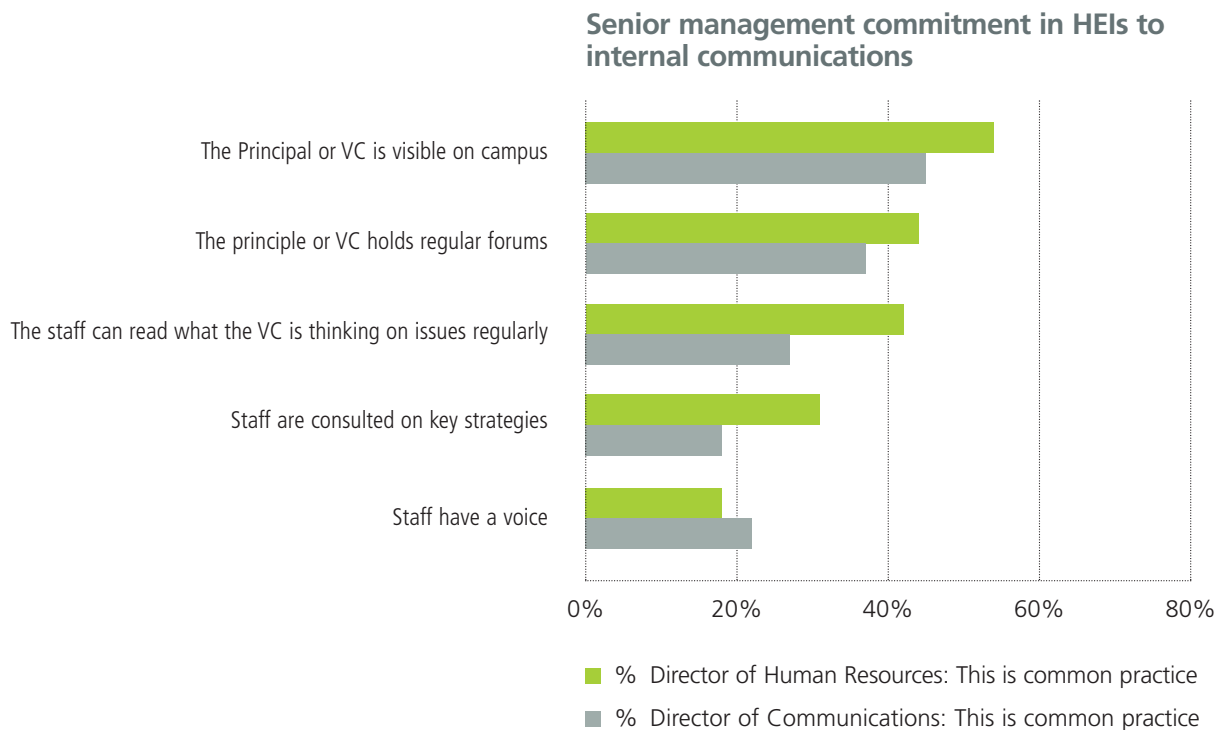
## 4 The managing and financing of internal communications



### Senior management commitment to internal communications

A variety of questions was asked of the Director sample to scope the degree to which Directors thought that other senior managers within their organisation were committed to internal communications, and the degree to which staff had access to senior management, and were consulted on strategic matters.

The green and the grey bars show where Directors think this is common practice.



“The majority of directors do not formally benchmark themselves against any other organisation in internal communications.”

## Strategic planning and assessing internal communications needs

The survey also sought to find out how universities currently plan, manage and resource internal communications.

The Director sample were asked how internal communication objectives and priorities were set in their institution. 57% of Directors of HR stated internal communication objectives and priorities were agreed on an ad hoc basis as the year progressed.

## Evaluating internal communications: current practice

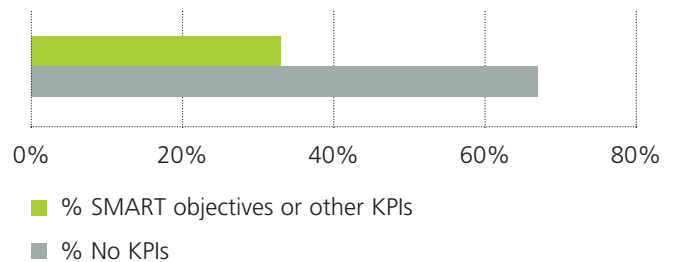
- A quarter of HEIs have never evaluated the effectiveness of their internal communications activities. (There was a consistency of response here: 29% of leaders, 26% of DoCs, and 35% of DHRs said they had not to their knowledge evaluated the effectiveness of internal communications).
- Half of the directors (50% of DHRs; 51% of DoCs) have never, or never knowingly, systematically researched the information needs, and preferences of staff as a basis for planning communications effort.
- The majority do not formally benchmark themselves against any other sector or university in internal communications – only 8% of DHRs and 10% of DoCs said they had engaged in formal benchmarking activity.
- When asked to comment on the efficacy of the internal communication methods used to gather information about employee information needs, the Directors responded with:
  - “The all-staff survey yielded useful and powerful information on this topic.”
  - “Road shows were attended by over 400 staff and students. Feedback was very helpful and we made good use of comment cards.”
  - “The staff survey included questions on communication as part of a far wider set of questions. It was helpful to identify overall issues but was not sufficiently detailed to inform a clear communication strategy.”
  - “The information gained is interesting, but it is difficult to get sufficient interest or resource to do anything about the outcomes.”
  - “We have asked questions on all staff satisfaction surveys carried out. This gives only basic information about the methods by which staff receive information and misses on clarity, effectiveness, understanding and engagement as a result of receiving information.” DHR
  - “Although the methods have given a good steer... they have not built a picture that allows us to demonstrate the importance of internal communications to the organisation. This means we can’t assess the relative importance or link activities where they sit under different functions.”
  - “Face to face (focus groups and individual interviews) possibly most effective.”



## Managing internal communications: current practice

- Almost two-thirds of directors (64% of DHRs and 65% DOCs) say they have no formal plan/strategy for internal communications. This contrasts with 71% of leaders who said that their institution has an internal communications framework or plan.
- Only 12% of directors say that they have one integrated internal communications strategy for the institution (23% say they have a strategy that is embedded in other strategies). 71% of leaders confirmed that their institution has an internal communications framework or plan so there is an evident lack of consensus between the majority of Directors of Communications who say there is no plan or strategy and the leaders who believe there is.
- Over two thirds of Directors of Communications do not have key performance indicators or SMART objectives (5) for internal communications (67%). This proportion increased to 83% for DHRs.

Proportion of universities with key performance indicators for internal communications (according to DoCs)



## Internal communications and the committee structure

This question focused on how the committee structure related to internal communications. We were interested to hear the extent to which leaders communicate with their senior colleagues at the top level of the internal communications chain.

- Leaders meet with their senior staff at least fortnightly in most cases, with the majority (77%) meeting weekly.
- 97% of leaders thought that 'Clear written terms of reference for committee members with standards for agendas, minutes and chairing' was critical or important.
- 97% thought that 'Communications skills were a critical factor in selecting committee chairs.
- There was 100% agreement with the notion that committee decisions should always be subject to consideration of how they should be communicated to those staff affected. This, as we see later on in section 5, is in contrast to actual practice in the sector.
- A large proportion, 75%, thought that committee chairs should be trained in communications.



## Crisis communications

The Director sample were asked if their institution had a plan for managing a crisis that included how to communicate with staff during and after the crisis. This appears to be an area of strength, with 70% of respondents declaring they have a plan for this area. A further 20% have a plan, but acknowledge internal communications is a weakness within it.

## Internal communication tools

In order to assist in the identification of best practice for the later stages of the HELIX Project, Directors of Communication were asked about the tools provided within the institution to facilitate effective staff communication.

- Most institution newsletters are produced monthly (31%), although 25% of respondent don't produce one at all. Most newsletters adhere to corporate guidelines. Only 15% allow letters and opinion pieces from staff 'that might not always accord with the corporate guidelines.' 93% of respondents have or are developing an intranet. 53% have weekly corporate news updates.

## Responsibility for internal communications

Research indicates that there is a shift away from thinking of internal communications as solely the responsibility of one office, since it involves so many types of expertise and has many stakeholders. <sup>(6)</sup> In the corporate sector, the main executive responsibility for internal communications appears to be in the 'corporate communications office' rather than human resources. In the business world, internal communications managers are often highly paid, with backgrounds in journalism or marketing, and responsible for training staff and senior managers in the presentation of corporate messages and integrated communications strategies that support business objectives.

All three of the sample groups were asked who they felt was primarily responsible for internal communications within their institution, and the results showed that there wasn't clear agreement:

- Directors of Communications are responsible for internal communications according to 56% of institutional leaders, 65% of Directors of Communications and 41% of Directors of Human Resources
- Another member of senior management team is responsible for internal communications according to 24% of VCs, 5% of Directors of Communications, 10% of Directors of Human Resources
- The VC is responsible for internal communications according to 10% of VCs, 5% of Directors of Communications and 27% of Directors of Human Resources
- HR is responsible for internal communications according to 0% of VCs, 4% of Directors of Communications and 6% of Directors of Human Resources

The results show that Human Resources has no perceived responsibility for internal communication although they are usually in charge of areas key to internal communications such as induction, recruitment, and training. The Director of Communication is the most likely director to be nominally in charge of this area. This position is not one that is always a member of the senior management team.



42% of Directors of Communications said they had a dedicated member of staff to deal with internal communications. The majority of HEIs quoted the number of staff as having this responsibility as one or two. The largest number of dedicated internal communications staff in one HEI was eight, although this stood out as being an exception.

## Budget for internal communications

Internal communications is hard to identify as a single budget head as it commonly lies under many different offices (Information Services, Web, Human Resources, Training, Recruitment, Marketing, etc).

An analysis of Communications and Human Resources offices, where many of the functions of internal communications often reside, revealed that:

- Less than one third of Directors of Communications had a defined budget for internal communications (although many others saw resources for internal communications as an integral part of their wider budget).
- Only 7% of Directors of HR had a defined allocation for internal communications activity (covering staff induction, staff development, management communications training, and internal staff conferences).
- Another 20% of Directors of HR had resources allocated to cover some or all of these areas, but it was not designated as 'internal communications'.
- A further 30% of Directors of HR used undefined HR budget to pay for some of these activities, but spending was ad hoc.
- 36% of Directors of HR said these activities were paid for by other offices.

The final 7% said that internal communications was integrated into all areas of work.

With internal communications not being segmented as a specific budgetary head, it is possible for it to be lost in terms of work prioritisation and perhaps more importantly in terms of evaluating its effectiveness. Research shows that companies who invest in staff engagement tend to outperform those who don't. <sup>(7)</sup>

- <sup>(5)</sup> SMART objectives – specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time bound. The origin of the term is unknown, but Peter Drucker, in his 1954 seminal work, "The Practice of Management" outlined a system that was very similar to SMART objectives while discussing objective-based management
- <sup>(6)</sup> The 2006 Macro-Trends in Internal Communications report, published by US-based Stromberg Consulting suggests an increasing collaboration with HR and marketing on the shared objective of understanding and building employee engagement. According to Stromberg: "Internal communicators need to consider the right mix of media, message and 'moment' to impact their internal audiences." <http://www.strombergconsulting.com/home>
- <sup>(7)</sup> The study **Connecting Organizational Communication to Financial Performance (2003/2004 Communication ROI Study™ Watson Wyatt Worldwide)** showed that a significant improvement in communication effectiveness is associated with a 29.5 percent increase in market value. Companies with the highest levels of effective communication experienced a 26 percent total return to shareholders from 1998 to 2002, compared to a 15 percent return experienced by firms that communicate less effectively.

## 5 Staff development and training



### Responsibility for training

If internal communication capacity and skill is to be developed in HEIs, then Directors of Communication (who are seen as the individuals responsible for facilitating internal communications see page 16) should engage closely with HR Directors. HR Directors are primarily responsible for training and development in HEIs according to the survey.

- Human Resources say they are largely responsible for ensuring management development opportunities are available. 46% say that HR is directly responsible for training managers. A further 39% say that they have some responsibility in these areas, shared with departments/other offices. A small number indicate that their Staff Development unit is totally separate from the HR function.
- 38% of HR directors indicated that any development needs are effectively identified through appraisals.

### Recruitment and induction

Induction and staff recruitment processes are key elements of a strong internal communications process.

- Most directors of HR thought that communications with prospective applicants, including job interviews, were 'fair' or 'good' but could be better.
- Nearly all HEIs (98%) offer an institution wide induction for new staff.

### Communications training

In terms of the quality and availability of specific communications training:

- 10% of Directors of HR reported that a manager's ability to communicate effectively is systematically evaluated.
- No institution systematically develops managers to be good communicators. For half of HEIs there is no development activity at all.
- Only a fifth of HEIs thought that their communication training for managers was very good/effective.
- 100% of Directors of Communications thought academic managers would be more effective if they were trained in communications.

## 6 Perceived barriers and critical success factors

“The leader is critical in establishing a culture of good internal communications.”



### The role of leaders

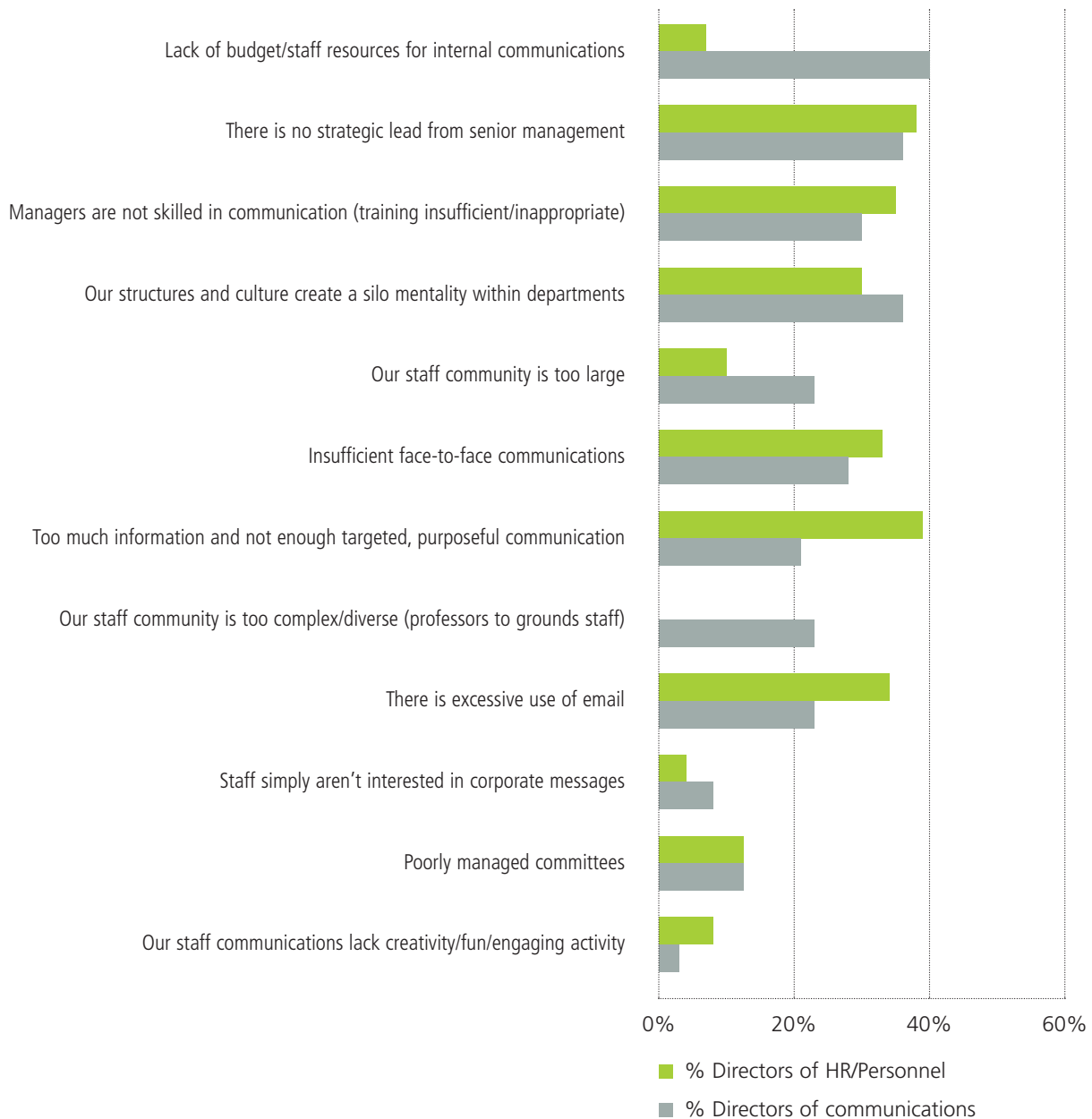
Institution leaders unanimously agreed with the statement ‘the leader is critical in establishing a culture of good internal communications.’ 97% also agreed that it was ‘critical for academic leaders to ensure that their vision and supporting strategies are understood by all staff’.

### Main barriers perceived by Directors of Communications and Human Resources

The Director sample were asked to rank factors they felt to be barriers to effective communication.

- For Directors of Communications, lack of budget was seen as the most significant barrier to effective communications
- Directors of Human Resources think that there is too much poorly targeted information and see this as the principal barrier.
- For both groups, ‘no strategic lead’ was seen as one of the most significant barriers.
- Both groups felt there was not enough opportunity for face-to-face communications
- Neither group think that poorly managed committees or lack of creative communication are significant barriers.

% rating as 1st or 2nd most significant barrier



### Other comments on barriers to good communications

“Multi-campus institution has particular challenges.”

“Individual difficulty among academics to see the importance of work of peers in other disciplines.”

“People pay lip service to it, but don't do anything. One result...is that when things are opened up, people communicate inappropriately and slow decision making down beyond reason. Too many behave badly after the decision is made, if they don't feel they have won the day. So it becomes easier to proceed by stealth.”

“80% of Directors of Communication agree that there was not enough sector-wide guidance on best practice for internal communication.”



## 7 The impact of good communications

### Sector-wide examples of good practice

Most directors strongly agree or agree that there is not enough sector-wide guidance for internal communications – 80% of Directors of Communications and 75% of Directors of Human Resources.

Few could name examples of international best practice in terms of staff engagement, but there were suggestions of UK institutions that were felt to be getting to grips with this area, or at least better at promoting their work in the area of internal communications. Most international universities that were seen as leading in this area were in the USA rather than Europe. A variety of businesses were cited as being strong at internal communications (particularly British Airways, Barclays and John Lewis).

There were many areas here that the Directors of Communications asked for advice on, from publications and email to senior management team communications and cross departmental communications.

### Evaluation and benchmarking

Directors of Communications were asked if they benchmarked against any other organisation to understand the strength of their internal communication. Only 10% reported that they benchmarked systematically against other organisations formally, while a further 56% said they informally benchmark.

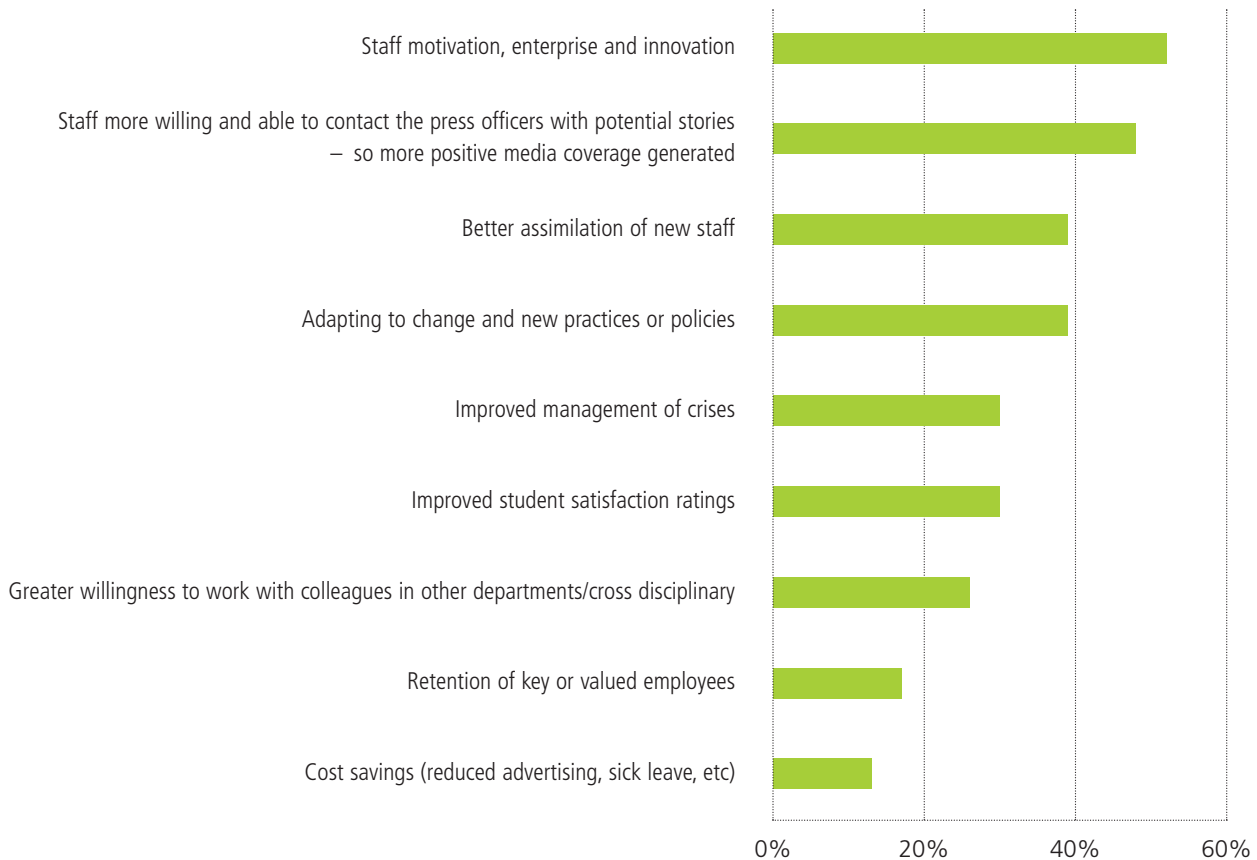
HELIX will create a simple system for benchmarking and evaluating internal communications.



## The perceived impact of good internal communications

A significant proportion of leaders reported that their organisation had empirical evidence linking internal communications to positive outcomes elsewhere in the HEI.

**Has your institution undertaken any empirical research or evaluation that demonstrates a link between internal communication and positive impacts on the organisation?**





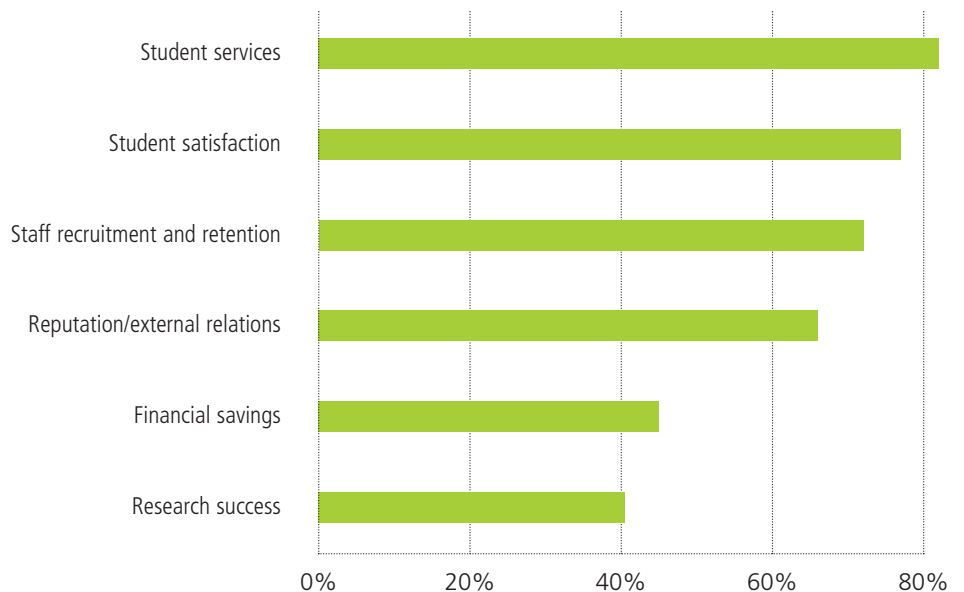
## Perceived benefits of good internal communications

We asked all groups what they thought the benefits of good communications were.

Leaders thought that the areas most likely to be enhanced by good communications are student support and student satisfaction, closely followed by staff recruitment and retention <sup>(8)</sup> and reputation.

Other respondents (Directors of Communications and Human Resources) agreed that good internal communications would have a positive impact across a number of areas of the institution, especially in terms of increasing positive word of mouth.

Area most likely to be enhanced by good internal communications according to leaders



<sup>(8)</sup> According to the CIPD (2006), recent research suggests that the push factors in resignations are a great deal more significant than most managers appreciate. A study by the Cass Business School puts the cost of recruitment to just one faculty at £175,000 a year. If this could be cut by only 5% a year, the saving to a whole university with five faculties would amount to about £44,000 per annum.

## 8 Desired improvements and future directions

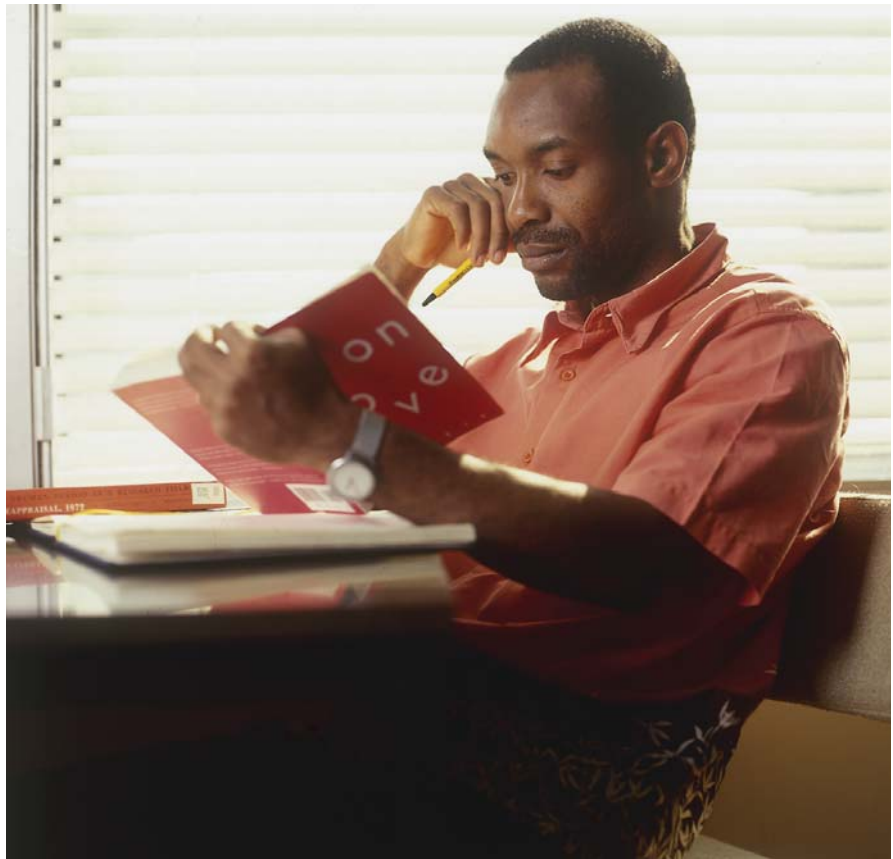


### Leaders

Leaders responded positively to questions about the effectiveness and professionalism of those around them in respect of internal communications. The qualitative comment areas of the survey revealed key frustrations, particularly in relation to difficulties in persuading staff to listen to what they had to say. Also of concern were managers being prepared to put time and effort into good communication themselves.

Leaders were asked what one practical improvement they would like to make to internal communications to enhance their university's culture. Here is a selection of their comments

- *To get all of my senior and middle 'managers' through a really good course on the importance of internal communications and follow up with an external review of the effectiveness/changed behaviour as a result*
- *To identify a quick and reliable way to get key information to staff other than through an 'all staff' email – we are exploring using an intranet home page as a way to do this in a lively and interesting way*
- *More consistent cascading of initiatives/decisions to those affected*
- *For all Deans to take on the responsibility for open communications*
- *Finding ways to communicate effectively between heavily devolved Schools*
- *To bring all leaders up to the standard of the best in communicating effectively to their teams and winning their trust and commitment. Have more face-to-face meetings and less communication through indirect channels.*
- *Persuade staff to read information sent to them!*
- *Have a very clear range of information about the University and its activities, protocols and procedures easily accessible by staff via a staff intranet or portal.*
- *Focus our communications through a Corporate Affairs Office within the V-C's office under the line management of the V-C with a dedicated professional supporting it.*
- *To understand that an internal communications strategy cannot be divorced from the core academic strategy of the institution. It is no more or less important than the core elements of our academic strategy (Research, Recruitment, WP etc) - it underpins all of them.*
- *To find ways of disseminating information about success in order to develop the self-confidence of the institution.*
- *Communication skills training and support for all staff in line management roles (whether academic or support)*
- *We have a good approach to communications with varied media and well qualified PR and communications staff but they struggle to understand the culture of HE and find it difficult to write in anything other than a kind of corporate PR speak. Discovering a more 'authentic' voices would help*



## Directors

There was a huge range of comments in the open section to the survey but when grouped into the most popular improvements the following priorities emerged:

## Improving internal communications

### DOCs

1. Make internal communications a Strategic Priority
2. Improve Intranet
3. Appoint internal communications Manager
4. Train Senior Leaders in IC
5. Improve Resources

### DHRs

1. More face-to-face meetings with senior staff
2. Single point for internal communications
3. Introduce a comms strategy
4. More 'all staff' meetings
5. Train Senior Leaders in internal communications

## 9 Conclusions



There are many human stumbling blocks to negotiate when it comes to internal communications. We live and work in environments overloaded with information. We receive too many emails and few of us have time to read the volume of material that crosses our desks. It is no longer sufficient to send out an email and expect this to constitute communication. There is a strong consensus among respondents to this survey that more thoughtful and segmented communications needs to take place, to focus on clear messages and facilitate genuine dialogue through the noise of overload and spam. For example, many universities are trying to instil a greater sense of collegiality through face-to-face forums, workshops and innovative building design.

A striking aspect of the survey was the number of people who responded, and the detail and attention they put into their comments. This summary is very much an overview, as the full findings amount to several hundred pages of information. The enthusiasm and willingness to provide answers and thoughts leads us to think that this is indeed an area of importance, in which people are keen to share, and hungry to learn.

### Impact of internal communication

Broadly speaking, leaders and directors agree that for communications and staff engagement to work, a listener as well as a speaker is required – in both directions. Internal communications is not simply a gravity, driven pipe between management and staff. There is also a strong feeling that internal communications is increasingly important: as important as external communications, say leaders. However it isn't likely to have its own budget, and 58% of directors of communication think 'we talk about how important communications is, but we don't resource it sufficiently'.

It is positive to see that many universities are looking at the impact of internal communications in relation to other areas of management, mainly through data collected in staff surveys, which are becoming increasingly common. Moreover, whilst there is no acknowledged best practice for higher education and very little benchmarking between HEIs or other sectors, there are some UK universities who appear to be engaging in innovative activity in terms of creative staff engagement and face-to-face communications. We will be visiting some of these as part of this study.

Most respondents think that improvements to internal communication will result in significant institutional benefits: reputational, financial and in terms of service levels.

### Managing internal communication

There is some confusion as to who is in charge. Directors of Communications appear to have the greatest managerial control over internal communications, but often in the operational areas of brand, newsletter and website. Human Resources are clearly in charge of key communications processes such as induction, orientation and recruitment, but leaders, Directors of Communications and HR Directors don't see directors of human resources as being primarily responsible for internal communication. However, it appears that Human Resources may be better resourced to engage in internal communications activity than directors of communications.

Directors of Communications see lack of resources as a major barrier to internal communications, and indicate this is the most substantial barrier to making internal communications improvements. However, most current commentary from academia and the business sector would suggest resources are only ever a small element of the issue.

Many of the comments refer to the 'lack of accountability', suggesting that universities are hard pressed to create a culture of staff responsiveness and corporate fidelity (and a few go so far as to doubt the desirability of this). People prefer to create their own rules. Leaders themselves deplore the fact that people don't read the main university communications. A key question communications professionals need to face is how universities ensure staff adopt some basic information standards to improve the quality of communication whilst not impeding academic freedom and the *raison d'être* of higher education.

Directors of Communications and Human Resources often feel frustrated at what they perceive to be senior staff paying lip service to the notion of internal communication but failing to make it a strategic priority. Leaders, whilst subscribing to the importance of internal communications, appear unconvinced that investment in internal communications in the terms described especially by Directors of Communications will pay dividends or deliver the desired results.

### Staff development and training

In order to have effective communications on the scale universities demand, some systems and protocols are necessary. However, the survey reveals firstly that many systems for internal communication are rarely effectively addressed. Universities do not systematically train people how to communicate and then observe them in this core task – there is almost an assumption that communication skills just happen.

Directors of Communications and Directors of Human Resources agree that mid/senior academic leaders are often lacking communications skills. Leaders tend to disagree and have higher regard for the communication skills of both academic and administrative colleagues. Perhaps this result is not surprising, but it would be interesting to see how these views are representative of other staff. The HELIX benchmarking model will address this in part.

### Evaluation of internal communications

Internal communication appears to be an area with little ongoing evaluation. Staff needs in this area are not routinely researched. There are few universities setting any key performance indicators (either formally or informally) to determine whether their internal communications are successful in any measurable way and contribute to the organisation's strategy. Moreover, few universities have an integrated internal communications strategy which allows senior management and directors to consider what actually needs to be done from an internal communications perspective to support other goals and vision. Most directors of communications therefore rely on a 'suck it and see' approach, reacting to problems rather than creating long-term solutions.

There is consensus amongst leaders and directors that internal communications is closely allied to strong strategic vision and effective management. It is seen as a fundamental part of leadership.

### In summary

Internal communications is perceived as a fundamental and important process in higher education. But according to respondents to the survey there are key weaknesses in current practice in the sector. The survey also reveals that the underlying roots of these problems cannot be simply resolved by increased investment or appointing more internal communications officers. Communications – including internal communication – should be strategic. By that we mean projecting a consistent and coherent vision and approach. The challenge for HEIs in terms of internal communications is as much about identifying and effectively projecting these, as it is about investing in the operational elements of internal communications.

## Next steps and information sources

HELIX will now build on the results of the survey as we seek to develop a model against which HEIs can evaluate and then benchmark their internal communications. The model will contain examples of good practice drawn from individual HEIs in the UK and overseas and where appropriate from business and the public sector. The model will not be prescriptive as to how HEIs should conduct internal communications but instead will hypothesise the main strategic and operational elements a HEI will need to have considered in order to succeed regardless of their environment and circumstances.

The project will be formally reported to HEFCE, and all findings and reports will be made available to the UK HE sector.

### Conference

A reporting conference is also planned for April 2009 at the University of Leicester.

For more information about the project, or for a place at the conference, please contact:

Louise Simpson:

[l.simpson@theknowledgepartnership.com](mailto:l.simpson@theknowledgepartnership.com)

The Knowledge Partnership

32a Bridge Street

Cambridge

CB2 1UJ

**Tel:** 01223-366327

**Mobile:** 07977 506722

**Web:** [www.le.ac.uk/helix](http://www.le.ac.uk/helix)



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UK

[www.le.ac.uk](http://www.le.ac.uk)

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