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## Comunicación y excelencia en la universidad privada como organización híbrida

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### Resumen

En este artículo se reflexiona sobre el papel de la excelencia en comunicación como un elemento esencial de la excelencia organizacional. Características de la excelencia organizacional, académica y comunicativa se sistematizan en un marco integral explorado empíricamente en tres universidades privadas de reconocida excelencia en Argentina, España y Lituania. Estas instituciones son además organizaciones híbridas por su doble propósito: la misión inherente a una universidad y el fin particular de una empresa privada. El trabajo de campo se basa en un estudio de caso múltiple con métodos combinados: encuesta piloto, entrevistas a expertos y entrevistas en profundidad. Los resultados de la encuesta piloto ilustran elementos de excelencia institucional y gestión de la comunicación avalados por Alumni de las tres universidades. Los 17 expertos en comunicación destacan factores críticos para el estatus estratégico de la función de comunicación. Los 56 entrevistados avalan la calidad académica alcanzada y el capital relacional.

**Palabras clave:** gestión estratégica, comunicación institucional, excelencia organizacional, educación superior, evaluación.

## Communication for excellence in private universities as hybrid organizations

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### Abstract

This work seeks to examine the role of excellence in communication as an essential element of overall organizational excellence. Features of organizational, academic and communication excellence are systematized into a comprehensive framework empirically explored in three private universities of Argentina, Spain and Lithuania. These excellent institutions are considered hybrid organizations having a dual purpose: the inherent mission attributed to a university and the particular corporate purpose of a private enterprise. The empirical work follows a multiple case study design with combined methods for data collection: pilot survey (quantitative analysis), expert interviews and in-depth interviews (thematic content analysis of qualitative data). Survey responses illustrate elements of institutional excellence and communication management endorsed by Alumni from the three universities. Communication experts (17 from the 3 countries) highlight critical factors for strategic status of communication function. Interviewees (56) endorse achieved academic quality and relational capital. Yet, the institutionalization of communication as strategic managerial function remains a challenge, as does the systematic evaluation of consistent communication work which directly and indirectly impacts institutional excellence.

**Keywords:** strategic management, institutional communication, organizational excellence, higher education, evaluation.

## 1. Introduction

Excellence is a holistic and comprehensive concept which embraces the overall performance of an individual and an organization, the pursuit of 'total quality' in every area of human activity with a declared commitment to deliver excellence.

Organizations are considered excellent when they manage to achieve and sustain outstanding levels of performance whereby the expectations of all stakeholders are met and sometimes also exceeded (EFQM, 2012). Excellent organizations strive for quality at the highest possible degree and this becomes an inherent characteristic that drives every step towards the fulfilment of the needs and expectations of all interested parties (Nenadál, Vykydal and Waloszek, 2018). In other words, sustained success comes as the result of consistent, persistent and purposeful search for excellence through quality in every area of performance.

In this study attention is drawn to the specific reality of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and particularly to private universities as hybrid institutional forms within the HE organizational field (Pache and Santos, 2013); (Kleinman *et al.*, 2018).

Private universities are dual-purpose organizations, where two institutional logics coexist: the social logic of an educational institution and the commercial logic of a business private enterprise, hence the attribute of *entrepreneurial* university (Audretsch, 2014); (Guerrero *et al.*, 2016). By combining the best attributes of two organizational species, private universities can also be seen as the result of a conscious crossing in order to improve species (Figuroa Herrera, 2016). In short, private universities can be counted amongst hybrid organizations (Klofsten *et al.*, 2019); (Kleinman *et al.*, 2018); (Secinaro *et al.*, 2019) that pursue an explicit social mission (educational) through strategies inspired by business. However, this type of universities does not operate merely driven by the express objective of creating market imbalance, but rather to challenge the HE sector with an offer of quality and exclusivity, which to a certain extent, may differ from public education.

In the journey towards excellence, every organizational sphere and every member is expected to contribute its part in order to ensure that organizational systems are aligned and functioning cohesively together towards the common search of organizational excellence (Nenadál, Vykydal and Waloszek, 2018).

Communication as a key managerial function ought to be a strategic companion along this excellence journey, where it can make a unique contribution. Communication excellence is an essential component of the wholesome excellence an organization aspires to achieve.

An organization cannot be held excellent without excellence in communication. Scholars advocate the communicative constitution of organizations claiming that the organization is an effect of communication rather than its predecessor and thus it has a primordial role to play (McPhee and Zaugg, 2009);(Putnam and Nicoletta, 2009);(Zerfass, 2008);(Gregory, 2013);(Craig, 2000).

The theoretical implications that underlie the proliferous development of models and managerial tools for quality and excellence evaluation call for thorough analysis of key constructs in management and communication theories and the way they interrelate and converge in the organizational reality towards the attainment of excellence goals.

Academic excellence and overall organizational excellence can be encountered amongst legitimate demands and expectations either implicitly or explicitly declared by stakeholders of all HEIs, let alone of private ones. Unarguably, academic excellence has become in itself an measurement and assessment object paving the way for the consolidation of various rankings and accreditation systems that naturally raise expectations to be justified. Therefore, models of excellence in HE and academic excellence measurements will be also referred to in the multifactor excellence framework designed after thorough literature review.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

Several concepts and terms related to organizational excellence have evolved in the last decades, along with the development of excellence models and assessment frameworks, widely accepted both in scholarly discussion and managerial practice. In parallel, communication scholars with a particular interest in excellence theory have demonstrated that communication management research fits well into a larger stream of management theory, particularly in the field of quality management (Vercic and Zerfass, 2016) highlighting the relevance of the strategic management of the communication function in the hands of excellent departments and excellent communication professionals (ECPs).

The next sections will deal with the conceptualization of excellence and quality as closely related terms, followed by a discussion on organization excellence methodologies, excellence in HE and communication.

### **2.1 On excellence and quality in the organizational context**

Excellence has been defined as a salient category of quality assessment that involves complex sets of criteria which are hard to formalize (Rescher, 2015), yet always consisting in the interaction between quantity and quality. Both excellence and quality imply a comparison scale where the superlative position at the positive end is reserved for a selected few items under assessment or evaluation according to a priori agreed criteria.

Excellence is evaluative, taxonomic and criteriological: positive features or factors that define the mode of excellence of a specific type of things determine the “quality-elite” for this particular type that “excels the other comparable items in that given context. And the set of features measured with the agreed criteria respond to functional, performatory and ontological reasons: possessing those features enables the possessor to perform more efficiently or display a better enactment of a particular function, which all in all makes the best type a ‘prototype’ amongst the other items in the compared category (Rescher, 2015).

Establishing the determining factors of merit to deserve the superlative degree of quality is a relatively easy task, as it requires setting the necessary *sine qua non* conditions of eligibility; however, the problem lies in determining the sufficient conditions to outsmart the majority: how much better must ‘X’ be than the rest? Then, quality calls for quantity, in other words, “quality has a quantitative side”, or bluntly said, there cannot be too many excellent ones, because “all excellent things are as difficult as they are rare” (Rescher, 2015, p. 93).

As evaluative assessment, excellence is ineradicably functionalistic, since evaluation is a rational, telic and purposive activity with a specific end in view. Evaluation outcomes should lead to decision-making towards reinforcement and/or improvement of the weaker areas of performance and sometimes to ground-breaking transformations that the individual, the collective or the object being assessed may have to embrace in the pursuit of excellence. In other words, the assessment outcomes should make a difference and lead to setting the quality goals organizations desire to achieve or excel, often guided by existing standards of excellence models.

## 2.2 On organizational excellence (OE) models and methodologies

Organizational Excellence (OE) has been defined as “the optimum utilization of internal and external resources to meet and exceed customers’ requirements as well as achieving sustainable business development” (Ubaid, Dweiri, & Ojiako, 2020, p.1).

The following features may distinguish excellent organisations from non-excellent ones (Nenadál, Vykydal and Waloszek, 2018):

- exceeding the „mere average” of expected performance within the relevant field or sector of business /activity.
- focused on adding the highest value to all stakeholders, not only customers.
- understanding that excellent results come from advanced and continuous improvement of management processes and systems.
- characterized by consolidated organizational culture fostered by leaders fully identified with organisational identity, leading by example, inspired by clear vision, mission and values.

OE is usually associated with quality and frequently explored by management researchers who endorse the Total Quality Management (TQM) approach. Yet, they claim that an organization's purpose should not be the mere search for TQM implementation *per se*, but rather its adoption as a means to achieve excellence and competitive advantage (Mele and Colurcio, 2006) In brief, excellence is (or should be) the main goal of all contemporary organizations. Consequently, methods or models selected to attain excellence goals are a matter of choice, a means to an end. Once a particular OE model is adopted, frequent adjustment is needed to fit the organization's particular purpose, sector and constituencies.

Most excellence models are dynamic and continuously upgraded tools or instruments that maintain organizations focused on quality standards towards attainment of organisational excellence.

The critical success factors (CSF) that impact OE comprise: integration of business strategy and quality strategy, clear vision, alignment of processes with objectives, employee empowerment, continuous improvement, flexibility (adaptability), resourced-based focus on strategy (Breja, Banwet and Iyer, 2011); (Breja, Banwet and Iyer, 2016), open communication and transparency (Rezaei *et al.*, 2018), inspiring leadership, seamless collaboration based on mutual trust and a strong sense of commitment with the organizational mission or purpose. A distinction is made regarding the key CSF of OE for the private sector, where rewards system to support excellence efforts and team-work spirit are particularly emphasized. (Garg and Punia, 2017). Out of the 46 examined OE methodologies, the 28 categorized as generic ones require adaptation to meet the specific

needs of a given organization or business sector, while the 18 customized OE models can still be further explored and improved.

Quality-related organizational challenges do not seem to reveal substantial differences across organization types (Eriksson *et al.*, 2016). Yet, currently applied excellence models fail to cover the increasing and wider scope of quality-related challenges, amongst which stakeholder relations management is not mentioned at all. Regrettably, one more challenge to be faced is the evident lack of communicative approach in all the examined existing models of QM, OE and business Excellence. After all, how can an organization aspire to continuous improvement through regular evaluation when the available excellence models do not include any hints and elements of communication management, except customer relations?

Evidently, excellence models need to be further developed so as to broaden their scope (Eriksson *et al.*, 2016) and integrate other relevant factors of increasing importance.

### **2.3 On excellence in Higher Education (HE)**

Several factors influence variations and approaches in the conceptualization and subsequent urge to assess and quantify excellence and quality in HE, namely: changes in social economic and political contexts (Skelton, 2009), 'new managerialism' practices (Clarke and Newman, 1997);(Ek *et al.*, 2013), national government increasing pressure for economic ROIs from HE (Salter and Tapper, 2002). In the particular case of private universities as hybrid organizations, executive leadership often have to juggle between a range of quality and excellence models to measure their performance and set their benchmarking goals both as a corporation and a university, while bearing in mind that the product of higher education is invisible and intangible and successful TQM implementation may fail or be inaccurate due to the non-standard human factor (Tasopoulou and Tsiotras, 2017); (Schröer and Jäger, 2015).

Quality in HE can be defined as a multi-dimensional, multi-level, and dynamic concept in close relation with the context shaped by educational models, institutional missions, objectives, and other specific standards within a system (Tasopoulou and Tsiotras, 2017).

Harvey and Green (Harvey and Green, 1993) also state that quality is relative to different views and uses of the term that may be synonymic to excellence. Quality can mean

exception as relatable to what is exclusive, distinctive, exceeding standards or 'zero' defects. In the HE context this can be ascribed to elitist high-quality Oxbridge education and would lead to acceptance (accreditation) or rejection of those below that standard. Quality as perfection entails conformity with specified standards partly 'democratised' for all other organizations aiming at excellence and able to demonstrate a consolidated culture of quality to prevent defects and do things right at the first time (zero defects policy).

Defining quality in Higher Education and establishing valid evaluation indicators is hard due to several reasons: the substantial growth in enrolment, students and globalized scholars mobility, increasing diversity of students and institutions; global and regional integration, need for quality standards or comparison benchmarks of international validity to evaluate academic and professional qualifications (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, 2009).

Some widely accepted values and elements of excellence can still be rescued, even though views of excellence in HE are multiple and conflicting (Brusoni *et al.*, 2014), ambiguous and vague (Bruno - Jofré and Hills, 2011), normative (Elton, 1998) and even an ideal standard that must be pursued as the guiding core value for all HEIs (Rostan and Vaira, 2011a); (Rostan and Vaira, 2011b);(Mora *et al.*, 2015).

Ruben (Ruben, 2007) emplaces the institutional mission as the first component of his set of Excellence in Higher Education (EHE), while the Baldrige Education model of excellence assigns students-customers the priority number 1, followed by parents; and only then come assessment strategy, adjustable key performance indicators, leadership and benchmarking (Brusoni *et al.*, 2014).

HE excellence and quality concepts used as synonymous are attributed to successful, leading or "top" universities, such as the top tier in USA universities, where both public and private universities can be found. Contrastingly, very few private HEIs of other countries make it to that very top set by the mostly referred world university rankings, namely: the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), QS World University Rankings and the Times Higher Education (THE), which 'catalogue' HEIs as excellent, high quality and successful (or not) and correspondingly ascribe high reputation to those at the top or world class university. The latter are said to count on three defining factors of excellence, namely: a favourable governance able and willing to strategically manage abundant resources, allocated to offer the best environment for learning and research to a high concentration of talented faculty and students (Salmi, 2009).



Some controversial views make a blunt claim stating that world university rankings have disrupted the landscape of HE with their ‘calculative technology’ par excellence” to “make legible the tangible and intangible features of universities” in order to “generate imaginative geographies of institutional difference” (Collins & Park, 2016, p.115). The multi-faceted reputation measured through rankings tends to aggregate different elements into a melting pot of standardization not prevented from methodological limitations, which may reveal the mismatch between quality, reputation and rankings (Collins and Park, 2016).

Sadly, most HEIs are under constant pressure for their own sustainability, thus the search for quality and excellence in education may turn into a luxury only affordable when quantity is no longer the major concern (Cabanas, 2004). By the end of the 20th century, quality entered into the context of quantifiable economic competitive advantage, administered by quality control and reputation measurement institutions of questionable selflessness towards the main stakeholders of HEIs (Marginson and Van der Wende, 2007).

The assessment criteria of most rankings and accreditation agencies tend to neglect excellence in teaching as the “poor relation” of research excellence or “the Cinderella” in the context of HE performance evaluation (Land and Gordon, 2015). Due to its multiple dimensionality, teaching quality and excellence pose more difficulty in delimitating the accountability for ‘the quality of its final product’: only teaching that can produce excellent learning could claim its excellence (Elton, 1998);(Elton, 2012). In contrast, some scholars claim that all universities aspiring to become renowned and attract more customers should establish benchmarking processes and take into account world rankings as evaluation processes of international validity, which contributes to the improvement of institutions and programmes as a drive to get better (Tasopoulou and Tsiotras, 2017).

Quality management in higher education requires the full commitment of institutional members willing to do their best to make their institution acknowledgeable for their outstanding achievements and exceptional services. Yet, doing their “best” or being “exceptional” might have subjective interpretations for different institutional members, therefore university leaders need to ensure that individual views and attitudes are aligned with the mission and vision of the institution. Hence, the vital role of institutional communication, both internal and external, as an agent of alignment with the corporate purpose and conciliation between dual logics hybrid organizations like private HEIs (Roundy, 2017); (Mair, Mayer and Lutz, 2015).

The triple backbone of excellence in HE (teaching, research and knowledge transfer) needs the continuous sap of strategic communication to make achieved institutional excellence widely known, counting on the full support of communication-oriented and purposed-driven governance (Wolf and Mair, 2019). Then, excellent communication can become a strategic ally to deploy excellence and quality commitment all through the organization.

## **2.4 On excellent communication departments and excellent communication professionals (ECPs)**

The “Excellence Theory” (Grunig and White, 1992) explores the relation between excellence and communication and states that excellent communication depends on three key factors determining the departmental performance: the knowledge background of the communication team members, their relation with the top management in the organization and the organizational culture or environment where they deliver their communication work (Fuller *et al.*, 2018).

Besides, excellence in communication can be observed at 3 levels of performance: individual, departmental and organizational (Tench *et al.*, 2017). Six characteristics are highlighted as differentiating excellent communication departments from non-excellent ones: staffing, alignment, listening, measurement intensive collaboration, an all-communications strategy (Vercic and Zerfass, 2016).

Naturally, excellent communication departments would be staffed by excellent communication professionals (ECPs) expected to be leaders in their field where they “display six major competence dimensions: self-dynamics, team collaboration, ethical orientation, relationship building, strategic decision-making capability, and communication knowledge management capability” (Fuller *et al.*, 2018, p.235). Individual competences of ECPs should comprise theoretical knowledge, technical skills, research and analytical ability, and unarguably certain personality traits that facilitate interrelations within the organizational environment and its peripheral context (Tench *et al.*, 2017). All these assets have a direct impact on the professional outcomes of the communication specialists and the whole organizational context. Communication leadership is therefore a key factor of excellent performance.

Excellence in professional communication “is an overarching term for a range of vocations focused on creating “purpose-driven communication”(Fuller et al., 2018, p.234). The organization’s purpose should be the basis on which executive leadership designs an excellence-oriented corporate strategy through an inclusive, interactive and open communication process that engages the whole organization. Thus, counting on an excellent communication department is a key factor to disseminate purpose-driven strategy towards the joint pursuit of excellence goals (Thurlow *et al.*, 2017).

Undeniably, the excellence of communication professionals has a direct impact on the strategic status given to the communication function as well as the degree of empowerment granted to the communication team. It can be inferred that excellent communication translates into strategic communication and vice-versa: strategic communication is excellent communication, which means it cannot remain at a tactical level of short-term communication outputs divorced from the overall corporate purpose and strategy.

If wise executive leadership delegates the direct management of tangible issues to experts of specific areas, the need for an expert department capable of managing institutional communication issues seems obvious (Falkheimer *et al.*, 2017). Hence, the necessity of an independent structure entrusted with the communication management, placed at the highest level of management in the organizational chart, i.e., a vantage point from which it is more likely to gain respect and authority for transversal work and gain empowerment in the strategic management process (Gregory, Invernizzi and Romenti, 2013). This is usually facilitated by and results in a participative culture, where two-way communication techniques are in force, both through clearly established channels and informal flows. In brief, excellence in communication management requires an excellent department led by an excellence-oriented director, with strategic vision of the whole institution and team-work approach, driven by the organizational purpose. Therefore, excellence-driven organizations would be expected to hire experienced practitioners with a strong focus on institutional goals and strategy, led by a Chief Communication Officer (CCO) or senior communicator capable of ensuring alignment through her/his membership in the executive board or at least reporting directly to the CEO or dominant coalition (Meng *et al.*, 2019).

Strategic communication management can be seen at the core of critical success factors and it can be claimed that without excellence in communication, the entire excellence journey is doomed to fail. Only “when communication helps to move the organization’s mission forward, we may speak of strategic communication” (van Ruler, 2018, p. 372), as a

purposeful and instrumental constitutive element of the organizational life and excellence journey (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). In other words, communications becomes strategic when it achieve a certain maturity as a core managerial and constitutive function in the organization (Johansson, Grandien and Strandh, 2019).

### 3. Case study

This multiple case study will focus the empirical analysis on hybrid organizations in the Higher Education sector. Two research questions are posed to be empirically explored in purposefully selected private universities ranked as excellent.

RQ1: Do 'excellent universities' rely on excellent communication as a key component of their overall institutional excellence?

RQ2: How does the current communication management practice uphold and enhance institutional excellence in private universities (as hybrid HEIs)?

As a result of thorough review of scientific literature and previous empirical studies, a comprehensive framework of excellence features has been designed by blending the critical success factors and elements of organizational, academic and communication excellence. This comprehensive multi-factor excellence framework can be seen in Table 1 below.

The field work has been carried out as a multiple case study in the three best private universities <sup>1</sup> in Argentina, Spain and Lithuania, whose real institutional names are codified as Univ-Arg, Univ-ES, and Univ-LT respectively to preserve their confidentiality.

The excellence elements included in table 1 have been the key contents of Web-based data analysis, survey questions and interview guidelines.

These components of organizational/institutional excellence in HE and excellence in communication have been empirically tested with triangulation of sources and methods (Baxter and Jack, 2008). Web-based data has been collected from the institutional websites of each university during the last 6 years to explore their portrayal in the digital interface and the degree of professionalization in communication. A 19-question pilot survey (Shields and Rangarajan, 2013) was conducted with 81 Alumni from the three universities; semi-

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<sup>1</sup> According to world university rankings and/or other valid national accreditations. See *appendix 1*.

structured interviews with 17 communication experts from the three countries provide relevant data on the key factors of strategic and excellent communication.

<b>COMMON ELEMENTS OF ORGANIZATIONAL, INSTITUTIONAL AND COMMUNICATIVE EXCELLENCE</b>		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Participative culture</li> <li>2. Strong sense of commitment with organizational mission/purpose and organizational culture</li> <li>3. Effective governance + leadership processes aligned with objectives</li> <li>4. Clear commitment to total quality</li> <li>5. Clearly pre-established communication patterns and channels for all stakeholders</li> <li>6. Transparency and open communication on organization’s initiatives</li> <li>7. Employee empowerment: collective discussion of organizational goals</li> <li>8. Stakeholder approach: clear mapping/matrix; stakeholders’ relations management</li> <li>9. Continuous improvement</li> <li>10. Regular evaluation (performance and outcomes)</li> </ol>		
<b>Specific features of excellence</b>		
<b>In communication management</b>	<b>In Higher Education</b>	<b>Organizational Excellence</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Supportive and communication- oriented governance/leaders</li> <li>2. Highly- qualified communication practitioners for each sub-function</li> <li>3. Expertise: strategic planning; advisory and executive authority</li> <li>4. Alignment with governance: CCO directly reporting to CEO</li> <li>5. Membership in executive board/dominant coalition; impact on managerial decisions</li> <li>6. Well-developed listening structures and techniques</li> <li>7. Integrative strategy for all communications</li> <li>8. Internal partnerships with dominant coalitions in all structural units</li> <li>9. Transversal synergies; collaborative common projects.</li> <li>10. Audits ; Score Card.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mission &amp; vision-driven strategic planning</li> <li>2. Resource allocation for high-quality academic offer</li> <li>3. Qualified and dedicated faculty (intellectual essence)</li> <li>4. Cognitive and social competence (empathy)</li> <li>5. Teamwork for research</li> <li>6. Faculty: role model for students</li> <li>7. Rich relational capital</li> <li>8. Focus on key stakeholders: Faculty, students &amp; parents</li> <li>9. Performance Analysis: Excellence Grid Tool; 3D Model of Excellence.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Integration of business and quality strategies</li> <li>2. Alignment of processes with objectives,</li> <li>3. Resourced-based strategy</li> <li>4. Inspiring leadership</li> <li>5. Rewards system (HRM practices)</li> <li>6. Flexibility (adaptability)</li> <li>7. OE tools: KPIs, High Performing Organization, Total Business Excellence management.</li> </ol>

**Table 1. Comprehensive multi-factor excellence framework**

**Source: own elaboration based on: (Ruben, 2007); (Salmi, 2009); (S K Breja et al., 2011; 2016); (Brusoni et al., 2014); (Vercic and Zerfass, 2016); (Uribe, Sánchez and Yebra, 2016); (Miranda, 2017)**

Additionally, 56 in-depth interviews were held with executive leaders, academic and administrative staff, communicators and current students.

All respondents have been proportionally selected from each explored university and have been provided with self-administered questionnaires (Check and Schutt, 2012) or personally interviewed and audio-recorded by the author in their preferred language (English, Lithuanian or Spanish). Qualitative thematic content analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013); (Žydžiūnaitė and Sabaliauskas, 2017) was applied to interview transcripts with coded categories relatable to the contents in table 1.

#### 4. Results

The Web-based content analysis has allowed to contrast and confirm either by efficiency or deficiency, the extent to which the information available in the institutional Websites is true to the organizational reality in terms of status of the communication function, available channels, identified stakeholders, mission-driven contents disseminated through this digital channel of growing significance (Fernández Beltrán, 2007).

The digital portrayal of each university in their Websites reveals different degrees of demonstrated excellence features according to the user experience of internal stakeholders and external observers.

Alumni survey responses confirmed the main attributes of institutional excellence and its interrelation with communicative excellence. Alumni demonstrate their appreciation for high academic quality and high calibre of faculty as key components of institutional excellence, together with a clear mission-driven commitment to pursue quality and focus on the quality of stakeholder relations, mainly professor-students. The results also provide evidence of the indistinctive use of the terms *excellence* and *quality*, particularly tied to excellence in teaching. Another relevant finding is their overestimation of international accreditations and world university rankings as indicators of excellence. This can also be perceived in the communication inputs of institutional websites.

All organizational, academic and communication excellence features can definitely be found in Univ-ES, though the balance between centralization and autonomy of academic units emerges as a challenge that is reflected in communication actions.

Univ-Arg has successfully achieved all key features of academic excellence in its 30 years of existence, yet it falls short in communication excellence. Deeply rooted mission and

values endorsed by the vast majority of community members may not suffice to guarantee institutional excellence and organizational sustainability, unless remarkable improvements in communication management are implemented. This has proven a serious claim and concern of all interviewees. The lack of stronger leadership in the Direction of institutional communication took its toll on the internal climate, with internal communication usually neglected on account of a marked preference for media relations as a strategic priority. Deficient cohesiveness and coherence of messages reveal the lack of pre-established communication patterns and channels for the whole organization as a safeguard of a consistent institutional discourse. In terms of overall OE, the institution lacks alignment of processes with objectives; however, the executive team has updated and reinforced wholesome institutional assessment practices that should soon bear tangible results. The university top leaders have eventually become more conscious of the relevant role of communication as a strategic ally, with clear decisions to equip the communication function with a more competent and larger communication team entrusted with integrated internal and external communications at corporate level as well as in the different academic units and dependent centres.

Univ-LT displays certain academic excellence features, like high quality of core faculty and academic offer, with a declared focus on students as main stakeholder. However, it lacks long-term strategic vision in managing the relational capital. There is in fact no communication department *per se*. And even though the marketing office has always been held responsible for communication outputs, in the over 20 years of performance all communications have been markedly sales-oriented. Other communication functions and key stakeholder groups have been neglected, only some occasional internal communication actions occur with the help of the Human resources team. Current communication channels and patterns are not adjusted to stakeholders needs and no communication audits have been implemented. The achieved degree of academic excellence may be threatened by an extremely high turnover rate in administrative/support staff, recurring organizational restructuring, failure to retain talent and poor core faculty management, all of which signal the urgent need for better communication management beyond marketing and sales aimed at attracting more students.

All interviewed experts unanimously assert that institutional communication should encompass all communications emanating from the organization and acknowledge the need for integrated and professionalized management of internal and external communication,

with cohesive outputs that reflect the unique communicative identity of the organization. This requires a full-fledged organizational unit entrusted with this strategic function, as well as regular performance evaluation with clearly excellence-oriented institutional strategy.

Experts holding PhD (active in research and teaching) stated that managing communication in a university should differ from the professional practice in other organizations, let alone business corporations, the key differentiating factors being the particular institutional mission, specificity of expected services and the wider scope of stakeholders. This would justify the choice of a university CCO with vast academic experience.

In order to deliver excellence, the communication management needs to be elevated from tactical to strategic level with the pertaining structural adjustments and resource allocation. This implies a communication-oriented Governance Body and highly qualified communication staff, able to prove the value of their work. Some institutions, like Univ-ES seemed to have taken the challenge very seriously and this has led to communication being fully integrated into and considered an essential component of the overall institutional strategy, supported by strategies in each of the managerial functions, amongst them, the communication function. Other institutions have managed to cultivate such a strong sense of identification with the institutional mission that even in the absence of a well-designed institutional strategy, communication is strategic in as much as it is still mission-supportive and purposed-driven, as in Univ-Arg.

*Having* a communication strategy, however smart, does not *automatically* result in communication actually *being* strategic, if it fails to deploy the mission and purpose through integrated management of all communication functions (as in Univ-LT). Hence, the extreme importance of stakeholder identification, prioritization and cultivation of relations through clearly established patterns, ad hoc channels and purposed-driven contents.

To sum up, not all 'excellent universities' rely on excellent communication as a key component of their overall institutional excellence (RQ1) and the consequences are visible in the outstanding achieved excellence, as illustrated by Univ-ES, with acknowledged excellence at national and international levels sustained for many years in a row, with some academic units heading the top 10 list in their specific disciplines worldwide.



Table 2. Excellence features attributable to the examined universities

<p><b>Organizational Excellence</b></p> <p>1. Integration of business and quality strategies</p> <p>2. Alignment of processes with objectives,</p> <p>3. Resourced-based strategy</p> <p>4. Inspiring leadership</p> <p>5. Rewards system (HRM practices)</p> <p>6. Flexibility (adaptability)</p> <p>OE tools: KPIs, High Performing Organization, Total Business Excellence management.</p>		<p><b>Ascribed to:</b></p> <p>Univ-ES Evidence of 1,2,3,4,6.</p> <p>N/A about 5,7.</p> <p>Univ-Arg Evidence of 1,3,4,6.</p> <p>Univ-LT Evidence of 1,2,5,6,7.</p>	
<p><b>In communication management</b></p> <p>11. Supportive and communication- oriented governance/leaders</p> <p>12. Highly- qualified communication practitioners for each sub-function</p> <p>13. Expertise: strategic planning; advisory and executive authority</p> <p>14. Alignment with governance: CCO directly reporting to CEO</p> <p>15. Membership in executive board/dominant coalition; impact on managerial decisions</p> <p>16. Well-developed listening structures and techniques</p> <p>17. Integrative strategy for all communications</p> <p>18. Internal partnerships with dominant coalitions in all structural units</p> <p>19. Transversal synergies; collaborative common projects.</p> <p>20. Communication Audits; Balance Score Card.</p>	<p>Univ-ES: 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,9. 8 and 10 can still be improved.</p> <p>Univ-LT: demonstrated 1,4,5. Some evidence of 8, 9. Urgent need of 2,3,6,7,10.</p> <p>Univ-Arg: demonstrated 1. Partly improving 2,3,7. Some evidence of 8, 9. Vital improvement needed in 4,5,6 and implementation of 10.</p>	<p><b>In Higher Education</b></p> <p>10. Mission &amp; vision-driven strategic planning</p> <p>11. Resource allocation for high-quality academic offer</p> <p>12. Qualified and dedicated faculty (intellectual essence)</p> <p>13. Cognitive and social competence (empathy)</p> <p>14. Teamwork for research</p> <p>15. Faculty role model for students</p> <p>16. Rich relational capital</p> <p>17. Focus on key stakeholders: Faculty, students &amp; parents</p> <p>18. Performance Analysis: Excellence Grid Tool; 3D Model of Excellence.</p>	<p><b>Ascribed to:</b></p> <p>Univ-ES and Univ- Arg Demonstrated, endorsed and acknowledged all 1-9.</p> <p>Univ-LT: Demonstrated 1,2,3,4. Partially 5,6,7. 8: student-customer first. 9: mandatory for accreditations.</p>

Source: own elaboration

The current communication management practices (RQ2) definitely match the overall excellence of Univ-ES where the hybrid institutional nature of a private university is harmonized and strategically balanced and there are no serious conflicts with the business logics. Univ-Arg represents a mid-way example where implementation of better managerial principles is badly needed to remain competitive and to disclose outstanding academic achievements that may pass unnoticed and fail to receive the deserved recognition due to poor management. Univ-LT is the only private university with a full academic offer in the country (3 cycles and executive education) and it is a clear token of an entrepreneurial university strongly leaning towards business logics, often at the expense of the institutional logics of education. Yet, it has not yet mastered best practices regarding communication excellence.

The results of the multifactor excellence framework applied to the explored universities are displayed in the table 2.

## 5. Conclusions

Excellent universities who manage their institutional communication integrally and strategically, may display the features attributed to excellent organizations with excellent communication departments. Each university ought to foresee the required level of professionalization in communication management they are willing and able to invest on in order to match their excellence goals.

Strategic communication in universities must face the challenge of managing intangibles through the joint work of ad hoc qualified executive team and communication staff to engage the whole organization in assuming the institutional identity and innovating to improve institutional performance towards excellence. Only by tackling these issues will excellence in communication management prove its contribution to make the achieved excellence visible and audible. If excellence is perceived and valued by key stakeholders, the institution should ensure that this perception is not only justified, but also strategically, widely and timely communicated.

Whatever the university organizational structure and the internal distribution of functions, tasks and responsibilities within the communication departments, their contribution to the cultivation of university excellence pivots around two essential axis: excellence in the performance of specific communication-related activities and excellence in executive

managerial actions, by providing a communicative perspective to decision making in all spheres.

Excellence in communication management is an item that may take a long time to get its place amongst the existing OE models and HE excellence rankings. Yet, thoroughly examined literature allows to infer that strategic communication management is an extremely important asset of overall organizational excellence and an unalienable aid to the university reputation building process.

If reputation is conceived as a fruit that an institution may harvest when objective and subjective quality has been achieved and perceived, the direct contribution of an excellent communication department should focus on making quality well-known and positively evaluated. In other words, communicating the already achieved excellence and the actual efforts in the quest for excellence.

Some HEIs may find themselves riding into transformational waves of “good” business practices (Kosmützky and Krücken, 2015) and might fall into the race of indiscriminately adopting performance management, entrepreneurialism and new models of financing and governance through OE models and TQM standards meant for business enterprises (Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009).

In contrast, excellent universities display consistent and thoughtful handling of entrepreneurial principles without betraying their institutional core values. A way of doing so is by strategically building their “unique communicative identity” (Bulotaite, 2003) and communicating it excellently. If an institution can legitimately disseminate the actual excellence of its community members and the individual and corporate achievements, but yet it fails to do so because of poorly managed or insufficient communication, this would constitute a waste of talent and it would reveal that excellence is not fully attained.

Excellent organizations deserve excellent communication that contributes to strategically deploy the unique organizational purpose and a culture of quality all through the organizational structure to make it reach all stakeholders. This declared purpose, like an institutional promise to pursue excellence, can become the unifying element that relies on strategic communication as an essential ally to cultivate relations and foster synergy. Scattered institutional achievements, however excellent, amount to lesser value than all held together and inspired by the shared purpose, like the thread of a necklace that holds the beads together.

## 6. Discussion

The globalizing critique in scientific literature acknowledges the relationship between contemporary calls for 'excellence' in HE and marketization; it reveals how far the "global HE sector is being profoundly reshaped" by neoliberalism processes, 'driven by economic imperatives to develop global, entrepreneurial, corporate, commercialised universities" (Gourlay & Stevenson, 2017, p.391). This is also reflected in the dominant rhetoric of "student satisfaction, research and teaching league tables, branding, and competition for students" (Burke, Stevenson, & Whelan, 2015, p.30).

Furthermore, the excellence construct is presented as an a priori ideal, but the concept requires measurement and this leads to fragmentation of the complex into the discrete, which enables the commodification of higher education as an external object for purchase or sale by students positioned as customers who can demand accountability (Saunders and Blanco Ramírez, 2017).

The current tension has forced into the university as a driver of social transformation and the notion of 'excellence' pressurized by a competitive and marketized sector may be acknowledged. Therefore, focusing on teaching excellence could be an alternative solution and the notions of teaching as craft could be coupled with the complementary role that research can play in informing teaching (Behari-Leak and McKenna, 2017).

The surfacing "traces of individual and institutional gaming and manipulation" with metrics applied to evaluate and measure research excellence have been catalogued as academic corruption (Oravec, 2017, p. 3) and other scholars join this scepticism regarding the measurability of excellence. They advocate for more ethical and relational conception against the threatening vacuity that this term may gain, when excellence is everywhere and the already excellent ones have to be 'yet more excellent' (Wood and Su, 2017).

This study advocates a balanced and reconciling position that harmonizes teaching and research as equally valued parts of the triple excellence expected from excellent universities. Even if some clever external assessors succeeded in manipulating metrics with which internal stakeholders and university leaders might be bound to comply, the ultimate accountability should be against the declared mission and purpose, the real guiding standard for institutional long-term pursuit of excellence as "a process of growth, development and flourishing", and not as an end itself (Nixon, 2007, p 22; 2013); (Fernández-Nogueira *et al.*, 2018).

In the long run, institutional excellence should be neither exclusively nor prudishly dependant on rankings, because these may be unpredictable and may raise expectations that some institutions need not struggle to reach. Nevertheless, each HEI should work out its own strategy towards a reputational commitment to be worthy of positive appraisal, to earn and deserve the reputation that corresponds to its achieved excellence in the light of how the institution has fulfilled its promises declared in its mission statement as a commitment with institutional stakeholders first and then to society at large.

Managing communication in a university may seem at first sight very similar to managing the usual processes of any other organization. Nevertheless, the institutional aims of a university are not only a matter of 'corporate choice'. In other words, a university cannot choose whether to teach, research or transfer knowledge. And, if excellence and quality are the declared institutional pursuit, then the institution is expected to aspire, deliver and disseminate its excellence performance in these three core activities of a university through strategic messaging and long-term relationship building with key stakeholders.

Despite the highly commoditized HE, the 21<sup>st</sup> century university is first and foremost an educational institution with an imperative mission set by its institutional nature and subject to specific institutional logics. Besides, the long-term commitment with institutional stakeholders differs dramatically from that of any other societal institution: the impact of the choice of HEI is significantly more transcendental, transformational and long-lasting.

Furthermore, students as key stakeholders of the university, should not be considered as ordinary customers who perform a consuming function, but rather long-term community members and active participants in the making of the institution and contributing to institutional excellence from within, and not only as external evaluators of a service render.

Excellent universities seek to be singled out for their pursued excellence (unique communicated identity) that justifies their praiseworthy attributes: strong strategic agenda, clear vision, internal endorsement, leadership support, collegiate structure of academic excellence (Chapleo, 2010). Then, a deserved good reputation based on the strategically communicated truth about the institution's actual excellence may lead more easily into being chosen out of the several thousand universities operating in the world. The triple mission common to all other universities can coexist with the unique purpose declared by each HEI. This unique way of fulfilling that common institutional mission can be the differentiating factor and the cornerstone upon which to build and communicate the unique identity, the singular path towards pursued excellence.

## **7. Research limitations and practical implications**

This paper has presented mainly a communicative approach to institutional excellence, at the expense of other angles, left underexplored. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, Lithuanian and English languages, thus linguistic equivalences may have partly affected coding and samples. Admittedly, the three chosen universities display certain commonalities; however, findings may not hold up across other countries.

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## Appendix 1

According to world university rankings and/or other valid national accreditations the three selected private universities are considered excellent HEIs

- <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2021>
- <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2021>
- [https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2021/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/locations/ES/sort\\_by/rank/sort\\_order/asc/cols/stats](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2021/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/locations/ES/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats)