

# INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS AND STAFF ENGAGEMENT IN WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITIES

## Executive Summary

*Senior management perspectives and best practice*

*Research Project for W100 Membership Year 2010/11*



## The World 100 Reputation Network

MANAGING THE REPUTATIONS OF THE WORLD'S LEADING UNIVERSITIES

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## SUMMARY

We invited universities ranked in the World Top 100 and 200 to undertake this survey about internal communications and staff engagement in higher education. The questions follow the first management stage of the methodology HEliX, which was developed by four partner universities in the UK, Bristol and Leicester (the lead project university), Oxford Brookes and Edge Hill, and funded by the British government's Higher Education Funding Council. For more information, see: [www.le.ac.uk/helix](http://www.le.ac.uk/helix) or [www.theknowledgepartnership.com/uk/helix](http://www.theknowledgepartnership.com/uk/helix)

HEliX part one (known also as Health Check) works by asking respondents to rate their internal communications performance against 35 good practice indicators. Each indicator has evidence points to help the respondent decide the extent to which the indicator is met by his or her institution.

## RESPONDENTS

Twelve universities filled in all the survey, and we also had 10 partial responses. It was agreed that no institution would be mentioned by name, nor any person mentioned in this benchmarking report. Thus all respondents are anonymous. However, we do know where the institutions come from, and what jobs people do. Most are very senior roles, mainly directors of communications or marketing functions. There is one professor, and one Rector Magnificus (European equivalent of a President or Vice-chancellor). There is only one director of internal communication, and one internal communications manager. Surprisingly, there is only one respondent with an HR title, the Vice-President of Human Resources, which suggests that this area is largely a communications or external relations function, or it may reflect that our connectivity as a group is largely with communications directors.

Top universities from eleven countries are represented – Australia, Denmark, Malaysia, Netherlands, Norway, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK and USA.

## THE 35 HELIX INDICATORS

### University goals, ambitions and character

1. The University has a well-articulated vision that enables all staff to understand the direction of travel of the institution, its ambitions and priorities
2. Consistent with the University's goals, all academic and administrative departments have a vision that sets out their specific ambitions and priorities
3. The University articulates and amplifies its character and strengths to its staff, enabling them to understand and explain its reputation to third parties

### Leadership

4. Excellent communications skills is an essential selection criterion for all senior executive and heads of department positions
5. Internal staff communications is integral part of University decision-making
6. The senior executive team contextualise the environment for their staff (political, policy, economic & social)
7. The senior executive team distil and clarify key messages for staff
8. The senior executive team is highly visible and communicate regularly and intelligently with their staff face-to-face

### Strategy, accountability and evaluation

9. There is a robust corporate strategy for internal staff communications
10. Staff communications is effectively operationalised and resourced to ensure that it is effective and impactful
11. Heads of both academic and service departments understand their critical role in delivering effective staff communications and have systems and protocols to facilitate this
12. Staff communications is regularly reviewed to highlight needs, gaps and evaluate effectiveness

### News and message dissemination

13. University news, events and success stories are communicated to staff effectively
14. There are channels for disseminating and accessing local news around and between departments
15. Important and urgent news reaches staff swiftly
16. Innovation and creativity is in evidence in staff communications

### Information sharing

17. Staff have comprehensive access to the policies, plans & information they need to do their jobs
18. Committees, formal meetings and working groups are effective in terms of sharing information and communicating decisions
19. There is an effective email system and policy in operation
20. There is an effective University website in operation

### Campus space and collegiality

21. The University is easy to navigate physically
22. The campus environment amplifies the University's personality and engenders staff pride and affinity
23. The campus estate is conducive to good communications and networking

- 24. All staff are fully connected to the University regardless of their campus location, both physically and in terms of access to decision-making
- 25. There is a culture and professional processes that encourage staff to communicate effectively/network with colleagues in other departments
- 26. There is a social programme that brings staff together outside the working environment, encouraging them to feel part of the wider University team
- 27. Staff communications is designed to be fully inclusive, taking into account disabilities, and cultural issues

### **Crisis, safety and security**

- 28. Staff and managers are well prepared for crises
- 29. Staff can be contacted in an emergency
- 30. Essential security and safety information is effectively disseminated to managers and staff

### **The employee journey**

- 31. The University strives to ensure that through the recruitment process prospective employees gain a good understanding of the University's history, achievements, vision, ambitions and personality
- 32. All new staff receive timely and effective inductions to the University
- 33. Staff who have a front-of-house role for the University or a department are developed to be effective communicators
- 34. There is a comprehensive appraisal system that reinforces objectives, celebrates achievements and allows for discussion about the effectiveness of internal communications and staff engagement
- 35. All leavers are communicated with effectively and are given the opportunity to provide constructive feedback, including comments regarding staff communications and engagement

## OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

The indicators that were set out as being appropriate ones for British universities in the development of HEliX are also regarded as being important for world-class international universities. Most of the indicators were regarded as very important or important, and only two were felt to be of 'some importance'. None fell in to the lowest category of being 'of low importance'.

Staff engagement appears to be highly valued by most world-class universities, but performance is patchy in some surprising areas, and best practice indicators that might improve performance (such as regularly evaluating communications, and having a strategy for it) are weighted as being of low importance.

There are no particular countries that appear to stand out in terms of performance, and the responses are not wide enough to draw firm regional conclusions.

However, looking at the conclusions as a whole, we can learn something about what the senior managers of world-class universities value in terms of staff engagement, and where they say performance is weak and strong.

Roughly two thirds of the indicators for good internal communications were judged to be well executed (good or outstanding in these universities), but a third were well below standard (judged to be absent or just developing).

In the areas of best practice, the world-class universities appear strong at crisis communications and news dissemination. They are also good at campus communications, although rather strangely they don't think it is very important.

Where they are weak are in areas of leadership and strategy. The weakest indicators, which are all deemed to be very important, are:

- 4. Excellent communications skills is an essential selection criterion for all senior executive and heads of department positions
- 7. The senior executive team distil and clarify key messages for staff
- 9. There is a robust corporate strategy for internal staff communications
- 11. Heads of both academic and service departments understand their critical role in delivering effective staff communications and have systems and protocols to facilitate this
- 33. Staff who have a front-of-house role for the University or a department are developed to be effective communicators

## DETAILED CONCLUSIONS BY AREA OF THE HELIX QUESTIONNAIRE:

### 1 GOALS, AMBITION AND CHARACTER

All indicators for this first section of HELIX are deemed important, but only indicator one achieved a high performance score. This was:

1. The University has a well-articulated vision that enables all staff to understand the direction of travel of the institution, its ambitions and priorities

Whilst universities think they have a strong outward facing vision, the vision is not made clear to staff or cascaded down to departmental visions. For example, Indicators 2 and 3 were deemed important but practice was rated as being very weak for 2 and only average for 3 respondents:

2. Consistent with the University's goals, all academic and administrative departments have a vision that sets out their specific ambitions and priorities
3. The University articulates and amplifies its character and strengths to its staff, enabling them to understand and explain its reputation to third parties

So however visionary the university is, the departments and the staff are likely to be unclear on key messages and directions, perhaps conveying quite different priorities in their own departmental strategies. There is little thought given as to how staff can be trained to be effective ambassadors either, despite these universities having world-class profiles.

### 2 LEADERSHIP

Whilst the senior executive team is highly visible and communicates regularly with staff, internal communications is not integral to university decision making. Moreover, the indicator given the highest importance score is one where performance is actually rated as being very poor.

4. Excellent communications skills is an essential selection criterion for all senior executive and heads of department positions

It is ranked as 98 out of a possible 100 in terms of importance, but respondents only gave themselves an aggregate 55 score for performance out of a possible 100. If universities don't have systems in place to quality assure communications, then the failure of this indicator is very serious. We would argue that even if a leader is a good communicator, communications processes and evaluations need to be in place throughout the institution, as universities are simply too big to rely on a strategy of leaders being innately good at communicating, and needing no steering.

### 3 STRATEGY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND EVALUATION

Universities were weak on all indicators to do with organizing and monitoring staff communications, even though they thought they were all important indicators. Staff communications is rarely evaluated, very few universities (less than one third) have a robust corporate strategy for internal communications. One of the most salient points to come from this theme is that half of the universities did not believe they had the appropriate budget for internal communications to support their strategy, and good practice is only shared centrally, not across departments. Less than a quarter of heads are briefed on the internal and external communications strategy, or have protocols to quality assure information management. Staff communications are evaluated fairly regularly, but this is done internally, rather than by an objective third party. Very few have SMART objectives to monitor progress robustly.

### 4 NEWS AND MESSAGE DISSEMINATION

This is one of the strongest areas for the respondents and appears to be well managed, and highly valued. News is regularly and effectively disseminated internally. The main weak area is in departmental communications, where news doesn't appear to go between departments, and departmental heads don't always consider how best to communicate policy decisions or major change. Staff aren't told about new staff joining, or sent more advanced forms of news technology (e.g. public online lectures or podcasts). On perhaps a less surprising note, internal communications is not managed with such high quality as external relations.

### 5 INFORMATION SHARING

On the whole, most respondents did well with these indicators. Staff are given access to information they need to do their jobs, and email and web sites are deemed effective. The weak link is in terms of committees, which are not thought to be effective in terms of sharing information and communicating decisions. This is bad news for universities where much of business is conducted in committees, and if these are poor at communicating decisions, then it leaves staff fairly alienated from 'core business' and the politics of the organization.

### 6 CAMPUS SPACE AND COLLEGIALITY

Respondents didn't think these indicators were very important, but tended to do well in them. Staff find campuses easy to navigate and good for networking. Indicators 22 and 24 are rather borderline however, showing that the campus environment doesn't fully amplify the university's personality or engender pride, and not all staff are well connected to the university. Few universities arrange social networking amongst staff formally. The low point is that very few believe universities actively try to discourage a "them and us" culture.



## 7 CRISIS, SAFETY AND SECURITY

Most universities say staff are well prepared for crises and information is disseminated effectively. Indicator 29 however is slightly weak in that staff can't be contacted easily in an emergency at many universities, and not all have systems for dealing with electricity failures.

## 8 THE EMPLOYEE JOURNEY

Indicator 33 is regarded as very important, but performance is also really weak. One would have thought that world-class universities would put a lot of effort into their front of house presentation.

**33.** (Staff who have a front-of-house role for the University or a department are developed to be effective communicators)

Indicator 32 reveals that only half of institutions have processes to ensure all new recruits complete induction, with just a similar number having a system for these new starters to meet informally. The indicator suggests that processes are more important than personal contact when it comes to new members of staff.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

World-class universities need to consider how to improve leadership, and put in place systems and protocols that protect them from relying on people to deliver just because they are 'thought to be' innate communicators. At the moment, universities appear to be strong on tactical and operational communications, but poor on the things that they say matter most – leadership communications, robust internal communications strategy, ensuring heads deliver and lead visionary and intelligent communications. Of course, these are also harder to deliver areas and more subjective in terms of measuring success in than say more definite things such as email access or websites.

The weakest but most important areas (top left area of the quadrant – main report page 65) need to be attended to, and some of this requires evaluative and interventionist measures. Staff who are poor communicators in front of house roles should not be there in the first place. Leaders who fail to get their messages across or listen to their staff need training and support, or perhaps should not have even been appointed if this indicator is so highly valued.

At the moment, it appears that world-class universities are out of their comfort zone when it comes to setting out internal communications strategies and quality measures for staff engagement but good at circulating items prepared for external audiences (press releases, news etc.). Intention is good, but there is no operational clout or vision to ensure staff are listened to, and engaged with creatively, or led by managers with high skills and standards in communications.

As a note of caution, we should reiterate that many of the people who responded to the survey are communications directors, and there may be a sense that they have scored areas highly that they are in charge of (media, press, crisis, news dissemination) and more severely those that they are less able to influence (leadership, departmental communications etc.). HEliX is a two-part survey, and for universities wanting to fully understand their staff communications, we would advise them to run the second part of the survey as well as the Health Check, which allows comparison between senior management perspectives and all staff to provide a much wider picture of their own internal communications.

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## Other research by the World 100 Reputation Network

- ✦ Website best practice for world-class universities
- ✦ Structures, strategies and resources for reputational advancement
- ✦ Rise and Fall: Managing reputation associated with significant world ranking change
  - ✦ Internal communications and staff engagement in world-class universities
- ✦ How international PhD students choose top universities and interpret reputation and rankings
  - ✦ Choice factors in international Academic job change