

**Abstract:** In today's complex, globalised, and digital world the risks facing higher education institutions multiply. Like their corporate counterparts, universities are increasingly confronted with the challenges of different crisis events – the current COVID-19 pandemic being only one example. Due to the growing number of potential crises and the risen importance of reputation and legitimacy threatened by these crises, it emerges that strategic crisis communication has become indispensable for higher education institutions. While corporate crisis communication is a considerable sub-discipline of PR research, the current state of research for higher education crisis communication is surprisingly thin. To address this research gap, the thesis identifies if university communicators pursue strategic crisis communication, what challenges they face in the process, and whether their crisis communication is integrated in a holistic crisis management strategy, following the superior research question: *To what extent are crisis communication processes implemented in the crisis management strategy of higher education institutions in Europe?*

The crisis communication in higher education settings is analysed by means of semi-structured guided in-depth interviews with heads of university communications departments of various institutions across Europe.

The findings indicate that university communicators are well aware of the characteristics of professional crisis communication. However, when it comes to the implementation of concrete measures and processes there are huge differences between the diverse institutions. While pre-crisis communication measures such as relationship and issues management are quite far developed at most universities, many higher education institutions still lack tools and procedures, which guide them during the acute crisis phase. Nevertheless, communications departments seem to have gained more importance in the eyes of university leaders. This results in the fact that university communicators are involved in the overall crisis management of the institutions. Here, too, enormous differences emerge. While some institutions have a well thought-out, integrated and holistic crisis management approach, others lack clear processes; crisis management is not seen as a corporate task but is handled individually by separate entities. A problem that seems to root in the decentralised structure of universities. Yet, higher education institutions are in a comfortable starting position. Transparency and dialogue lie in their nature and they enjoy a favourable ground reputation due to their mission of research and education. All these characteristics are optimal conditions for crisis management and must be further exploited by universities in the future. Yet, to professionalise their crisis management and communication, higher education institutions need to learn to function more like companies during exceptional situations.

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