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Review Article

Mapping Communication Plan Elements for Promoting National Strategies of Higher Education

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Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to study and identify the elements of a comprehensive communication plan tailored to promote national strategies for higher education, an area where existing research has been fragmented. *Methodology* - Previous research has primarily focused on communication plans for universities, business enterprises or national strategies in isolation, leaving a gap in understanding the elements that constitute an effective communication plan focus on promoting national strategies for higher education. Using a systematic review guided by PRISMA approach methodology, research aimed to identify the key components of such a plan, with the objective of filling the gaps and creating a unified new holistic framework. *Findings* - Study identifies a holistic framework of twelve essential elements that draw up a communication plan and implement in sequence, including targeting specific stakeholder groups, integrating traditional and digital communication channels and establishing a timeline for communication activities. Also the study reveals that a well-structured communication plan can significantly enhance the alignment of national educational objectives with stakeholder engagement. *Practical implications –* The results offer precious knowledge on field of promoting national strategies of higher education. Findings provide a novel contribution by filling existing gaps in the literature, offering practical implications for policymakers. *Originality –* This is the first research on educational marketing that focus and create a holistic framework to implement from public sector in order to communicate a national strategy policy for higher education, while similar work is limited even at international level.

Keywords

Promotion, Communication Plan, National Strategy, Higher Education

1. Introduction

Communication as an important part of marketing science is crucial in managing reputation and promote strategy of public sector entities and there is a need for governments to use strategic communication across sectors and entities such as higher education (HE) [21]. A central issue for successful implementation of a national higher education strategy is the decision about elements that included in a communication plan of national strategy for higher education. Structure and selection of these elements is a pillar for effectiveness of national strategy and its adoption by society and stakeholders. This process help to clearly outline a concise and compelling need for the communication activity or campaign and all elements of a promotion plan should reference supporting evidence, quantitative and qualitative [61, 68].

Previous research has largely concentrated on communication plans of universities aimed at attracting students or on

communication strategies used in business and commerce sectors [11]. This fragmented approach has left a significant gap in our understanding of designing and implementing promotion plans that can effectively support and promote national higher education initiatives. While there is ample research on communication in business, commerce and even at the institutional level within universities, there is a lack of focused study on how these strategies can be systematically applied to support national educational strategy [76]. Thus given the need for such a study we submit the following research question: "What are the key elements that constitute an effective communication plan for promoting a national higher education strategy?".

2. Review

Communication planning has been extensively studied across various fields, with significant contributions from many scholars [18, 34, 70, 74] who developed foundational models of public relations and communication strategies. Their work emphasizes the importance of systematic planning and stakeholder engagement, concepts that are widely accepted in both corporate and public sector communications. More recent studies have expanded on these ideas, exploring how strategic communication can align with organizational goals to enhance effectiveness [20]. While universities have employed communication plans to attract students, there is limited research on how these plans can be scaled and adapted to promote broader national educational strategies [64].

National strategies in higher education often focus on broad objectives such as increasing access, improving quality and enhancing global competitiveness. Authors have examined the global dynamics of higher education, highlighting the role of public policies in shaping educational outcomes [3, 54]. Other papers explores policies that influence higher education but lack a detailed analysis of how these policies are communicated to and perceived by stakeholders [36, 69]. The communication of national strategies is often assumed to be a straightforward process, overlooking the complexities involved in engaging diverse audiences, from policymakers to the general public [1].

In business sector, communication plans are well-documented, with extensive literature on their development and implementation. Scholars Kotler and Keller have provided comprehensive frameworks for strategic communication, particularly in marketing contexts [44, 72]. However, the transferability of these business-oriented communication strategies to the higher education sector is not straightforward. Universities and educational institutions operate under different imperatives and focus is often on long-term reputation building and stakeholder engagement rather than immediate sales or market share. Research have explored marketing strategies in higher education, particularly in attracting international students. Structure of communication plan is based on common principles but differs depending on organization,

whether private or public, purpose and target group [24, 55, 79].

Elements of communication plan are many. First, executive summary provides a clear direction and purpose for educational initiatives, ensuring alignment with broader national development agendas. A national higher education strategy establish goals such as fostering innovation and encouraging research and development, collaboration between academia and industry and promoting internationalization but regardless of the context of the goals, is important to clearly underline context so that policymakers can more effectively manage the resources and communication channels to disseminate the strategy [25, 47].

Communication plan context establishes the context scene and answers the question "why there is a need for creating a communication plan". This element describes the issue that is driving the need for a coherent communication plan and includes references and link connections to key national higher education strategic plan priorities with evidence, metrics and data [74].

Defining the purpose of the communication plan meaning to answer the question "what does a state aims to achieve through effective communication" [77].

"Which are the objectives and specific outcomes should accomplished" with communication efforts is the question of element "Communication plan objectives". Such objectives is to promote vision, priorities and actions to stakeholder groups or to form a unified perception of the national strategy between implementation body and stakeholders [19].

Target groups of communication plan for national strategy for higher education typically includes various stakeholders involved in the higher education ecosystem. This element answers "who communication plan trying to reach" and underlines the importance of identifying and analyzing stakeholders, choosing methodologies for stakeholder mapping, highlighting the diverse stakeholders involved, including entities, educational institutions, students and industry partners, identifying and segmenting the target audience based on special characteristics [13, 42].

Content marketing involves creating and sharing valuable resources to attract and retain stakeholders [37]. This element concerns the content of the messages that will reach the target groups and essentially answer "what we want to communicate". There are several types of communication messages in higher education based on their purpose, form and medium but regardless of the type of message must be craft clear and tailored for different stakeholder groups, utilize various formats, including articles, videos, infographics and success stories [43, 60].

Defining the communication channels essentially concerns the answer to the question of "where to promote the messages" to traditional and digital communication channels such as traditional Media, workshops, events, digital marketing channels and collaborations.

Implementation of communication plan, answers the ques-

tion "which organization carry out the plan" and usually is relevant secretariat for higher education, supported and assisted by higher education strategy planning groups [14, 27].

Also implementation of national strategy usually has a 5-year horizon separated on three phases with variations depending on country, level and depth of interventions [58].

A detailed budget with various expenses, including digital marketing campaigns, content creation, public relations activities, stakeholder engagement events, and the deployment of advanced communication tools [5].

Key roles typically include strategic leaders, communication managers, content creators, data analysts and public relations specialists. Strategic leaders, often from government bodies, data analysts, content creators, copywriters, graphic designers and multimedia specialists [4, 19].

Key performance indicators that are appropriate for national strategy of higher education provide comprehensive insights into the campaign's performance, effectiveness and impact [22, 41].

3. Methodology

This study follows a systematic review methodology guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) approach. The PRISMA approach is chosen because it provides a structured and transparent method for synthesizing research evidence, which is essential for achieving the study's aim of developing a comprehensive framework based on existing literature [62]. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flowchart that illustrates the flow of studies through the different phases of the review identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion.

The research was conducted across academic databases of Scopus and Google Scholar. Google Scholar provided a wide array of academic content however we also used Scopus for more curated selection of peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings and scholarly materials [35, 59].

Studies of review focused on communication plans related to national strategies for higher education (Table 1). Only peer-reviewed articles, reports and books published in English were considered. The majority of studies were excluded if they focused solely on communication strategies of each universities to attract students or on communication strategies in business and commerce that lacked relevance to national educational strategies (Figure 2).

To extract research papers of higher quality and relevance, on Scopus used specific terms and criteria to filter and index content. This review uses key components of PRISMA methodology to extract data from "Titles", "Abstracts" and "Keywords" such as «communication plan», «national strategy» and «higher education» and use Boolean operators such (AND) to refine the search.
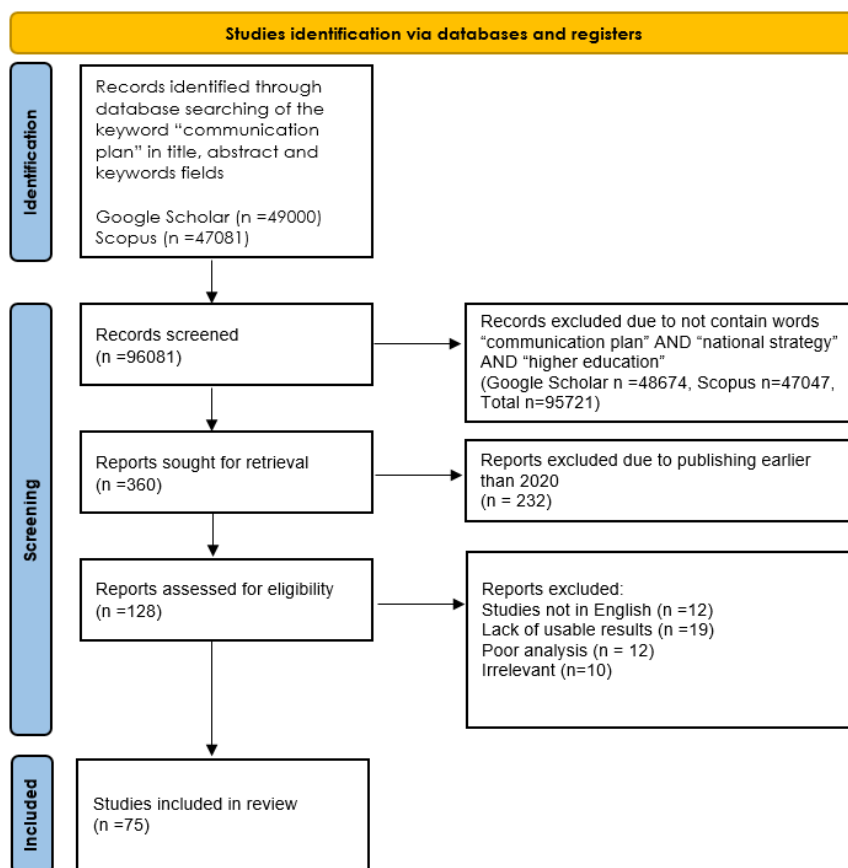

Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart for the selected keywords.

***Table 1.** Categorization of research studies.*

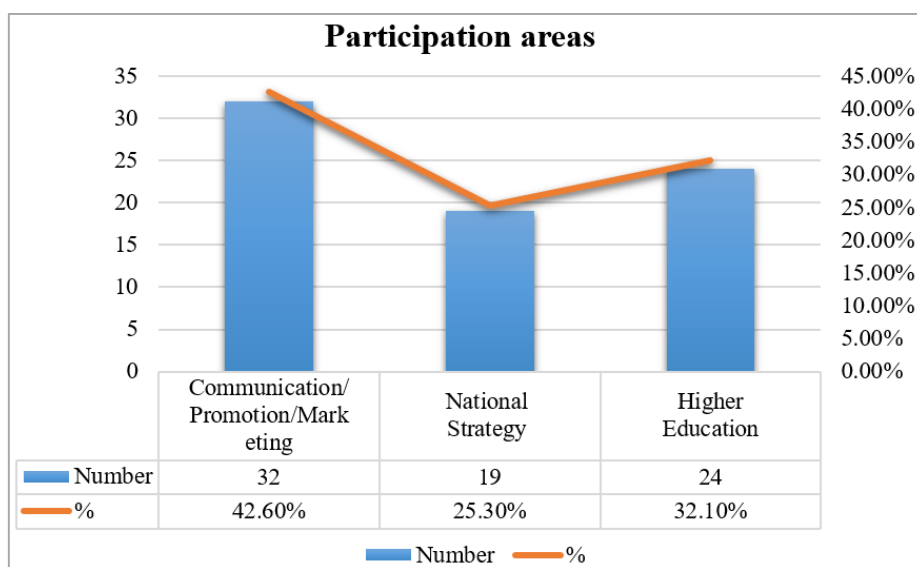| Research area	Number of studies	% of participation
Communication/Promotion/Marketing	32	42,6
National Strategy	19	25,3
Higher Education	24	32,1

***Figure 2.** Distribution of research areas.*

Selection criteria focus on recent publications, particularly those published last two decades, to ensure the review reflects contemporary practices and trends. Analysis involves categorizing the findings into elements, such as objectives setting, audience analysis, message development, communication channels, and feedback mechanisms. For eligibility used criteria like study design, study language, outcomes and analysis. This approach helps in distilling the critical elements of a communication plan, ensuring the accuracy and reliability of data extraction and critical synthesis. This was achieved by double-checking the data extraction process and conducting regular reviews.

4. Results

One of the most significant findings is the identification of target groups as central to the design of a communication plan. Target groups belong into two main categories, the first concerns intermediate target groups and the second the final target group to which the policy maker wants to promote the national higher education strategy (Table 2).

***Table 2.** Target groups of communication plan of national higher education strategy.*

Target groups	
Intermediate	**Final**
1. Government and Policymakers 2. Higher education sector	1. Higher Education Institutions 2. Research institutions 3. Enterprises and Organizations 4. Public bodies 5. Community and Society 6. International Partners

a. Intermediate target groups consists of Government and Policymakers and Higher education sector [46].

Government and Policymakers: National strategies for higher education involve government ministries, independent authorities, entities, agencies and policymakers responsible for funding, regulation and policy development in the education sector [6]. Each head of public body acts as a multiplier for communicating the strategy [40, 73].

Higher education sector: The main multipliers member bodies participating in the strategy planning committee, such as national university associations, higher education associations, associations of university rectors, national associations of teaching, research and administration staff, national associations of higher education, national bodies for the internationalization of universities [56, 75].

b. Final target groups consists of the broader spectrum of higher education sector and society.

Higher education institutions: Universities, boards of governors, colleges and other tertiary education providers are the most crucial audience [26]. Educators, expatriate professors at universities abroad, researchers, faculty and administrators within higher education institutions are target groups. Students unions focused when strategy aim to improve access, affordability and quality of education for students from diverse backgrounds [17].

Research institutions: national or private research institutes, scholarship institutes, education research centres, hubs and clusters, national innovation and education digital transformation centres are crucial audience as promotes the creation of synergies between industrial enterprises and research institutions, making a decisive contribution to the orientation of higher education to [50].

Enterprises and Organizations: Country's educational institutions present significant research work with potential for implement in industry and at the same time prepare and equip the future human resources of the country providing high quality theoretical and technical knowledge. Communication plan create a framework for cooperation to develop education based on labour market needs such as industrial doctorates, postgraduates and specialized training programs [32].

Public bodies: Public bodies as ministries and secretaries general that have not been directly involved in the formulation of the higher education strategy, but have responsibilities which are related to education policy and is critical to inform them and build consensus around the strategy [15].

Community and Society: Citizens benefit from actions and initiatives of the strategy as it will help to educate and create skilled scientists who will respond to the working environment and the overall development of whole economy [9, 78]. The broader community, including parents, alumni, higher education thought leaders and local communities are major target group.

International Partners: Collaboration with international partners, international education institutions, national embassies, consulates and organizations abroad for the promotion of higher education is part of national strategies for higher education internationalization, particularly in areas such as research collaboration and student exchange programs [45, 57].

Another important finding is the utilization of a mix of traditional and digital communication channels. The integration of traditional and digital channels reflects findings in both the business and higher education marketing literature, however, this study emphasizes the importance of this mix spe-

cifically for promoting national higher education strategies (Table 3).

Table 3. Channels for communication plan of national higher education strategy.

Communication channels	
Traditional media	Television, radio, newspapers
Workshops/seminars	
Promotional events	
Digital marketing channels	Websites, search engines, ads on search engines, organic social media and ads (LinkedIn, X, Youtube, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram), email marketing, referral channels, mobile marketing, Artificial intelligence channels.
Partnerships & collaborations	

a. Traditional Media.

Television with public service announcements, documentaries and educational programs highlight the importance of higher education and promote specific initiatives. Campaigns that feature success stories of alumni can inspire prospective students and reassure parents [63], educational shows on existing popular programs target specific stakeholder groups, programs that discuss new policies, educational reforms or highlight academic achievements engage educators and policymakers, broadcasting interviews with educational leaders, policymakers and experts can lend credibility to the national higher education strategy, talk shows with manager of public organizations and institutions, educators, students and policymakers can provide in-depth insights into the national higher education strategy [66].

Radio campaigns can promote scholarship opportunities, new educational programs, and changes in policy [1].

Established newspapers campaigns can enhance the credibility of the national higher education strategy and ensure that the information is taken seriously by stakeholders [53].

b. Workshops/seminars. Info Days promote initiatives, flagship projects, programmes and actions and give to participants the opportunity to ask specific questions to the managers of ministry of education and independent higher education authorities.

c. Promotional Events

Public entities for issuing the strategy in cooperation with the Ministry of Education organize information events to develop opinions on higher education.

d. Digital marketing channels.

Websites: A website dedicated exclusively to the national higher education strategy is required, which act as a national portal for higher education [12].

SEO: Search engine optimization (SEO) enhances the visibility of website of national higher education strategy and its ranking on search engines, making it easier for stakeholders to find relevant information [8, 52].

Advertisements on search network: Google Ads and platforms of search engines drive targeted traffic to the website and among tactics is to run targeted ad campaigns focusing on specific initiatives or events, use remarketing to re-engage visitors who have previously shown interest and utilize geotargeting to reach stakeholders in specific regions [49].

Social Media: Platforms such as LinkedIn, X, Youtube, Facebook, TikTok and Instagram are effective for engaging with various stakeholder groups and sharing timely update. Target groups of social media channels focus on associations of university rectors, teaching and research staff, public bodies, community, and society [2, 71].

Email marketing: Boards of governors, national bodies, universities, associations of teaching and research staff are appropriate audience for this channel [33].

Referral channels: Is crucial to publish articles on policy impacts, research developments and best practices, specialized guest posts from key stakeholders and experts in the field and highlight success stories and case studies from other countries strategy implementation.

Mobile marketing: Ensures that content is accessible and engaging for on-the-go stakeholders of all target groups and particularly those with busy schedules [39].

Artificial Intelligence channels: AI enhances personalization and efficiency in marketing efforts, ensuring more effective stakeholder engagement, focusing on all stakeholder groups [28].

Partnerships and Collaborations: Forge partnerships with industry stakeholders, academic institutions, non-profit organizations, and media outlets to amplify the promotion efforts.

The review also shapes the importance of a clearly defined timeline for communication activities. A timeline for communication activities is separated into three phases and should consider key milestones and events related to the national higher education strategies (Table 4). Also implementation of national strategy usually has a 5-year horizon separated on three phases with variations depending on country, level and depth of interventions [58].

Phase 1: Launch and awareness (Year 1).

Objectives of first phase is to introduce the national strategy focus on higher education and build awareness among stakeholders by applying key activities:

(1). Digital presence: launch website about strategy, launch social media.

(2). Announcement Campaign: kick off the communication campaign strategy with a high-impact campaign using press releases, media events, social media engagement.

(3). Engage media: press conferences, press releases.

(4). Content Creation: develop and distribute promotional materials, including brochures, website content, videos and infographics [38].

(5). Stakeholder Engagement: webinars, workshops, meetings to engage with partners and policymakers.

(6). Influencers Engagement: events, info days.

Table 4. 5-year timeline of communication plan of national higher education strategy.

Timeline phases of communication plan of HE national strategy						
	Phase 1			Phase 2		Phase 3
Year 1	Digital presence Announcement campaign Media engagement Content creation	Stakeholder engagement Influencers engagement Public engagement Governmental web presence	Stakeholder meetings Feedback			
Years 2-4				Reports	Case studies and success stories Engagement	Media relations Feedback
Year 5						Strategic review Update announcement Future roadmap Feedback and engagement

(7). Public Engagement: open event with participation of representatives of stakeholders and target groups from the public and the academic sector.

(8). Governmental websites: strategy will be published on the websites of all involved public services and on all the websites of stakeholders.

(9). Stakeholder meetings.

(10). Feedback Mechanisms: establish channels for stakeholders to provide feedback such as surveys.

Phase 2: Communication of implementation results (Years 2-4)

Implementation phase, starts after the awareness of strategy and lasts for the next 2-4 years and at this phase, emphasis of key activities placed on communicating the progress and outcomes of strategy.

(1). Progress Reports: annual reports, achievements, milestones, challenges, interventions implemented during the year.

(2). Case Studies and Success Stories: Highlight successful initiatives [51], share through newsletters, social media, and events.

(3). Ongoing Engagement: Host events, such as progress update meetings, conferences and interactive sessions [65].

(4). Media Relations: press coverage of significant milestones and positive outcomes.

(5). Feedback and dialogue: utilize surveys, feedback forms, social media listening and personalizes emails.

Phase 3: Updates and future directions (Year 5)

Communicate updates to the strategy and outline future directions based on the outcomes and evolving educational landscape.

(1). Strategic Review: comprehensive review of the past four years.

(2). Update Announcement: updates or revisions through campaign, press releases, media briefings and targeted emails.

(3). Future Roadmap: Present future plans in detail.

(4). Feedback and Engagement: stakeholders discussions about updates.

The crucial role of evaluation of a communication plan measured by the following specific KPI's tailored for higher education.

(1) Television: percentage of the target audience exposed to the advertisement at least once (Reach) [48].

(2) Radio: Total number of unique listeners who have heard the radio promotion at least once (Reach).

(3) Newspapers: number of copies of the newspaper distributed and sold.

(4) Workshops/seminars: Number of stakeholders who register for and attend the workshops or seminars [31].

(5) Promotional Events: number of stakeholder attendees.

(6) Website: total visits, unique visitors, page views, average session duration, pages per session, bounce rate, number of downloads of key documents, percentage of visitors signing up for newsletters.

(7) Search engine optimization: total organic visits, unique visitors from search engines, average click through rate for high-priority keywords [10].

(8) Advertisements on search network: percentage of users who click on the ad after seeing it.

(9) Social Media: number of unique stakeholders who have seen the social media content, assessment of stakeholders' attitudes, reactions and discussions related to the social media posts [7, 16, 23].

(10) Email campaigns: percentage of recipients who open email.

(11) Mobile marketing: number active sessions, session length and in-app actions.

(12) Referral channels: number of stakeholders who proceed to complete actions such as enrolling in programs [67].

(13) Artificial Intelligence channels: engagement rates with AI-recommended content.

(14) Partnerships and Collaborations: number of new partnerships established with academic institutions, industry partners, government agencies, participation rates in collaborative projects [30].

(15) Information and promotional material: number of printed and electronic material, of downloads from the website and of press releases and articles published.

For first time, a study synthesizes the findings from the literature into a comprehensive framework table consisting of twelve key elements that are essential for a communication plan promoting a national higher education strategy (Table 5).

Table 5. Elements of communication plan of national higher education strategy.

Elements of communication plan of national higher education strategy
1. Executive summary
2. Communication plan context (why there is a need of communication plan)
3. Communication plan purpose (what does a state aims to achieve - overall goal)
4. Communication plan objectives (specific goals and objectives – outcomes – to be accomplished)
5. Target groups (who communication plan trying to reach)
6. Messages and content
7. Communication channels
8. Implementation agency (which organization carry out the plan)
9. Timeline
10. Budgeting

Elements of communication plan of national higher education strategy
11. Responsibilities and roles
12. Evaluation

5. Conclusion

Study has answered the research question by identifying the key elements that constitute an effective communication plan for promoting a national higher education strategy. The twelve-element framework developed includes essential components such as stakeholder identification, message development, channel selection, timeline planning and evaluation. Findings demonstrating that a communication plan integrating both traditional and digital marketing elements, tailored to the national context, enhances stakeholder engagement and aligns more closely with educational objectives.

The significance of findings lies in their practical implications for policymakers and communication professionals, providing a structured approach to crafting effective communication strategies that resonate across diverse stakeholder groups and advances academic understanding by integrating insights from various fields into a cohesive framework and offers a practical tool that can be applied to real-world communication challenges in higher education.

Abbreviations

HE	Higher Education
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
SEO	Search Engine Optimization

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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