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ARTICLE

“Everything has changed”: a qualitative study of trends in university communication over the past decade

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Abstract

Universities are pivotal in contemporary knowledge societies, bridging science and society. Amidst societal transformations, communication has become crucial for higher education institutions (HEIs). Yet, research on university communication is limited, with few studies capturing long-term developments. This qualitative study addresses this gap by examining changes in university communication departments over the past decade in Switzerland. Semi-structured interviews with 30 communication practitioners and university leaders in eight HEIs reveal that university communication has diversified with regard to digital channels and stakeholders, intensified in terms of personnel and output, and professionalized. Moreover, some, albeit not all communication departments have increasingly aligned their communication strategies with university strategies. Despite the fact that “everything has changed”, differences exist among various types and clusters of universities. This study contributes to understanding how and why long-term changes in institutional science communication emerge. It also offers insights for communication practitioners for enhancing university communication processes and structures.

Keywords

Professionalism, professional development and teaching in science communication; Professionalism, professional development and training in science communication; Science communication tertiary studies

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1 ▪ Introduction

Universities are key institutions at the interface between science and society, with specialized departments tasked with communication [Autzen & Weitkamp, 2020]. Research on organizational science communication and specifically on university communication has received more attention in recent years across the fields of science communication, higher education, public relations, and organizational communication research [Schäfer & Fähnrich, 2020]. However, the few existing studies usually only provide a snapshot of the structures of higher education communication departments at a given time, meaning that research designs allowing for conclusions about longer-term changes are lacking. In addition, empirical findings are only available for a few countries like Germany [e.g., Marcinkowski et al., 2013; Schwetje et al., 2020] or Scandinavia [e.g., Engwall, 2008; Sataøen et al., 2024] and rarely across different types of higher education institutions (HEIs) [e.g., Bühler et al., 2007; Höhn, 2011].

The lack of empirical insights into the transformation of university communication contrasts with a professional field that appears to have changed considerably, driven by the profound changes that HEIs have undergone in recent decades. These include regulatory and organizational changes [de Boer et al., 2007]; changes in the surrounding communication environments, where online and social media have risen in importance [Brossard, 2013; Sörensen et al., 2023]; and changes in expectations by stakeholders and the broader public about transparency and public accountability of HEIs [Krücken, 2021]. These factors are all likely affecting university communication as well. Yet studies tracing such changes over time and across different types of HEIs remain rare [Fürst et al., 2022]. This qualitative study addresses this gap by analyzing perceived developments in university communication over the past decade, based on retrospective accounts gathered via 30 interviews with communication practitioners and university leaders from eight universities in Switzerland.

2 ▪ Literature review

In past decades, public communication from universities — sometimes coined 'university PR' — has broadened in scope and importance as a result of universities' increased dependance on public support and funding for research and teaching [Krücken, 2021]. Universities today are under increasing pressure to justify their raison d'être in society and demonstrate return on taxpayers' money. At the same time, New Public Management (NPM) reforms have stimulated competition for talent, funding, and public visibility [Krücken, 2021]. In response to this, university communication is becoming more important [Autzen & Weitkamp, 2020; Entradas & Bauer, 2022] and is likely changing [Engwall, 2008; Schwetje et al., 2020]. These changes — some of which are well documented, while others are merely assumed — can be conceptualized into four analytical dimensions [see also Fürst et al., 2022]:

The *diversification* of university communication refers to an increase in stakeholders addressed and channels or communication modes used — spoken or written text, visuals, or auditive formats [Fürst et al., 2025; Kress, 2010]. Research shows that while public communication at German universities in the 1980s mainly targeted politicians and the general public, it has widened since the 2010s to include a range of stakeholders [Marcinkowski et al., 2014]. Scholars explain this trend by the increased need for universities

to gain and maintain their organizational legitimacy among more and increasingly specific stakeholders [Krücken, 2021], the most common of which are journalists, the general public, students, employees, industry representatives, and politicians [Engwall, 2008; Schwetje et al., 2017]. In addition, the diversification of communication channels is well documented [e.g., Entradas et al., 2023; Volk et al., 2023], with universities increasingly embracing online and social media channels [e.g., Schwetje et al., 2017]. A recent survey of university leaders in Switzerland shows that communication channels in particular have diversified considerably in the eyes of leaders in the last decade and that this change is more pronounced than the increase in stakeholders [Fürst et al., 2022].

The *professionalization* of university communication can be observed at the individual level, for instance with regard to educational backgrounds, role conceptions, or professional networks among communication professionals [e.g., Sörensen et al., 2023; Trench, 2017]. It can also be seen at the organizational level, for example with respect to structures or services of communication departments. Early studies found that staff in German universities' communication departments rarely had formal education or training in communication [Höhn, 2011], especially at universities of applied sciences [Bühler et al., 2007]. A decade later, this number had increased to half of all employees [Leßmöllmann et al., 2017]. The perception that more university communicators have received formal training in the past five to ten years was also shared among Swiss university leaders [Fürst et al., 2022]. Similarly, the perceived autonomy of the profession and its connectedness in professional networks were initially low [Bühler et al., 2007; Höhn, 2011], but a more recent survey indicates an increase [Leßmöllmann et al., 2017]. Yet, recent studies point to unclear and multiple professional identities of university communicators [e.g., Elken et al., 2018; Fischer & Schmid-Petri, 2023; Sataøen et al., 2024]. On the organizational level, professionalization refers to the structure and organization within communication departments [e.g., Raupp & Osterheider, 2019], for instance, whether they provide guidelines and trainings for university members to communicate professionally. Research indicates that specialization and clear task division in communication departments is rather low [e.g., Schwetje et al., 2020]. Studies further suggest that communication departments nowadays more often enable organizational members to communicate professionally by establishing guidelines or support for interactions with news media [Engwall, 2008; Marcinkowski et al., 2014; Rowe & Brass, 2011].

The *intensification* of university communication comprises growing personnel and financial resources, outputs, and perceived competition with other universities [Fürst et al., 2025; Vaira, 2004]. The assumed intensification rests on studies conducted with university communicators at different points in time, which indicate a growth in personnel: a comparison of studies from Germany conducted a decade apart indicates an increase in universities' personnel in central communication departments, from two full-time equivalent staff on average [Bühler et al., 2007] to six [Schwetje et al., 2017]. Comparative research from other European countries shows similar findings, with a staff increase in half of the investigated universities in the past five years [Entradas et al., 2023]. Earlier studies for Germany found similar increases for budgets [Höhn, 2011] and outputs of communication departments. Mirroring perceptions of university communicators, university leaders in Switzerland also perceive an increase in resources and personnel as well as outputs in the last decade [Fürst et al., 2022]. Moreover, scholars have diagnosed an increase in competition among universities [e.g., Fürst et al., 2022; Entradas et al., 2023; Marcinkowski et al., 2013].

Increasing *strategic alignment* of university communication indicates whether communication strategies are developed and aligned with overarching organizational goals [Volk & Zerfass, 2018]. Early studies show that one in four communication offices at German universities were guided by a communication strategy [Bühler et al., 2007; Höhn, 2011], while more recent comparative research in Europe reveals that more than two out of three communication offices have such a strategy [Entradas et al., 2023]. Similarly, a survey among Swiss university leaders suggests that communication departments are increasingly guided by communication strategies [Fürst et al., 2022]. However, research on the strategic alignment of communication with the overall university strategy remains sparse. In addition, the influence of communication departments on strategic decisions of the university — for example, by advising leadership — is often demanded, but little empirical data exists on these aspects. Early studies show a minor influence of university communication on organizational decision-making [Kohring et al., 2013; Leßmöllmann et al., 2017], which is supported by a survey of Swiss university leaders, who perceived that communication departments only gained some influence on strategic decisions in the past five to ten years [Fürst et al., 2022].

The evidence for these four changes varies and is mostly limited to studies conducted in different (albeit mostly Western) countries and at different points in time, using different methods. Only few standardized surveys have asked communication practitioners or university leaders about the changes of university communication, and these have mostly addressed its intensification over the past five years [Fürst et al., 2022; Entradas et al., 2023; Marcinkowski et al., 2013]. Hence, most changes of university communication need to be inferred by comparing data from studies that depict the status quo at different points in time. It still remains unclear how and why changes unfolded, for instance why stakeholders and channels of university communication diversified or on what occasions professionalization took place. The interrelation between dimensions of change is also still to be researched. Therefore, a qualitative approach is required to better understand changes in university communication.

Drawing on this four-dimensional conceptualization of trends, we aim to assess how and why university communication has changed in the past decade. We focus on Switzerland, which represents a typical case for changes in higher education systems and comprises 42 universities: 14 research universities (RU), 10 universities of applied sciences (UAS), and 18 universities of teacher education (UTE). Based on previous studies [Fürst et al., 2022; Engwall, 2008; Marcinkowski et al., 2013], we argue that assessing changes in university communication requires insights from two groups: professional communicators in communication departments and university leaders (e.g., presidents, vice-chancellors). University leaders set communication objectives and allocate resources, placing them in a good position to evaluate changes in communication [Elken et al., 2018; Marcinkowski et al., 2013; Schwetje et al., 2020]. While studies are limited, it is reasonable to assume that perspectives from leaders and communicators from different types of universities and communication departments have different perspectives on change. In light of the identified gaps, we formulate two research questions:

RQ1: How, if at all, has university communication (a) diversified, (b) professionalized, (c) intensified and (d) become more strategically aligned in the past decade?

RQ2: How, if at all, do changes in university communication differ across types of HEIs?

3 ▪ Methods and data

We used qualitative, semi-structured interviews with communication department leaders and their staff as well as university leaders to capture perceived changes over the past decade, based on retrospective accounts and institutional memory.

We selected eight HEIs (two RU, two UAS, and four UTE) that represent the diversity of HEIs in the Swiss higher education landscape. Instead of relying on typologies that categorize HEIs according to their organizational type, mission, or funding and governance structures, we based our sampling approach on a quantitative survey, which allowed us to categorize HEIs according to their communication practices and structures [Fürst et al., 2025]. A cluster analysis of the survey data yielded four distinct types of university communication departments (for details on the survey and clustering, see supplemental material, Table 1 in SM1), which we labelled the 'Minimalists', 'Well-resourced Competitors', 'Specialized Strategists' and 'Professional All-rounders'. From each cluster, we sampled the two most typical universities for our qualitative study. In total, we conducted 17 interviews with heads of communication departments and their staff, and 13 interviews with university leaders (see SM2). We interviewed multiple individuals per HEI to mitigate potential biases arising from differing personal perceptions or subjective recall of past developments, allowing us to triangulate accounts of the same developments across diverse perspectives and providing more robust evidence of change.

The 30 interviews took place in German, French, and Italian from July to September 2021 and from March 2022 to March 2023. Most interviews were done in person, with some online due to COVID-19 restrictions. We used semi-structured guides with seven major themes tailored to communicators and university leaders to ensure flexibility (see SM3). Interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed using qualitative content analysis [Mayring, 2014; Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2019] in MAXQDA. Fourteen main categories and 92 subcategories were developed through deductive coding informed by the literature and inductive coding based on the material (see SM4). The first author led the primary analysis, with iterative reviews and collaborative discussions with the co-authors. To develop inductive categories, the authors followed Rädiker and Kuckartz [2019] who propose an initial coding in which data was first read to get a sense of the content, segments were highlighted, and preliminary codes assigned. Successively and iteratively, categories were formed by grouping similar codes together. Eventually, categories were refined by comparing them to new segments and, if necessary, adjusted to ensure accuracy. A pre-test of the coding frame was conducted based on six interviews to detect any ambiguities and/or inconsistencies in the coding categories. To increase validity of the coding frame, the first author relied on peer debriefings involving all co-authors, regular reflection of own biases and assumptions, as well as continuous refinement until a point of saturation was reached in which no new themes seemed to emerge from the data.

4 ▪ Findings

The qualitative study among communicators and university leaders shows substantial changes in university communication in the past decade. As one communicator put it:

> Everything has changed. The professional skills have changed; the number of people working in the department has changed; and it has also become much more diverse and organized in a different way. And, of course, all the channels have changed too. (Head of Communications, Minimalist, RU)

The perception of profound change was shared also by university leaders:

> The communication task has really become much more complex and broader. Our core messages have remained the same. But the whole framework, the digitalization, these tools that we have to use today have increased dramatically. (Rector, Well-resourced Competitor, UAS)

Overall, interviewees indicated diversification as the strongest trend, followed almost equally by professionalization and intensification. Increased strategic alignment was least prominent and only found in a few universities. Trends were often interdependent but will be discussed separately for analytical clarity. Overall, the perceptions of university communicators were largely similar to those of university leadership.

4.1 ▪ *Diversification*

The diversification of stakeholders and channels over the past decade was clearly visible across all universities and represents the most prominent trend (RQ1a), reported both by communicators and university leaders.

4.1.1 ▪ *Changes in stakeholders addressed by university communication*

A widespread perception was that the target groups addressed by communication departments diversified considerably over the past decade: “We [have developed] from a basic press office concept with one stakeholder — journalists — to an all-round communication department” (Head of Communications, Minimalist, RU). Over time, the relevance of internal stakeholders increased, including students, employees, external lecturers, and the university council. Current students gained importance as both a target audience and senders of university communication. Several departments involved current students in addressing peers — e.g., in “take-overs” of the university’s Instagram profile. At one university, students even served as protagonists for news media reports and were enabled by the communication department to actively promote institutional messages, including in delicate matters:

> The media are inquiring a lot about the issues with teacher shortage, where we are reluctant to express our opinion. So we offered the media the opportunity to have our students respond, and we promptly received two or three inquiries. Now we are running against the clock to get the students ready. (Team leader in Communication Department, Specialized Strategist, UTE)

Across all HEIs analyzed in this study, we found a strong increase in the perceived importance of prospective students and in marketing efforts to attract students: "When I arrived here [in 2010], we didn't go hunting for students. They just came to us. But today, that has changed. [...] We now have to start doing marketing much more aggressively, much more actively." (Head of Communications, Specialized Strategist, UTE)

The importance of alumni, on the other hand, did not change according to the interviewees. Nor did interviews reveal any major changes in the communication with former, current, and prospective employees, apart from a few people mentioning an increased importance of internal communication as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In terms of external stakeholders, news media were widely mentioned as very important, notably among university leaders — but the extent and nature of the universities' media work differed considerably. Many mentioned the crisis of journalism and the decline in relevant media outlets as an important change in the external media environment: "There used to be science journalists. I don't know if they still exist, but I rarely have anything to do with them. Those days are long gone now." (Team Leader in Media Relations, Specialized Strategist, UTE)

Half of communication departments were increasingly involved in communication toward politicians and authorities, which had developed from lobbying in parliament to conducting entire communication campaigns. University leaders often reflected on this increased relevance of politicians:

> Terms like public affairs were not in our vocabulary back then, but the external pressure has increased. Discussions on targeting specific groups like "Should we redesign the annual report to be more memorable to the cantonal council?" were not yet common. (Secretary General, Well-resourced Competitor, RU)

The "general public", while considered an important target group in all communication departments, has neither gained nor lost any importance over the years. If anything, digital channels have made communication with specific audiences possible, leading to a subdifferentiation of different "publics".

The scientific community was, and still is, not considered a stakeholder by central communication departments. The continuing importance of private companies as stakeholders was only mentioned by interviewees from UAS.

4.1.2 ▪ *Changes in channels used for university communication*

Communicators and university leaders both emphasized that channels of university communication had diversified: "First of all, communication is becoming faster and faster; and secondly, it is taking place on more and more channels" (Head of Communications, Well-resourced Competitor, UAS). This change has happened in several waves driven by new digital technologies and was the most top-of-mind development, particularly among university leaders. The first phase — the web revolution — started more than two decades ago, with the first universities creating websites as "the institution's first narrative about itself" (Head of Communications, Specialized Strategist, UTE):

> We were the first university in Switzerland at that time to create our own web presence, and we also had — which was truly innovative at the time — an online magazine. It launched in December 2000. (Team Leader Digital Communications, Well-resourced Competitor, RU)

Digital channels contributed significantly to the transformation of university press offices — mainly tasked with media relations — into communication departments communicating to multiple target groups directly through websites, online magazines, and email newsletters. The second phase, the social media revolution, began around fifteen years ago when the first Swiss universities set up institutional Facebook pages.

> In 2012, it was clear that we would do media work and produce an annual report. And then came social media: first Twitter and Facebook, then Instagram and LinkedIn and XING. Now TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube and also WhatsApp. (Team Leader Digital Communications, Well-resourced Competitor, UAS)

Social media platforms like Instagram or LinkedIn enabled more direct and targeted communication toward specific stakeholders like students or decision makers. For example, a head of communications reported that "we also had those target audiences five years ago, but today we address them differently" (Well-resourced Competitor, UAS).

Interestingly, several interviewees also mentioned a recent de-diversification, or consolidation phase, because their department could no longer adequately maintain all their social media channels: "We have introduced new channels without cutting off the old ones, and [...] now we need to consolidate" (Head of Communications, Well-resourced Competitor, RU).

Some universities have also increasingly started to use digital marketing and advertising channels (e.g., banner advertisement, Google Alerts) during the past five years. While "marketing to attract students was very small, [it is] now much more developed" (Head of Communications, Professional All-rounder, UTE), and gained relevance:

> What has changed a lot is all the advertising that is played out via Google — i.e., via search — and has gained tremendous importance. That has become a huge thing for us, and it has also become very, very competitive. (Head of Marketing, Professional All-rounder, UAS)

The approach to media relations has also changed over time and become more proactive in various universities. Scandals that got picked up by the news media were a turning point for university leadership to recognize the importance of communication and media relations:

> A significant shift occurred with said scandal. It threw us into the media spotlight, causing considerable turmoil. This experience was like an internal wake-up call. It shaped us for years and likely contributed to our increased focus on media relations today. (Secretary General, Well-resourced Competitor, RU)

Moreover, communicators noticed that earned media has lost relevance while paying for press coverage has become increasingly common practice. Furthermore, the general pace of media work has increased:

> Fifteen years ago, we responded so slowly to media inquiries that they sometimes were lost because someone else was quicker. Now they usually have an answer within half an hour. That's our benchmark for success now. (Head of Communications, Professional All-rounder, UAS)

University events are now seen as a key channel, targeting specific audiences rather than broad "publics". Although the number of events had increased, this growth mainly occurred at the decentralized level of schools or departments. The COVID-19 pandemic also led to a significant and ongoing shift toward more online events.

4.1.3 ▪ *Changes in communication modes*

In the mid-2010s, university communication shifted strongly from written text and print products toward more visual content — i.e. videos, interactive web designs, and infographics. The new costs of using digital media for university communication were most often financed by reducing costs for printed media. The main driver for this visual turn is the emergence of new affordances of social media and video platforms like YouTube, which require new skill sets and ways of designing content. Changes in audio communication, such as university podcasts, were only mentioned very rarely.

4.2 ▪ *Professionalization*

Our results point to a professionalization of university communication both at the individual and organizational level (RQ1b). These trends were evident in interviews with both communicators and university leaders.

4.2.1 ▪ *Changes in qualifications and roles of communicators*

Across all analyzed HEIs, the educational background of communication practitioners had professionalized significantly over the past years: "People are better educated. Today, everyone on our team has a university degree." (Team Leader Event Management, Well-resourced Competitor, UAS). This trend was also noticed at the leadership level:

> [The head of communications] is closer to university leadership and more qualified today. The position [used to be] staffed as a part-time job, and now these people are qualified professionals with a lot of experience. (Team Leader Marketing, Well-resourced Competitor, UAS)

Almost all heads of communications were networked professionally — i.e., as members of the Swiss association of university communications (SUPRIO) and/or the European association (EUPRIO). But exchange among them had not intensified.

However, changes were reported in terms of role conceptions: most experienced communicators reported that, a decade ago, many professionals had a journalism background, reflected in their pride in "critical coverage of the organization" (Deputy Head of Communications, Minimalist, RU). This began to change in the early 2010s. Today, a self-perception shaped by institutional norms is more common: "In these past five years, we have also [developed] a service mentality. We are much more service-oriented and also understand our work today stronger along the lines of corporate or institutional communications" (Head of Communications, Minimalist, RU). The perspective of university leadership mirrors that of the communication staff. Yet the changing purpose of university communication was repeatedly scrutinized by university leaders:

> The key question remains: "Is the communication department an advocate for the university, or are they internal science journalists?" [...] Initially, there was more critical self-reflection. Over time, less space was available for this as the focus shifted toward showcasing ourselves for international visibility. (Rector, Well-resourced Competitor, RU)

A recurring theme was the recruitment of experienced communication managers from the corporate sector as department leaders, partly as a result of a specific crisis event. Several interviewees noted this to be a potentially risky strategy, emphasizing how universities differ fundamentally from corporations. One interviewee critically remarked the resulting influx of managerial thinking in the university's communication department:

> A very big change happened recently regarding the fact that the student journey is really viewed strongly from a business perspective. We are aware of using the term "student journey" and not "customer journey", but [laughs], yes, that's exactly the logic behind it, right? (Head of Marketing, Professional All-rounder, UAS)

Those hires appeared to reflect university leaders' ambition to professionalize communication, as illustrated by the quote of one rector: "With the departure of our former

head of communications, I simply saw an opportunity to move more strongly in the direction of professional communication" (Rector, Professional All-rounder, UTE). Several leaders further reported dismissing a head of communications shortly after taking office: "I replaced [the head of communications] quite quickly. The chemistry wasn't right. The person wasn't proactive or forward-looking enough for my taste" (Rector, Well-resourced Competitor, RU).

4.2.2 ▪ *Changes in structure and organization of communication departments*

Most communication departments maintained a press officer or unit with stable resources over the past decade. In more than half of the universities, the communication department had been restructured recently — i.e., adding more specialized units, such as marketing or events; or with the creation of entirely new divisions, such as graphics, video production, or social media. Restructuration took place, "because the volume and nature [of our tasks] changed completely so we had to organize communication in a different way." (Head of Communications, Well-resourced Competitor, RU) In a few cases, a newsroom had been implemented to establish clearer processes:

> After the merger, all of a sudden, [our communications team] included an awful lot of new people. So, we decided to create a corporate newsroom. Once a month we meet and, like a newspaper editorial office, sit at the same table and talk about the things that are newsworthy. [...] Once a month, together with the rector, we discuss communication topics; everyone chips in with topics, and we plan our communication activities. (Head of Communications, Minimalist, RU)

While most departments had opted for a more centralized structure as described above, one had chosen a different approach deliberately strengthening decentralized units at the level of faculties and departments, with the central communication department being tasked mainly with institutional branding and coordination (Well-resourced Competitor, UAS).

Efforts to empower university members to communicate professionally varied: half the communication departments offered media trainings to support scientists going public. Some departments had established guidelines for media and social media communication, with one recently sanctioning non-compliance. Interviewees noted no substantial changes in consulting scientists for media engagement since the 2010s, except during the COVID-19 pandemic or specific crises. However, some universities had placed decentralized communicators throughout the organization, linking them to the central department, enhancing overall communication: "Now we have people responsible for communication in all service areas, all prorectorates or departments; they are not on my team, [but] we work very closely together" (Head of Communications, Professional All-rounder, UTE).

4.3 ▪ *Intensification*

Across all analyzed HEIs, communication practitioners described an intensification (RQ1c) in that "there had been a terrible increase in work" during the past decades "caused by the exponential growth in the volume and nature of tasks" (Head of Communications, Minimalist, RU) driven by digitalization. While this change was a common perception in interviews with

communicators, it was only mentioned by half of the university leaders, and primarily with reference to an increase of staff in communication departments.

4.3.1 ▪ *Changes in personnel and budgets*

All communication departments had grown considerably in the past 15 years:

> We were two people in 2009, or let's say three, with one person who did design. Today we are seven, plus the graphics people. Of course, not always with 100% positions. But that's a tripling. There are also the new additional resources of the communication officers in the prorectorates. (Deputy Head of Communications, Professional All-rounder, UTE)

In a few cases, interviewees described how a crisis with extensive media attention and reputational damage to the university had first "shocked" the communication department and led to fluctuations, but eventually resulted in a major leap in staff numbers and output, as well as growing status in the eyes of university leadership.

Compared to the rise in personnel, communication budgets had not risen as much in recent years. Some universities had allocated large budgets early on and kept them unchanged for decades. In contrast, other institutions mentioned having to reduce budgets. Interestingly, at several universities, university leaders overestimated the number of staff in communication departments by 20–30% over what we were told by the head of communications, and several rectors stated that budgets had increased, in contrast to accounts by the head of communications referring to budget cuts.

4.3.2 ▪ *Changes in competition among universities*

Increased competition among universities to attract students was noted in several interviews, with university leaders perceiving it as stronger than communicators and commissioning regular benchmarking. Key factors for competition included the visibility of the university in the news media, a distinct "trademark", and high reputation among stakeholders, especially politicians. Rankings had lost importance over the years from the perspective of our respondents. Despite rising competition, interviewees highlighted growing collaborations among universities for third-party funding, new student programs, and public science events. Communication professionals mostly mentioned digital technologies as drivers of intensification while university leaders often mentioned NPM reforms as an external pressure.

4.4 ▪ *Strategic alignment*

A few communicators reported that university communication had become more strategically aligned and gained influence on strategic decisions of the university in recent years (RQ1d). Compared to the previous three trends, however, considerable variations were found across the eight HEIs. In the few cases in which strategic influence had increased, the communicators reported stronger changes than university leaders, pointing to differences in perceptions.

4.4.1 ▪ *Changes in alignment of strategies*

Alignment between the communication and university strategy was reported to be strong or moderate in most departments, but also nonexistent or reversing in a few departments. Changes in strategic alignment were rarely described, for instance by comparing the present with the past, where no alignment was given:

> Today the communication strategy is aligned with the university strategy, and the communication concept is aligned with the communication strategy. Everything else is derived from this concept, with each department having its own specific strategy, connected to the overall strategy. (Head of Communications, Well-resourced Competitor, UAS)

In the few universities that reported increased strategic alignment, the development of communication strategies had turned into a more clearly structured collaborative process where university leadership was involved in providing feedback to the communication strategy. In one case, the process of developing a communication strategy aligned with university goals was the result of further training measures for both the communication and university leader:

> Initially this all started with an executive MBA we both [intending head of communications] did, envisioning to develop communication that aligns with the goals of the university as an organization. In the process we did a stakeholder analysis, created a risk management map, compiled strategic objectives, and established a communication cockpit, which included the target groups, messages, objectives, risks, and concrete activities to achieve these objectives. (Secretary General, Minimalist, RU)

However, in other cases, strategic alignment was clearly lacking, and university leadership was not involved in the formulation of communication goals, as one deputy head of communications described:

> Companies have annual goals, and corporate communication then tries to help achieve these goals. But we don't have that. We have very far-reaching, very fuzzy goals like "good teaching" or "innovative research". We cannot really derive any goals from that, so over the last few years, we have defined a bit ourselves what the communication goals are. But those [goals] are not strategically derived in any way. (Deputy Head of Communications, Well-resourced Competitor, RU)

4.4.2 ▪ *Changes in influence on strategic decisions*

Some communicators noticed increased strategic influence of the communication department on the overall organization in recent years, although this perceived change was not always shared by university leaders. This change was primarily seen in the closer relationship between university leadership and the head of the communication department.

In some cases, the head of communication had gained a permanent seat without voting rights at university management meetings in the past few years and was thus able to advise on strategic decisions. In other HEIs, the head of communications had developed more direct and regular contact with the rector over the past three to five years but had no permanent seat in university leadership meetings. In a few cases, the head of communications had only limited access to the rector and thus limited influence. Reasons for changes in strategic influence were traced back to crises situations like the COVID-19 pandemic and restructuring processes:

> During COVID everything changed [...]. It became evident that it's very useful if communication is directly involved in decision-making. [...] Since then, I've had a permanent seat in university leadership — without a vote, but I can actively contribute, and I get directly involved in what's relevant for communication. (Head of Communications, Professional All-rounder, UTE)

In another university, restructuring processes led to the creation of a new communication unit to provide personal strategic advice to the rector:

> By request of our rector, who wanted Communications to be closer and to be directly under him, I transitioned from Communications to the Rectorate in 2016. Since then, the position has undergone substantial changes, [and] the focus has become much more strategic. (Head of Communications, Professional All-rounder, UAS)

Notably, in one case, the strategic influence of the communication department decreased and lost its standing with university leadership with the arrival of a new rector, who relocated the department to a different floor far from the rector's office and was in the process of installing a personal communication advisor without the involvement of the communication department.

> A new person was hired three or four days ago, and it's a bit unusual because this person is in charge of strategic communications, but not part of [our] communications department. She also reports to the rector directly. (Head of Communications, Specialized Strategists, UTE)

4.5 ▪ *Differences across clusters of universities*

Our findings suggest both similarities as well as notable differences in the reported changes of university communication between the four clusters of universities (RQ2). The "Minimalists" and "Professional All-rounders" clusters represent extremes on the spectrum of change in all four dimensions and thus distinguish themselves from the "Specialized Strategists" and "Well-resourced Competitors" clusters (see SM1 and SM2):

The universities in the **Minimalists** (UTE, RU) cluster are characterized by a late adoption of digital channels and social media in comparison to other clusters. They did not report a

diversification or increased importance of internal and political stakeholders, nor did they segment stakeholders into more defined target groups. University communicators in this cluster were the least professionally networked and did not participate much in professional training. While resources for communication in this cluster had grown, the increase was less pronounced than in other clusters. The communication departments had little strategic alignment and influence, although the RU (see SM2) had gained a seat in university management meetings recently. The communication department in the UTE had seen a recent professionalization leap following a crisis, which resulted in the hiring of a new head of communications from the corporate sector.

The universities in the **Specialized Strategists** (UTE, UTE) cluster stand out with putting emphasis on students as stakeholders, which had sharply increased over the past few years. To attract students, they intensified their marketing efforts — including for continuing education programs — and made use of LinkedIn. The communication departments experienced an enormous growth in resources within just a few years and showed strategic alignment at a rather high level early on with little increase. In one of the UTEs, the slipstream of a crisis involving political stakeholders had led to more political communication, contributed to further professionalization, and resulted in the hiring of a new head of communications.

The universities in the **Well-resourced Competitors** (RU, UAS) cluster are unique because they developed professional decentralized structures for communication and allocated resources at the decentralized level. This cluster experienced the least budget growth in recent years compared to the other clusters, maybe because budgets were high to begin with. In the RU, strategic alignment was low, yet the head of communications had secured a permanent (non-voting) seat at university leadership meetings (see SM2). In contrast, the UAS exhibited very strong increased strategic alignment and culture of learning, but close ties to university leadership were lacking.

The universities in the **Professional All-rounders** (UAS, UTE) cluster are characterized by increased professionalization and growing resources, either at the decentralized or centralized level. Departments in this cluster were early adopters of websites and social media, now being furthest into the consolidating phase. They stand out as having the most elaborate strategies for communication aligned with the university strategy and a direct involvement of university leadership in communication. In both the UAS and UTE (see SM2), the communication leader gained strategic influence, either through a seat at university board meetings or as a personal communication advisor to the rector.

Small differences are also visible between the three types of universities (RU, UAS, UTE). According to a communication head, differences in communication were the result of historical developments within the Swiss higher education system:

> A difference [between us and] the [research] universities is that we are much more marketing oriented. We have only been around for 20 years and always had a marketing perspective on communication. Always keeping acquisition [of students] in mind, we are much more business-oriented. As we are younger, we had to fight for our place. (Head of Communications, Well-resourced Competitor, UAS)

In relation to diversification, the findings suggest that the importance of prospective and current students as well as political stakeholders had grown more in UAS and UTE than in RU over the years. News media were found to be the most important stakeholder at RU, both of which had established newsrooms, while it was less prioritized in both UTE and UAS. In terms of intensification, we found that the expansion in personnel and output had happened more quickly at UAS, followed by bigger UTE, compared to RU. With regard to professionalization, it seems that communicators working at UAS had a stronger service mentality than their counterparts in UTE and RU. In addition, communicators at both UAS and larger UTE exhibited a more pronounced marketing perspective and gained expertise in the field of marketing and digital campaigning earlier than their peers at RU.

5 ▪ Discussion and conclusion

This qualitative study explores trends in university communication over the past decade, focusing on changes in the diversification, professionalization, intensification, and strategic alignment of communication in eight universities that represent typical cases in the Swiss higher education landscape. The findings show notable changes with regard to:

Diversification (RQ1a). Results confirm that university communication has diversified considerably and is the most pronounced among the four changes. This is manifested in a surge in digital channels alongside a decrease in print publications as well as in the growing importance of internal stakeholders, prospective students, and politicians, aligning with earlier studies from the late 2000s and 2010s suggesting that stakeholders and channels diversified [Höhn, 2011; Marcinkowski et al., 2013; Schwetje et al., 2017] as well as with a recent survey in Switzerland [Fürst et al., 2022]. Yet our findings also point to a recent consolidation, with some universities focusing on the most relevant digital channels and discarding others. The potential of new communication channels and the COVID-19 pandemic have contributed to the inclusion of more stakeholder groups [Entradas & Bauer, 2022; Fähnrich et al., 2019].

Professionalization (RQ1b). Results point to a pronounced professionalization at the level of individual communicators in recent years, with clear increases in communication-related formal education, job experience, and skills as well as more professional networking and a service-oriented and institutional role conception — findings that may contribute to the sparse research on professionalism in institutional science communication [Höhn, 2011; Sörensen et al., 2024; Trench, 2017]. The hiring of communication managers from the corporate sector has also influenced this trend. Professionalization at the organizational level includes restructuration and internal specialization within communication departments, with sub-units responsible for graphic design, web, or digital marketing, aligning with previous studies [Gottschall & Saltmarsh, 2017; Volk et al., 2023].

Intensification (RQ1c). Findings reveal an intensification of university communication, which is manifested in increased personnel and output, supporting previous research from Switzerland [Anderegg & Kunz, 2003; Fürst et al., 2022] or Germany [Höhn, 2011] showing an increase in financial resources. In our study, this was particularly true for the early 2010s. However, in contrast to increasing personnel and output, the budgets have stagnated or declined in most of the analyzed universities since then. This may explain why some communication departments are consolidating channels and content creation.

Strategic alignment (RQ1d). Our study illuminates that strategic alignment of university communication to overarching organizational goals has changed the least in recent years. Alignment was evident or partially present in most cases. However, only a few interviewees acknowledged changes, including cases involving an increase or decrease in strategic alignment. Moreover, our findings support previous studies indicating a low strategic influence of communication departments within universities from Germany [Kohring et al., 2013] and Switzerland [Fürst et al., 2022], and low alignment in public sector organizations more generally [Zerfass & Volk, 2020].

Differences across universities (RQ2). Results also reveal differences across the four clusters, especially between the "Minimalists" and the "Professional All-rounders". For example, communication departments in the Minimalists cluster were slower to adopt new digital channels and showed limited diversification of stakeholders or progress in strategic alignment. In contrast, universities in the Professional All-rounders cluster reported substantial changes in all four dimensions, including stronger alignment between communication and university goals and growing professionalization within their communication teams. Moreover, differences across types of HEIs were observed: in contrast to earlier studies [Bühler et al., 2007], we found that UAS have among the most professionalized communications staff compared to RU. UAS were also quicker to increase personnel and output — partly driven by the competition for students — but RU and some UTE have reached similar levels.

Although we analyzed the four trends separately for analytical purposes, they are interrelated. For example, the rise of social media led to the adoption of new channels and more tailored content for a growing number of audiences (diversification), increased output, and a higher work pace (intensification). It also required new skills (e.g., for video production, analytics) and led to the hiring or further training of communicators and, in the longer run, to a restructuring of departments (professionalization). With growing competencies, some communication departments developed communication strategies that were more aligned with university goals and gained increasing influence (strategic alignment).

The findings from our qualitative study are widely, with some minor exceptions (e.g., budget stagnation), in line with our quantitative survey in Switzerland (see also Table 2 in SM1), which indicated that university communication has changed considerably over the past five to ten years in the eyes of university leaders [Fürst et al., 2022]. The in-depth qualitative approach enabled a better understanding of the various facets of change and the causes to which this change was attributed by communicators and university leaders. The reasons for changes in university communication — whether they occurred continuously, gradually, or abruptly — were often linked to external transformations and pressures external to the communication departments and can be structured into four different factors: (a) specific *crisis situations* (e.g., financial crises, media scandals, COVID-19 pandemic) that directly affected the university as a whole and abruptly brought the relevance of communication and media relations to the fore; (b) *changes in the media and technological environment* (e.g., emergence of new social media platforms, declines in science journalism) which resulted in gradual internal reforms or restructuration processes like a newsroom, often initiated by the communication department; (c) *changes in the higher education system* (e.g., NPM reforms) resulting in more competition and gradually more market-driven communication; and (d) *changes in university leadership* (e.g., appointment of a new rector) and subsequent shifts for the communication department like the replacement of the head of communication.

These results emphasize and underline the importance of (a) *crises* [Schwarz & Büker, 2019] and (c) *changes of the higher education system* [Marcinkowski et al., 2013] as relevant turning points for change in communication departments. The findings also support and extend our previous quantitative research [Fürst et al., 2022], which found that among the strongest predictors of change are the perceived competition between HEIs for reputation and the goal to build the university's public reputation, which are related to the identified (c) *changes in the higher education system* and (b) *changes in the media environment*.

In sum, this qualitative study comprehensively maps changes in Swiss university communication departments over the past decade and contributes to the literature on the evolving role of institutional science communication [e.g., Fürst et al., 2022; Elken et al., 2018]. It chronicles the development from small press offices focused on news media to integrated, professional, and diversified full-service departments as well as highlights changing role conceptions [e.g., Fischer & Schmid-Petri, 2023; Sataøen et al., 2024] and increasing professionalization and specialization [Sörensen et al., 2023; Trench, 2017]. The main limitation of this study is its focus on Switzerland and the reliance on interviewees' recollection of change over time. While the interviews provided rich insights into perceived developments over time, such reflections are shaped by memory, personal experiences, and potentially self-serving biases. For instance, interviewees may have emphasized their own roles or certain institutional changes in ways that reflect professional pride or strategic positioning. We have sought to critically interpret these narratives by interviewing both communicators and university leaders and gathering multiple perspectives per HEI. However, we acknowledge that such data cannot substitute for direct longitudinal observation.

Despite these limitations, we suspect that the overarching trends we identify are observable in other countries and transferable to private universities. Future research could investigate trends across diverse education systems and consider both centralized and decentralized communication [Entradas & Bauer, 2022; Volk et al., 2025].

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