

EVALUATION OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION OF AN ORGANISATION ON THE EXAMPLE OF A STUDENT SELF-GOVERNMENT

Agnieszka MALKOWSKA^{1*}, Mariia VIKHASTA²

¹ Faculty of Economics, Finance and Management, Institute of Management, University of Szczecin, Poland;
agnieszka.malkowska@usz.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-3857-8946

² Student, Faculty of Economics, Finance and Management, University of Szczecin, Poland;
221904@stud.usz.edu.pl

* Correspondence author

Purpose: The aim of this paper was to identify, analyse and evaluate the communication system in place at the Student Self-Government of the University of Szczecin (UoS).

Design/methodology/approach: The research methods included a source literature analysis, a diagnostic survey, primary data analysis and observational study. A survey questionnaire addressed to the members of the Student Self-Government of the University of Szczecin (SSUoS), as well as a face-to-face interview with the SSUoS chairperson, were additionally carried out

Findings: The research showed that communication in the examined organisation is effective, the flow of information in the analysed self-government is adequate, and communication between the self-government members and the management and self-government members is considered as good, which is due to the tools used as well as the atmosphere in the organisation and interpersonal relations. Moreover, barriers to internal SSUoS communication were identified.

Research limitations/implications: The limitation of the research was the evaluation of communication in the student self-government of only one university in Poland. The research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Practical implications: The research can be used by student self-governments of universities to improve the effectiveness of internal communication and reduce communication barriers.

Social implications: Research may contribute to the improvement of the effectiveness of internal communication in the analyzed organisation, and thus influencing interpersonal relations in the student self-government.

Originality/value: The article fills an important gap in Polish literature in the field of research on student organisations, and above all on the identification of internal communication tools that are used in the organisation.

Keywords: internal communication, communication in student self-government, communication tools, COVID-19 pandemic.

Category of the paper: Research paper, case study.

1. Introduction

Communication in an organisation is considered one of the most important processes for a good reason (Guffey, Loewy, 2021; Petrucă, 2019). It is a crucial element in the operation of any organisation and has a decisive impact on its efficiency (Laužikas, Pranckuvienė, 2019; Husain, 2013), as the fulfilment of duties by its members is contingent upon effective exchange of the relevant information. Effective communication is one of the elements of an organisation's success. The communication process is designed to enable its members to perform tasks, express specific needs, and communicate the consequences of their actions. Good communication plays a special role at the time of transformation in the organisation and is the basis of all interpersonal and group relations. Internal communication is one of the key elements of developing organisational culture, facilitating company operations and preventing internal crises.

It is important to study communication processes of any organisation, whether private or public. The latter group includes student self-governments. The study of these organisations is advisable both from the point of view of university authorities, as well as the student community, including a chairperson of the student self-government, and the academic community in general. Moreover, the literature on the subject is fairly scarce, which additionally argues for exploring this topic.

2. Literature review

In the source literature, communication is usually defined as a process through which a person makes his or her thoughts, desires or knowledge known and understood by another person. Internal communication involves establishing and maintaining relationships between the organisation, supervisory authorities and employees to develop a sense of community (Karanges, Johnston, Beatson, Lings, 2015, p. 129). The primary purpose of communicating is “the coordination of instrumental and interpersonal behaviours of those engaging in communicative activity” and “it is not a matter of direct coordination of observable behaviours, but also the reconciliation of beliefs, opinions, and attitudes toward reality” (Fazlagić, 2011, pp. 97-98). The specific nature and efficiency of the internal communication process in an organisation is directly influenced by, among other things, the organisational structure, the level in a hierarchy and interrelations that exist between positions, as well as the communication potential of its employees.

In general, the issue of student self-government activity has been briefly discussed in the Polish academic literature. There are only a few publications pertaining to university self-governments. They address the following areas and issues: the impact of organisations on the process of university management (Bielecki, 2010); the structure of self-governments and the scope of their operations (Grzonka, 2012); the participation of students in the life of an academic community and the self-government organisations representing them (Muś, Depta, 2017); publishing activities under censorship (Centek, 2016); adaptation of “internally displaced” students (e.g. refugees from war zones) to the academic community through activity in self-governments (Krashchenko, Sorokina, Degtyarova, 2017); social involvement (Majewski, 2019); determinants of promotional campaigns of student self-governments (Bryk, Gębarowski, 2018); or the position of student self-governments in the statutory legislation (Musiakiewicz, Więznowski, 2019).

Studies by foreign authors have examined various aspects of student participation in the activities of their self-governments, including, among others: the development of academic self-governance (May, 2010); the process of electing organisations’ authorities (Lewis, Rice, 2005; Tilton, 2008); the relation between student activity and future political involvement (McFarland, Starmanns, 2009; Saha, Print, 2010); the involvement and influence of student representatives on university governance (Miller, Nadler, 2006; Lizzio, Wilson, 2009; Planas et al., 2013); the impact on student professional development (Dorozhkin, Zaitseva, Tatarskikh, 2016); gender equality in self-governments and women's participation in the actual management of organisations (Miller, Kraus, 2004); differences between universities from different countries (Pabian, Minksová, 2011); and the leadership development of organisational members (Alimbekova et al., 2015).

A review of the literature on student self-governance reveals a significant research gap, particularly evident in the Polish academic literature. This gap should be filled by studies exploring diverse aspects of the activities of student representative organisations, including, above all, completely overlooked dimension of internal communication of student self-governments, especially against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Research scope and methods

The purpose of this paper was to identify, analyse and evaluate the communication system in place at the Student Self-Government of the University of Szczecin (UoS). The following research hypothesis was formulated: The communication system in the UoS Student Self-Government ensures an adequate flow of information, which allows efficient communication and performance of assigned duties.

The research in particular covered such areas as: determinants of communication in the studied organisation, specifically in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the purposes of internal communication, the use of internal communication tools in the organisation and the evaluation of their effectiveness.

The primary method adopted in the research was a diagnostic survey. For the purposes of this paper, a survey questionnaire addressed to the members of the Student Self-Government of the University of Szczecin, as well as a face-to-face interview with the SSUoS chairperson, were additionally carried out. The interview yielded a great deal of additional and interesting information, which was then subjected to descriptive analysis. Fifty-six surveys, i.e. 63%, were considered eligible for the study. For the purposes of the paper, the method of literature analysis, primary data analysis and observational study was also used (the co-author draws on her own experience of participating in a student self-government). The results of the study are described and presented graphically through tables and figures.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Legal conditions of student self-government operations in Poland

The operation of a student self-government is regulated by the Act on Higher Education and Science of 20 July 2018 (Dz.U. – Journal of Laws – of 2018, item 1668). According to Section 202(2) thereof, “the bodies of the student self-government are the exclusive representative of all students of the higher education institution.” Thus, the student self-government in Poland is an organisation that represents the interests of all University students. In addition, it is an organisation independent of social and political organisations, not controlled by any supra-university self-government or administrative structures.

According to the Act on Higher Education, at least 20% of the collective bodies of higher education institutions are composed of student representatives, which means that they have significant influence on matters related to teaching, education, development policy, or legal regulations, such as study regulations or regulations on payment for educational services. Additionally, the student self-government participates in student financial aid committees.

Pursuant to the Act on Higher Education, the University of Szczecin Statutes and the Rules of the UoS Student Self-Government, the examined university is self-governed by all UoS students. The supreme legislative body of the Student Self-Government of the University of Szczecin (SSUoS) is the Student Self-Government Parliament (SSP), and the executive body of the Student Self-Government is the Management. It is composed of 7 members: The Chairperson of the Student Self-Government, the Chairperson of the 5 Standing Committees of the Student Self-Government (i.e., Legal, Internationalisation and Development, Teaching and Educational Quality, Scholarship, Outreach) and the Secretary of the Student Self-Government. Each of them has a specific area of competence.

At a faculty level, faculty student self-governments are formed with Student Self-Government Councils (SSC) as legislative bodies consisting of 7 to 13 members. Each council is presided over by an SSC Chairperson, who is an *ex officio* member of the Parliament. In addition, the councils elect 3 delegates to the SSC from among their members.

The tasks and powers of the Student Self-Government of the University of Szczecin include, in particular:

- cooperation with UoS authorities in the performance of tasks provided for by all regulations,
- representing the interests of university students,
- participation in the work of the collective bodies of the university,
- issuing opinions on student matters – collective or individual,
- undertaking activities for the personal and cultural development of students and for the integration of the University academic community,
- conducting, among others, academic, cultural, inclusive, and sports activities at the university,
- conducting activities at the university in the field of student rights, including those pertaining to social and living conditions,
- representing university students on the forum of inter-university student organisations, including the Students' Parliament of the Republic of Poland or the Forum of Polish Universities.

4.2. Internal communication in the Student Self-Government of the University of Szczecin

The analysed model of internal communication adopted by the Student Self-Government involves the use of a number of tools aimed at more effective communication. The first tool is e-mails, as they are more convenient, faster and cost-effective than traditional correspondence. Each member of the organisation has its own e-mail address. This allows an efficient exchange of information and documents.

Members of the self-government are informed, through written correspondence, about the current affairs of the organisation on a monthly basis. This is the official form of communicating information, including minutes of meetings, reports and statements. Google Drive tools (e.g. Google Doc – online documents, online spreadsheets, online presentations, etc.) are crucial for the circulation of documents and information between members of the Student Self-Government. Such tools definitely facilitate remote work and cooperation between members of the organisation.

SSUoS members' meetings, in connection with countering the spread of the COVID-19 virus, have been held online since 2020. To this end, popular web applications, Microsoft Teams or Google Meets, were used. Among other things, they enable real-time video conferencing, as well as sending text and graphic messages.

Another tool is the informal meetings organised by the Student Self-Government Management in a group of its members. They aim to increase their openness and build up trust in the body. The presence of the Chairperson at such informal meetings is conducive to the establishment of two-way communication without undermining the authority of the superior. Members feel valued and convinced that they play an important role in the operation of the Student Self-Government.

Social media also serve a crucial role in internal communications. Individual social media channels are run on Facebook. At the beginning of 2022, the site had 7.8 thousand followers.

As part of the survey, respondents evaluated five selected factors affecting communication in the organisation. Half of the respondents felt that both the management's communication skills and the organisational culture and atmosphere were important. A high percentage of respondents (i.e., almost 43%) additionally pointed to the communication skills of self-government members. According to the respondents, factors such as relations between self-government members or organisational structure are of lesser importance in this regard (Tab. 1).

Table 1.

Influence of selected factors on communication in the Student Government of the University of Szczecin

Factors	Evaluation				
	definitely bad	rather bad	neither bad neither good	rather good	definitely good
Communication skills of the board of the student parliament	-	-	14,3%	35,7%	50,0%
Communication skills of student parliament members	-	-	14,3%	42,9%	42,9%
Organisational structure	-	-	14,3%	50,0%	35,7%
Organizational culture and climate	-	-	21,4%	28,6%	50,0%
Relations between student parliament members	-	7,1%	14,3%	42,9%	28,6%

Source: own study.

Moreover, survey participants evaluated the quality of communication in the UoS Student Self-Government. 21% of respondents rated the quality of communication as definitely high, while 50% of self-government members considered it rather high or requiring minor improvements. 29% of respondents rated it as average.

In order to assess the quality of communication in SSUoS in more detail, its selected determinants were additionally analysed. Respondents rated the clarity and precision of the information and messages they received highest. This means that they are well formulated and recipients have no difficulty understanding them. Issues such as speed of information flow as well as reliability and completeness also received a high rating. The results of the survey reveal that the element that most impairs the quality of communication in the UoS self-government is the excessive amount of information received in relation to the essential information, for the efficient and effective operation of the studied body (see Tab. 2).

Table 2.*Evaluation of selected elements characterising the communication process*

Factors	Evaluation				
	definitely bad	rather bad	neither bad neither good	rather good	definitely good
Access to information	-	-	7,1%	42,9%	42,9%
Speed of information flow affecting timeliness of information/messages	-	-	14%	35,7%	57,1%
Amount of information received in relation to the amount of information needed	-	-	21,4%	42,9%	35,7%
Reliability and completeness of the received information	-	-	7,1%	35,7%	57,1%
Clarity (comprehension) and accuracy of the information/messages received	-	-	7,1%	28,6%	64,3%
Adapting communication activities to the needs of student parliament members	-	-	7,1%	42,9%	50%

Source: own study.

As part of the survey, respondents also assessed the frequency of use of communication tools in the self-government (see Tab. 3).

Table 3.*Evaluation of the usage and functioning of selected communication tools*

Communication tools	Evaluation				
	definitely bad	rather bad	neither bad neither good	rather good	definitely good
Instruments requiring direct contact					
Face-to-face conversations	-	-	35,7%	21,4%	42,9%
Meetings	-	-	14,3%	42,9%	42,9%
Consultation hours of the board of the student parliament	-	-	21,4%	50%	28,6%
Trainings	-	-	14,3%	57,1%	28,6%
Integration events	-	-	28,6%	21,4%	50%
Celebrating the holidays	-	-	28,6%	35,7%	35,7%
Print and electronic forms					
Paper correspondence	-	21,4%	35,7%	28,6%	14,3%
E-mail	-	-	14,3%	14,3%	71,4%
Noticeboards	-	7,1%	28,6%	35,7%	28,6%
Boxes of ideas and complaints	-	7,1%	35,7%	28,6%	21,4%
Reports and statements	-	7,1%	21,4%	35,7%	35,7%
Informal meetings of the student parliament members	-	-	21,4%	28,6%	50%
Informal meetings of the student parliament members with the president of student parliament	-	-	28,6%	28,6%	42,9%

Source: own study.

In terms of face-to-face communication, meetings have proven to be the most important, as information is provided by the management immediately, and it relates to the current situation, ongoing projects, plans for the following months and current organisational matters. In terms of printed and electronic forms, respondents considered e-mails to be the most satisfactory tools, and in the area of informal communication tools, respondents rated informal meetings of self-government members highest.

Respondents considered face-to-face conversations (78%), meetings (71%), Messenger (50%) and e-mail (43%) as the most preferred internal communication tools. Team-building events (28.6%) and a suggestion box (14.3%) were less popular. The survey of opinions and attitudes of self-governments was considered least relevant (7.1%).

The survey not only identified the preferred communication tools, but also assessed the effectiveness of the communication channels used by the student self-government. An overwhelming majority, as many as 92% of respondents, considers face-to-face conversations to be the most effective. This is followed by meetings (64%) and e-mails (43%). The information obtained at the meetings are of great importance for self-government members, as it allows them to develop lasting relationships. During these meetings, the condition of SSUoS is presented and the current challenges faced by the organisation are discussed.

The results of the survey show that the main obstacle to efficient communication was information overload (64.3%) and the lack of direct contact between all self-government members (50%), which was mainly due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 1).

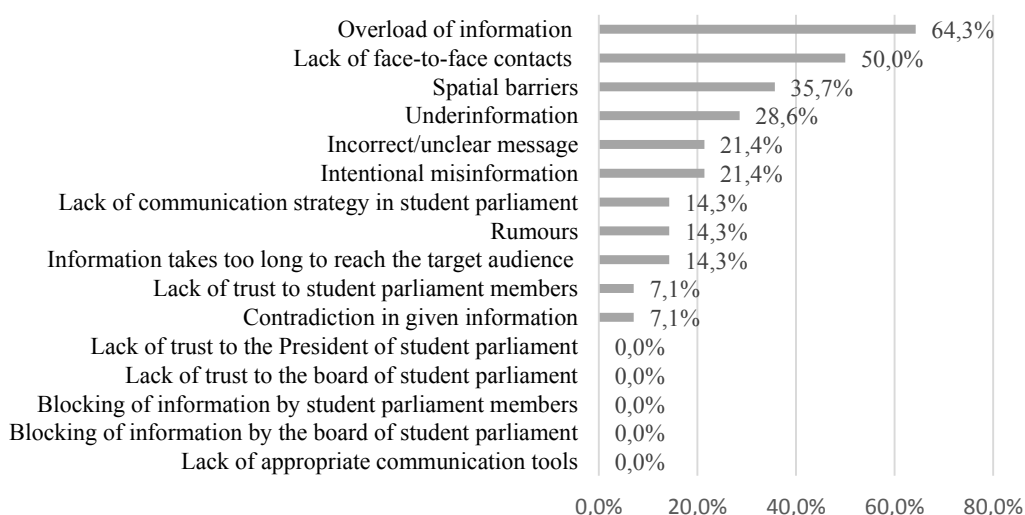


Figure 1. Barriers to effective communication within the student parliament members of the University of Szczecin. Source: own study.

More than 86% of respondents believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the effectiveness of the communication system in the UoS Student Self-Government. Eliminating the above obstacles is not an easy task, yet necessary to improve internal communication within the organisation, and the responsibility in this area within the Student Self-Government lies primarily with the Chairperson. The Chairperson realises the powerful impact of communication on self-government operations. Information flow is a crucial element in the effective communication between self-government members. It was stressed that the current communication system fulfilled the needs and expectations of self-government members. It allows members of the organisation to interact at all levels. In addition, it contributes to a communication system that helps meet their communication needs. According to the Chairperson, informal communication has a greater impact on the operation of the self-

government than formal communication. A communication system adopted in the self-government, based on openness and reliability of students, is more effective than formal communication. These activities should be considered as positive.

The SSUoS Chairperson stressed that some communication problems occur in the organisation, e.g. ignoring certain messages, but he strived to solve them on an ongoing basis, in consultation with the management. In addition, a so-called “Self-Government Handbook” has been developed to introduce the structure of self-government, its rules and responsibilities. Furthermore, a training programme to improve communication skills among self-government members was completed.

5. Summary

Internal communication is a significant aspect of the operation of such organisations as student self-governments within higher education institutions. The study showed that the communication system in the Student Self-Government of the University of Szczecin ensures an adequate flow of information, which allows efficient communication and performance of assigned duties by all its members. Self-government members are both senders and receivers of messages. They possess good communication skills, and the experience they have gained and the relationships between them significantly affect the quality of communication in the organisation under study. Feedback enables effective intra-organisational communication. An adequate number of verbal and non-verbal messages delivered to self-government members results in an increased information flow, well-informed receivers and more frequent face-to-face contacts between self-government members, and additionally reduces communication barriers.

It was confirmed that internal communication is a process of particular importance for the operation of the Student Self-Government of the University of Szczecin. The scope of communication activities in the examined organisation is very well known to its members, including the chairperson and the management. The management's priority is to create and maintain a communication system that meets the communication needs of students. The effectiveness of an organisation's communication system is based on streamlining the flow of information. The significant impact of two-way interpersonal and communication relationships on the activities of the entire UoS Student Self-Government was confirmed. The management builds communication awareness in self-government members with the appropriate management tools. To avoid communication problems, the chairperson, in cooperation with the management, strives to fit new members into the organisational culture of the self-government and draws on the experience of self-government members in crisis situations, while placing great trust in them. The self-reliance of the members of the self-

government in their day-to-day duties has contributed to building a highly effective system of communication in all areas.

The internal communication system in place at self-government of the University of Szczecin functions well, although the survey also revealed communication barriers. The main barriers include information overload, lack of face-to-face contacts between all self-government members, and spatial barriers due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it should be emphasised that the chairperson and the management of the studied organisation are aware of the barriers that have arisen and are taking initiatives to eliminate or reduce them.

Based on the research performed, the hypothesis was confirmed. It was proven that communication in the examined organisation is characterised by high efficiency. Therefore, it may be assumed that it will allow the student self-government to continue its activity and to develop.

References

1. Alimbekova, A.A., Bakyt, A.Z., Kyyakbaeva, U.K., Suranshieva, M.K. (2015). Leadership Development University Students in the Activities of Student Government. *Procedia — Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 197, pp. 2131-2136.
2. Bryk, J., Gębarowski, M. (2018) Uwarunkowania aktywności promocyjnej samorządów studenckich. *Marketing Instytucji Naukowych i Badawczych*, 4(30), pp. 1-17.
3. Dorozhkin, E.M., Zaitseva, E.V., Tatarskikh, B.Y. (2016). Impact of student government bodies on students' professional development. *Mathematics Education*, 11(7), pp. 2666-2677.
4. Fazlagić, J. (2011). Dzielenie się wiedzą wg psychologii ewolucyjnej i ekonomii behawioralnej. *Problemy Jakości*, 43(4), pp. 8-12.
5. Grzonka, P. (2012). Struktura i funkcjonowanie samorządu studenckiego na przykładzie Uniwersytetu Śląskiego w Katowicach. In: A. Turska-Kawa (Eds.), *Polityka w opinii młodych* (pp. 183-200). Katowice: Idee–Instytucje–Obywatele.
6. Guffey, M.E., Loewy, D. (2021). *Business communication: Process & product*. Cengage Learning.
7. Husain, Z. (2013). Effective communication brings successful organizational change. *The Business & Management Review*, 3(2), p. 8.
8. Karanges, E., Johnston, K., Beatson, A., Lings, I. (2015). The influence of internal communication on employee engagement: A pilot study. *Public relations review*, 41(1), pp. 129-131.
9. Krashchenko, Y., Sorokina, H., Degtyarova, I. (2017). The Conditions of Adaptation of „Internally Displaced Persons” to University Environment by Means of Students' Self-Government. *Studia Warmińskie*, 54, pp. 385-393.

10. Laužikas, M., Pranckuvienė, A. (2019). Communication efficiency and effectiveness within strategic management of change: hierarchy and strategy development in Lithuanian civil service organizations. *Journal of security and sustainability issues*, 8(4), pp. 617-630.
11. Lewis, K.M., Rice, T.W. (2005). Voter Turnout in Undergraduate Student Government Elections. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 38(4), pp. 723-729.
12. Lizzio, A., Wilson, K. (2009). Student participation in university governance: the role conceptions and sense of efficacy of student representatives on departmental committees. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(1), pp. 69–84.
13. Majewski, B. (2019). Zaangażowanie społeczne na studiach – samorząd i organizacje studenckie. *Com. press*, 4(2), pp. 58-59.
14. May, W.P. (2010). The History of Student Governance in Higher Education. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 28(2), pp. 207-220.
15. McFarland, D.A., Starmanns, C. (2009). Inside Student Government: The Variable Quality of High School Student Councils. *Teachers College Record*, 111(1), pp. 27-54.
16. Miller, C.D., Kraus, M. (2004). Participating but Not Leading: Women's Under-Representation in Student Government Leadership Positions. *College Student Journal*, 38(3), pp. 423-427.
17. Miller, M.T., Nadler, D.P. (Eds.). (2006). *Student Governance and Institutional Policy: Formation and Implementation*. Greenwich: Information Age Publishing.
18. Muś, A., Depta, A. (2017). Partycypacja studentów w życiu wspólnoty akademickiej na przykładzie Uniwersytetu Śląskiego w Katowicach: raport z badań. *Górnośląskie Studia Socjologiczne. Seria Nowa*, 8, pp. 202-219.
19. Musiałkiewicz, R., Więznowski, P. (2019). Pozycja samorządu studenckiego w ustawie z dnia 20 lipca 2018 r. Prawo o szkolnictwie wyższym i nauce. *Zeszyty Naukowe Zbliżenia Cywilizacyjne, Vol. 15, Iss. 3*, pp. 66-89.
20. Petrucă, I. (2019). Managing the Image of the Organization in the Communicational Process. *International Journal of Communication Research*, 9(4), pp. 318-321.
21. Planas, A., Soler, P., Fullana, J., Pallisera, M., Vila, M. (2011). Student participation in university governance: the opinions of professors and students. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(4), pp. 571-583.
22. Regulamin Samorządu Studenckiego Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego (2020). Szczecin: Uniwersytet Szczeciński.
23. Saha, L.J., Print, M. (2010). Student school elections and political engagement: A cradle of democracy? *International Journal of Educational Research*, 49, pp. 22-32.
24. Tilton, S. (2008). Virtual polling data: A social network analysis on a student government election. *Webology*, 5(4), pp. 1-8.
25. Ustawa z dnia 20 lipca 2018 r. Prawo o szkolnictwie wyższym i nauce (Dz.U. 2018, poz. 1668).