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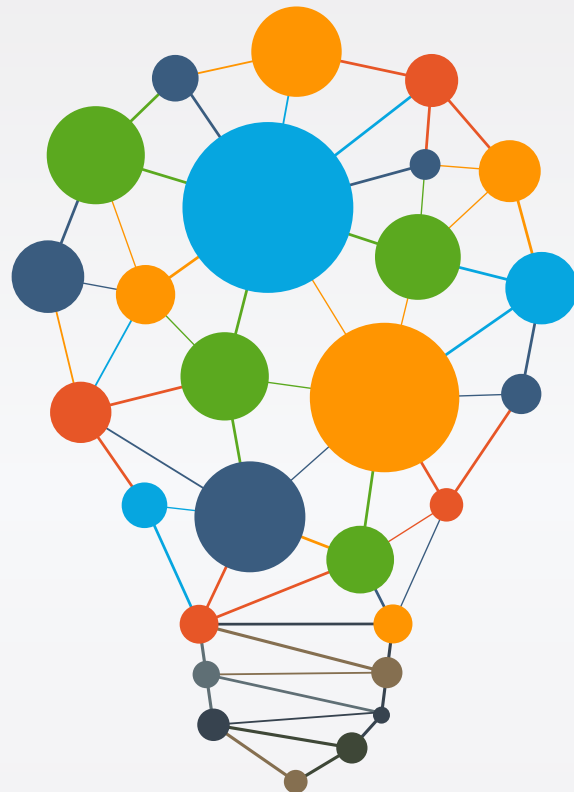
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REVEALING THE PURPOSE OF A STAKEHOLDER ORGANISATION: THE CASE OF A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY RESPONDING TO THE COVID-19 'CORONA' CRISIS

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In early March 2020, Austria declared a state of emergency due to COVID-19. Social life was put on hold, public and private organisations were largely shut down, and universities had to adapt their operations. A group of WU[1] academics investigate how one of Europe's biggest public universities in business and economics responded to the crisis and in the process rediscovered its core purpose.

INTRODUCTION

> One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed, he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug. – Franz Kafka[2]

In this paper, we report on similar experiences as Gregor Samsa in the famous novel *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka – namely, the ad hoc change of operations of a public university that has been caused by the pandemic spread of the SARS-CoV-2 ('Corona') virus, which can be considered a crisis for the organisation. Crises can be characterised as 'low probability/ high consequence events that threaten the most fundamental goals of an organisation'.[3] The first days of the event hitting the university provide a unique opportunity to investigate the initial phase of how the organisation responded to the crisis.

We analyse internal and external crisis communication concerning the organisation's purpose. Considering the 'what for' question

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1. Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien (German) – The Vienna University of Economics and Business
2. The original quotation reads as: 'Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheuren Ungeziefer verwandelt'. (Franz Kafka, Die Verwandlung, 1915)
3. K.E. Weick, Enacted Sensemaking in Crisis Situations, *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1988, p. 305

of the organisation,[4] we understand how the university reacts in this critical phase and how this corresponds to its purpose. Consequently, our research question reads as: 'What impact does a low-probability-high-impact event have on the perception and enactment of an organisation's purpose?'

We conclude that such a situation reveals the dominance of particular aspects of organisational purpose over others. It reflects a gradation (or hierarchy) among different ends of the organisation that is not explicitly salient in regular times. Our research contributes empirical evidence to the mostly theoretical debate on single- versus multiple-objective purposes of organisations.[5] In particular, it reinforces the argument that organisations apply heuristics to balance divergent objectives.[6] The low-probability-high-consequence event we draw on provides a singular opportunity to trace the implications of such a heuristic and to hypothesise on the underlying motives and mechanisms.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Organisational Purpose and Components of Purpose

The fundamental dynamic of successful organisations is purpose. While productivity, quality, and customer service create profitability, the force that drives them all is the organisation's purpose.[7] An organisation encompasses both its purpose and the mechanism established to achieve that purpose.[8] Although the purpose is decisive for organisations,

most of them do not state their purpose explicitly. Instead, they communicate essential aspects of their purpose to the respective target group through a mission statement or vision. There is a hierarchical relationship between purpose, mission, and vision of an organisation. Although mission and purpose are often used interchangeably, there is a subtle difference between them. The mission answers the question 'Why does the organisation exist?' The purpose is somewhat more general and conceptualised as an object or end to be attained, whereas a mission is a specific task with which a person or organisation is charged. The vision of an organisation answers the question 'What kind of a future do you, and your fellow employees want to create?'[9] In other words, we could argue that the commonly tacit purpose of an organisation is externalised through mission and vision. According to Nonaka et al., the externalisation from tacit to explicit is one of the critical concepts not only in knowledge management in general but particularly in the field of knowledge creation.[10] Thus, the formulation of a mission or vision statement can be considered as a knowledge creation process.[11]

Often, the purpose of an organisation is made up of components and is therefore multifaceted. The broader the scope of an organisation's purpose is, the higher the number of objectives to achieve that purpose is.[12] Moreover, the bigger an organisation is, and the more stakeholders it has, the greater the challenge is to balance particular divergent interests inherent to the purpose.[13] As a consequence, a broad purpose and a large number of stakeholders

4. R.F. Duska, The Why's of Business Revisited, *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 16, 1997, pp. 191–199
5. D. Melé, The View and Purpose of the Firm in Freeman's Stakeholder Theory, *Philosophy of Management*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2009, pp. 3–13
6. L. Lankoski and C. Smith, Alternative Objective Functions for Firms, *Organization and Environment*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2018, pp. 242–262
7. R. Hodgson, Purposing: The Fundamental Dynamics, *Business Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 4, 1988, pp. 8–11.
8. R.E. Miles et al., Organizational Strategy, Structure, and Process, *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1978, p. 547.
9. I. Nonaka and H. Takeuchi, *The Wise Company: How Companies Create Continuous Innovation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019
10. I. Nonaka, R. Toyama and N. Konno, SECI, Ba and Leadership: A Unified Model of Dynamic Knowledge Creation, *Long Range Planning*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2000, pp. 5–34
11. A. Kaiser and B. Fordinal, Creating a Ba for Generating Self-transcending Knowledge, *Journal of Knowledge Management*, vol. 14, no. 6, 2010, pp. 928–942
12. E. Alston, L.J. Alston and B. Mueller, The Logic of Leadership and Organizational Hierarchies, Indiana University Bloomington Ostrom Workshop Colloquium Series, 2019, https://ostromworkshop.indiana.edu/pdf/seriespapers/2019spr-colloq/alston-paper.pdf.
13. B.L. Parmar et al., Stakeholder theory: The state of the art, *The Academy of Management Annals*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2010, pp. 403–445

increase the probability that different stakeholders will focus on various components of the purpose. However, it seems crucial that the overall purpose drives the actions of an organisation and that the relation between the constituents of the purpose is transparent.

Unlike the mission and vision of an organisation, its purpose is relatively stable over time.[14] Using the metaphor of a house, one could say that the organisational purpose is the foundation of the building and, on top of this stable foundation, the floors of the house can change, develop or be added depending on various influences and events. At the same time, the purpose is not completely static. Rather, it can be assumed that the purpose will become sharpened over time, which implies that the organisation's 'essential' purpose becomes clearer and thus easier to communicate. Thinking about one's own life, in most cases recognising one's purpose in life, one's own self, and the best version of oneself is a lifelong learning and 'recognition' process in which people become increasingly aware of what they are here for.[15] Often, crises or unexpected situations foster this learning process. As we assume, this also holds for organisations. We argue that such a learning process, whether at the individual or organisational level, is closely linked to the creation and/or externalisation of knowledge about the purpose, knowledge about its components, and knowledge about the relation between these components. This specific

knowledge is valuable as it enhances our ability to make decisions that are in line with and serve the purpose. Moreover, this knowledge allows for evaluating current and future possibilities for action.

The Case of Public Universities

Public universities can be considered as a prototypical example of a multi-stakeholder organisation. In contrast to private corporations, public universities are not owned by single individuals and, thus, are not intended to deliver on solitary objectives, i.e., shareholder value in a figurative sense. Instead, universities can be considered as an 'invention of society' serving its superordinate purposes.[16] In other words, a public university is a 'community of persons' that reflects the different stakeholders in society.[17] However, the role, that universities should play in society, is subject to heated debates since several decades and has considerably changed in the so-called knowledge society. While universities were expected to produce and reproduce a leading class of intellectuals that served in the local administration in the past, their focus shifted towards vocational education, internationalisation, and increasingly offers mass education to produce and reproduce white-collar workers[18] through the growing numbers of students.[19] As 'entrepreneurial universities' or 'enterprise universities',[20] especially business schools, are often measured by the economic utility they (and their graduates) produce.[21] Together with the industrial complex

14. A. White et al., Purpose-Led Organization: 'Saint Antony' Reflects on the Idea of Organizational Purpose in Principle and Practice, *Journal of Management Inquiry*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2017, pp. 101–107; E. Hollensbe et al., Organizations with Purpose, *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 57, no. 5,2014, pp. 1227–1234

15. K. Akrivou, R.E. Boyatzis and P.L. McLeod, The Evolving Group: Towards a Prescriptive Theory of Intentional Group Development, *Journal of Management Development*, vol. 25, no. 7, 2006, pp. 689–706; R.E. Boyatzis and K. Akrivou, The Ideal Self as the Driver of Intentional Change, *Journal of Management Development*, vol. 25, no. 7, 2006, pp. 624–642

16. Duska, 1997

17. D. Melé, The Firm as a 'Community of Persons': A Pillar of Humanistic Business Ethos, *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 106, no. 1, 2012, pp. 89–101

18. C. Star and S. Hammer, Teaching generic skills: eroding the higher purpose of universities, or an opportunity for renewal?, *Oxford Review of Education*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2008, pp. 237–251

19. E.A. Lynton, A Crisis of Purpose Reexamining the Role of the University, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, vol. 15, no. 7, 1983, pp. 18–53.

20. S. Marginson, The enterprise university in Australia, Leading and Managing, vol. 6, no. 2, 2000, pp. 98–112; S. Marginson and M. Considine, *The enterprise university: power, governance and reinvention in Australia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

21. K. Starkey and S. Tempest, A clear sense of purpose? The evolving role of the business school, *Journal of Management Development*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2008, pp. 379–390

and the government, universities are seen as the 'generative principle of knowledge-based societies'[22] and best serve this end in a configuration called a triple helix.[23] Contemporary universities can be seen as purposeful actors who are expected to contribute to the society's wealth – first, by producing valuable knowledge that serves as input for innovation processes and, second, by transferring this knowledge to society. Consequently, universities carry out three missions: teaching, research, and the so-called third mission (i.e., the entrepreneurial aspect), that is the interaction with the socioeconomic environment.[24]

Crisis and Crisis Management in Organisations

It is inevitable that organisations face adversity and need to adapt to jolts from the environment.[25] In line with the view of a crisis-as-event,[26] we define a crisis as a low-probability-high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organisation and is characterised by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution.[27] To cope with such a situation, crisis management aims at 'coordinating stakeholders and resources in an ambiguous environment to bring a disrupted system (i.e., organisation, community, etc.) back into alignment'[28] and is usually conceptualised in three phases: prevention, response, and recovery.[29] We suggest

that the university perceived the SARS-CoV-2 virus crisis as having primarily event-like properties, and the crisis management of the university's top-management can be summarised by actions to bring the organisation back in equilibrium in the response phase.

The way how people react to and interpret such events or crises may be referred to as sensemaking. It may be defined as the 'process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations'.[30] More related to communication, sensemaking refers to 'processes of meaning construction whereby people interpret events and issues within and outside of their organisations that are somehow surprising, complex, or confusing to them'.[31] These definitions stress the ambiguous and novel nature of an event that interrupts the organisational routines and confuses people who have to deal with the crisis. How the top management deals with the crisis may be referred to as sense giving. Sense giving is concerned with the 'process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organisational reality' by 'supplying a workable interpretation to those who would be affected' by the top management's actions.[32] In a

22. H. Etzkowitz, *The triple helix: University-industry-government innovation in action*, New York, Routledge, 2008.

23. L. Leydesdorff, The triple helix: an evolutionary model of innovations, *Research Policy*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2000, pp. 243–255

24. M. Sánchez-Barrioluengo, Articulating the 'three-Missions' in Spanish Universities, *Research Policy*, vol. 43, no. 10, 2014, pp. 1760–1773; J. Goddard, D. Robertson, and P. Vallance, Universities, Technology and Innovation Centres and Regional Development: The Case of the North-East of England, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2012, pp. 609–627

25. A.D. Meyer, Adapting to Environmental Jolts, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1982, pp. 515–537

26. Williams et al., Organizational Response to Adversity: Fusing Crisis Management and Resilience Research Streams, *Academy of Management Annals*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2017, pp. 733–769

27. C.M. Pearson and J.A. Clair, Reframing Crisis Management, *The Academy of Management Review*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1998, pp. 59–76

28. Williams et al., Organizational Response to Adversity: Fusing Crisis Management and Resilience Research Streams

29. J.E. Hale, Crisis Response Communication Challenges: Building Theory From Qualitative Data, *Journal of Business Communication*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2005, pp. 112–134

30. S. Maitlis and M. Christianson, Sensemaking in Organizations: Taking Stock and Moving Forward, *Academy of Management Annals*, vol.8, no. 1, 2014, pp. 57–125

31. J.P. Cornelissen, Sensemaking Under Pressure: The Influence of Professional Roles and Social Accountability on the Creation of Sense, *Organization Science*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2012, p. 118

32. D.A. Gioia and K. Chittipeddi, Sensemaking and Sensegiving in Strategic Change Initiation, *Strategic Management Journal*, vol. 12, no. 6, 1991, pp. 433–448

crisis, sense giving is partly accomplished through and accompanied by crisis response communication.

Crisis communication often aims at the general public,[33] but communication to internal stakeholders is essential as well. Crisis response communication includes 'conveying ongoing crisis events to stakeholders, decision making within the crisis management team, and organisational decisions regarding whether and what amount of information to share'.[34] It is triggered by a crisis event and subsequently runs iteratively through four phases: observation of the event, interpretation (i.e., making meaning of the ambiguous situation through sensemaking), choice (deciding on an action plan), and dissemination (sense giving through communicating the action to the relevant stakeholders).[35] For universities, crisis communication is necessary when its stakeholders experience physical and psychological harm through school shootings, bombings, sexual abuse, or natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes or wildfires).[36]

Crisis (Management) and Organisational Purpose

In sum, we argue that crisis-as-events require crisis management and afford the enactment of sensemaking processes to deal with the ambiguous situation in stakeholder organisations. As a consequence of responding to a crisis, coping with ambiguous and novel situations, the top management of an organisation attempts to influence how stakeholders of the organisation make meaning of the crisis through sense giving, which is partly accomplished through its crisis communication. Therein, considering the purpose of an organisation is decisive and forms a standard for taking actions. We propose that a crisis by influencing processes of sensemaking and sense

giving affords a crisis communication that makes the hierarchy between components of the organisation's purpose (in case of a large public university, its first, second, and third mission) more salient than communicated in regular times through the organisation's vision or mission statement. In other words, when multi-stakeholder organisations deal with a crisis, what they stand for becomes visible primarily through its communications.

In the following sections, we demonstrate that analysing the internal and external communications in the early response phase to a crisis (i.e., internal email communications and announcements to the general public) allows for making the enacted components of the organisation's purpose more salient.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE

Description of the University

The organisation subject to our analysis is one of Europe's biggest public universities in the field of business and economics, hosting about 25,000 students who form the largest group, as well as a combined number of 2,500 academic and non-academic staff. The organisation is hierarchically organised, led by a rectorate consisting of one rector accompanied by four vice rectors for different duties and responsibilities – e.g., teaching and students, research and human resources (HR). There are eleven departments which again consist of a certain number of institutes. The single department subject to this research comprises five institutes, to one of which all authors of this article belong.

As in many organisations, there is no explicit purpose statement. But, as mentioned above, the mission statement can be seen as a written

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33. L. Moerschell and S.S. Novak, Managing Crisis in a University Setting: The Challenge of Alignment, *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2020, pp. 30–40

34. Hale, 2005, p. 113

35. Hale, 2005

36. Moerschell and Novak, 2020

manifestation of what comes close to the purpose of the organisation. The following mission statement can be found on the university's official website:

MISSION STATEMENT OF WU (VIENNA UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS)

WU provides space for contemplation and creativity and is a pioneer in research and teaching, all with the goal of increasing economic capability and social prosperity.

WU's faculty, staff, students, and alumni take social responsibility and are characterised by their expertise, open-mindedness, and eagerness to make a difference.

WU is a leading academic institution and one of Europe's most attractive universities in business and economics.

True to its role as an open-minded institution, WU also sees itself as an international university, as an important hub for global exchange, and as a place where students and teachers work together. Open-mindedness and diversity were already among the university's key values at WU's founding in 1898. WU is committed to the principles of fairness and equal opportunities, scientific integrity, academic freedom, and especially plurality in topics and methodology.

WU is a responsible university.* This means that WU not only accepts responsibility for the quality of its performance in research, teaching, and third mission activities, but also that it acts in a socially responsible manner in all that it does.

* As based on the six Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME)[37]

As we can see from this mission statement, the communicated purpose of the university is to contribute to social prosperity and economic performance through both research and teaching. In so doing, it accepts its social responsibility and emphasises open-mindedness and diversity. The university acts upon values such as fairness, equal opportunities, scientific integrity, academic freedom, and plurality in topics and methodologies.

Interestingly, the mission statement on the official website does not entirely match with other self-descriptions published in different official university sources. For example, on LinkedIn the emphasis is placed much more on research than on teaching. It seems that the university communicates various aspects of its purpose to different audiences, apparently following the assumption that different stakeholder groups would be attracted by different aspects of the organisation's purpose. According to our observation of the organisation's different means of communication, the university would target students, the numerically largest group, with more teaching-related aspects of its purpose whereas the academic staff would be appealed mostly by research-related aspects of the purpose. The different communications of the purpose's components lead to a certain ambiguity in the salience of the organisation's purpose. This makes it difficult to judge what the answer to the single 'what for' of the organisation would be.

Description of the Low-Probability-High-Consequence Event

COVID-19, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, emerged in China at the end of 2019. What was first thought of as a local epidemic, quickly spread around the globe and became a disease of pandemic scale. Gradually, other countries were facing serious, often exponentially growing infection rates that not only took healthcare systems to their limits, but also induced fierce countermeasures like closing public spaces, businesses, and educational

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37. Vienna University of Economics and Business, https://www.wu.ac.at/en/the-university/about-wu/strategy, retrieved May 13, 2020

institutions in many countries. All of that also happened in the authors' country of residence.

Our observation period started on a Tuesday morning in early March (Day 1). In the evening, 182 people in Austria were reported as infected.[38] Rumours began to spread that some university councils in the same city have decided to close temporarily, while universities in other cities were said to be already shut down. During this day, the rumours turned out to be true. Almost simultaneously, various universities first announced to suspend their regular teaching activities and later communicated the possibility to switch to distance learning formats until the beginning of April, while the government announced a ban of events hosting more than 100 people. Border controls were set up at the borders to countries with an already higher SARS-COV-2 virus infection rate. Just the next day (Wednesday, Day 2), the national government decided to close all schools for the upcoming weeks. Only primary schools were allowed to open to provide childcare as the government wanted to avoid having young children be looked after by their grandparents, the most at-risk group. This measure aimed at slowing the spread of SARS-COV-2, since more than 200 people were infected by the virus at this time. On the third day of observation, the first death in Austria due to the SARS-CoV-2 virus – a 69-year-old man who had visited Italy – was announced. Already 302 cases of infection were confirmed, and only four people had recovered. Several borders were already closed by that time; many others were likely to follow. The university subject to his research was at that time only open for employees. The total shutdown of the university followed on Monday, three days after the end of our observation period. The US, Sweden and many other countries banned flights to Austria and Europe in general. Most shops in Austria ceased their operations during the next week and remained closed.

METHODOLOGY

To analyse how the university responded to this low-probability-high-impact event, we draw on two sets of data that reflect the internal and external audience of the organisation, more precisely, two groups of stakeholders – i.e., staff and the general public. Our primary source is internal email communications that were sent during the initial response phase of crisis management. Although this data is quantitatively limited, it is exceptional from a historical perspective, as after the end of World War II there has not been any large-scale shutdown of universities in Central Europe due to a pandemic. Also, we analyse external communications that were either directly (i.e., press releases and social media posts) or indirectly (i.e. print media, an announcement by the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research) addressing the general public. Our analysis starts with the very first public announcement of a neighbouring university to shut down and ends with the first release of comprehensive, though provisional, instructions of the university's rectorate.

Internal Communications

In this period of roughly four days, 57 emails were sent to the university's internal mailing lists to which the authors are subscribed. This allowed for analysing all messages that were sent from top management to all employees and all executives as well as communications that were (internally) sent to the mailing lists of the department, department heads as well as the institute and institute heads to which the authors belong. The analysis of email communications was two-fold. First, we analysed emails with respect to their subject and the type of message they disseminate. Second, we plotted the gathered information combined with metadata as a sociogram. This provided additional insights, as it illustrates the directed flow of messages among different hierarchical levels over time.

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38. WHO Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report – 51, https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200311-sitrep-51-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=1ba62e57_10 retrieved on March 21, 2020

Content analysis

To inductively analyse the content of email communications, we adopted a text-driven approach.[39] We analysed the email messages in two respects: (I) What is the main subject of the message? (II) What is the nature of the message? The content analysis resulted in four subject areas that reflect the main content of the email messages, and four categories on the different nature of messages. The latter reflect different intentions of the sender and imply different levels of obligation for the recipients. Table 1 presents the developed subject categories and different types of messages (i.e., nature of messages).

Table 2 summarises the results and gives the numbers of messages. On the one hand side, we see that the majority of messages addresses the topic of distance learning (58% of all messages). When we only consider the messages that relate to specific and active measures to respond to the event (i.e., distance learning and change in organisational procedures), the emphasis on

TABLE 1: SUBJECT AREAS AND CONTENT OF THE MESSAGES ANALYSED

SUBJECT AREA	NATURE OF MESSAGE
Distance Learning Messages on switch to distance learning, web technology, e-teaching didactics, e-teaching related software licencing issues	**Discussion [D]** Members of staff exchange ideas, experiences, summarise collected information etc., most commonly in response to a question. These messages are not instructions; they may rather be seen as a collective search for best practices. They provide guidance one may follow.
Change in Organisational Procedures Messages on changes organisational procedures and altered (internal) regulations (except learning/teaching), e.g., home office policy, care leave, change of opening hours	**Announcement [A]** These messages inform recipients about upcoming changes in operations, which may (or may not) affect staff members. Although important, they are not necessarily work-related and have informative character., e.g., cancellation of events, closing of library, extension of medical services
Event Cancellation Messages informing about the cancellation of (non-teaching) event	**Instruction [I]** These messages give specific work-related instructions (to subordinates) how to behave, e.g., altered work procedures. These are mandatory directives.
General Advice Messages on how to deal with the situation in daily live, e.g., prevent an infection, psychological hints	**Question [Q]** Members of staff pose questions on how to proceed under the new circumstances, e.g., what software to use, how to contact students

39. K. Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, Los Angeles, SAGE Publications, 2018

TABLE 2: QUANTITATIVE DEPICTION OF THE RESULTS

NATURE OF MESSAGE	SUBJECT AREA				NUMBER OF MESSAGES
	Distance Learning	Change in Organisational Procedures	Event Cancellation	General Advice	
Discussion	21	–	–	–	21
Announcement	3	3	9	4	19
Instruction	8	7	–	1	16
Question	1	–	–	–	1
Number of Messages	**33**	**10**	**9**	**5**	**57**

distance learning becomes even more prominent. On the other hand, the nature of messages indicates a state of disorder in the department/institute: while only 28% of all messages give clear instructions (leaving unconsidered that some messages only relay and reinforce instructions), 37% of all messages reflect discussions among members on the operational level of the department/institute seeking for ideas and best practices on how to deal with the altered situation on distance learning.
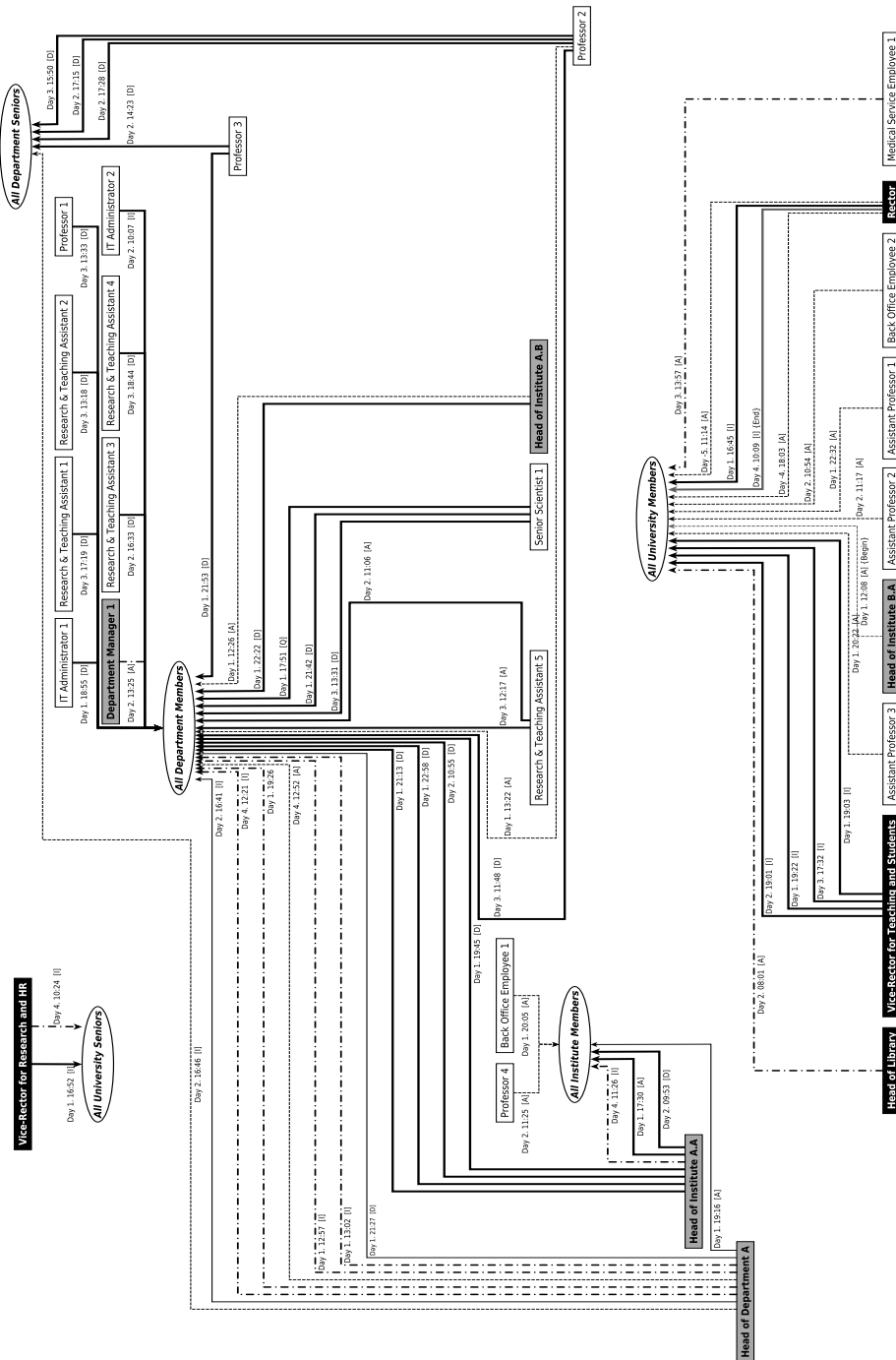
Sociogram

As a second step, we combine the results of the content analysis with metadata of the email communications and conduct a network analysis.[40] In Figure 1, we plot the resulting data as a sociogram, i.e., a systematic graphical representation of individuals as nodes and the relationships between them as edges.[41] This graphical representation of email communications on the institute, department, and university level (from the restricted perspective of the authors) provides additional insights. It illustrates the directed flow of messages among different hierarchical levels over time and visualises how the interaction of actors is shaped and who plays a central role.

Figure 1 depicts the communication as an exchange of messages (edges) between staff members or groups of staff members (boxes). Each box represents an anonymised individual (e.g., Research and Teaching Assistant 3). The colours of the boxes represent the organisational hierarchy. Black boxes represent top management executives, grey boxes represent middle management (department or institute level), and white boxes represent the operational level. Ellipses represent groups of people (on middle management or operational level); individuals represented by boxes may belong to these (and other) groups. Each directed edge represents an email message sent. The shape of the edge represents the subject of the message: Bold lines reflect distance learning, irregularly dashed lines represent change of organisational procedures, and all other subjects are represented by thin dashed lines. These lines are labelled with their relative timestamp (Day 1 to Day 4) and a code reflecting their nature (see Table 1). The start and the end of the observation period are indicated by additional labels on the respective edges ('Day 1. 12:08 [A] {Begin}' and 'Day 4. 10:09 [I] {End}').

40. L.J. Jaspersen and C. Stein, Beyond the Matrix: Visual Methods for Qualitative Network Research, *British Journal of Management*, vol. 30, 2019, pp. 748–763

41. P. Tubaro, L. Ryan, and A. D'Angelo, The Visual Sociogram in Qualitative and Mixed-Methods Research, *Sociological Research Online*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2016, pp. 180–197; J. L. Moreno, Who Shall Survive?: A New Approach to the Problem of Human Interrelations, Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing, 1934

FIGURE 1: SOCIOGRAM DEPICTING THE EMAIL COMMUNICATIONS

Studying the sociogram (Figure 1), we can make several observations. First, we observe a predominant focus on a single topic. The vast majority of messages concerns distance learning. There are no messages on research or the university's third mission. This holds particularly true for the messages sent by top management. The very first message sent by the rector was on distance learning, followed by two emails on the same topic sent by the vice rector for teaching and students on the same day. Compared to the rector and the vice rector for teaching and students, the vice rector for research and HR has only sent two messages. Only on day four, the vice rector sent an instruction on altered HR practices. Second, despite the direct communication of top management to operational level employees, there is considerable ambiguity. On the one hand, there are hardly any messages sent from top management to middle management. Top management directly addresses all staff members, which indicates a rather flat organisational hierarchy in terms of communication pattern and may avoid time lags in relaying important information via middle management. On the other hand, we see a considerable amount of communication classified as 'discussion' instigated by operational level staff on the department/institute level. All these messages are exclusively on the topic of distance learning and appeared after the initial messages of the top management. This indicates a state of ambiguity among staff. Third, we observe a division of tasks. We see that the Head of Department A sent instruction emails on short notice (three messages on the first day). At the same time, the Head of Institute A.A (i.e., a subunit of department A) engaged in the discussion on distance learning. There were five messages (including two 'instruction' emails) before the first statement by the top management.

External Communications

As we cannot rule out that internal communications are biased towards the expectations of internal stakeholders, we complement our analysis by considering the external communications to the general public. In so doing, we draw from four sources, i.e., print media, the information given by the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, various social media channels, and press releases by the university. These address the general public in two ways. While the first can be considered as indirect channels of communication, the latter allow the university to directly approach the general public.

Indirect communications to the public

Daily updated Austrian media coverage during the observation period was gathered from the wiso-net.de database and a complimentary search on Google. In total, 26 relevant articles were found. Nearly half of all items concerning universities in the observation period were published on the first day. Almost as many were publicised the day after, however, from then on, universities were only mentioned rarely and parenthetically. Generally, all articles described the shutdown of universities and the changing teaching situation, and almost solely addressed its consequences. Notably, there was one exception that dedicated several sentences to the changes and efforts of universities' employees. Also, we did not observe communications on the other two missions of the university.

Also, publicly available communications of the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research were gathered. A letter to all university and college administrations was published on the first day of the observation period. It mainly included information about teaching activities and upcoming events, but also mentioned that research should be maintained regardless of the measures taken.

Direct communications to the public

We also analysed the communication channels that the university uses to directly approach the general public. Accordingly, social media, including the university's Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts, as well as press releases and entries on the organisation's website, were scanned. Within the observation period, only two COVID-19 related post was published, containing information that teaching activities would be switched to distance learning. Despite social media, the university announced no public statement on the situation.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The analysis presented in the sociogram (Figure 1) shows that most internal communication messages sent during the observation period concern teaching-related aspects; research and the third mission were not mentioned. Together with the analysis of the external communications of the university, we can conclude that teaching-related issues were the main focus of communication at the beginning of the crisis. Thus, following our argument that an organisation's purpose manifests itself in the organisation's communication, we can conclude that teaching plays an important, if not the main role in the purpose of the university. Considered in isolation, that finding is not surprising. Naturally, teaching is a main pillar of the purpose of a university. What is interesting though is that the analysis of internal and external communication reinforces the perception that the equilibrium of the university's emphasis underwent a serious realignment towards teaching during the time of our observation. Facing the crisis, at least rhetorically, clarified some sort of hierarchy amongst the different aspects of the university's purpose. It seems as if the single – or call it most relevant –

'what for' of the organisation emerged as a result of the organisation facing the low-probability-high-impact event of a pandemic crisis.

With this research, we contribute to theory in the following ways. First, based on the assumption that a multi-stakeholder organisation has a purpose which consists of several components,[42] we demonstrate how a crisis, such as the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, makes the hierarchical relationship between these components of an organisation's purpose more salient. We find empirical evidence for this proposition in the email conversations of a large public university. In this regard, teaching was the main content of crisis communication (by the universities top management). The mechanism to explain this finding can be found in an evolutionary perspective.[43] If an organisation faces an existential crisis, the top management has to make sure that the essential purpose remains in reach to ensure the organisation's survival.[44] As in this case, the funding of public universities often relies on the number of students they can train, which makes it important for them to reach the number of graduations negotiated with the government.

Second, we emphasise the role of a large public university as a multiple-objective organisation that needs to consider several stakeholders.[45] While the university's communication takes into account several stakeholders and communicates multiple components of the organisation's purpose in normal times (e.g., underlining the third mission and the entrepreneurial aspect to acquire funding),[46] in times of an existential crisis, the university's communication focuses on the most important components of its purpose (which is, as the email communications analysed clearly show, not the entrepreneurial or enterprise aspect but the safety of students enrolled and the smooth continuance of

42. M. Sánchez-Barrioluengo, 2014

43. A.H. Van de Ven and M.S. Poole, Explaining Development and Change in Organizations, *The Academy of Management Review*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1995, pp. 510–540

44. M.T. Hannan and J. Freeman, The Population Ecology of Organizations, *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 82, no. 5, 1977, pp. 929–964

45. Lankoski and Smith, 2018

46. Marginson, 2000; Marginson and Considine, 2000

teaching to ensure negotiated number of graduates). Based on these findings, the imperative of the entrepreneurial or enterprise university may be rather seen as organisational rhetoric[47] and as a figure of speech rather than as an existential part of the case university's purpose. Even though the third mission and the entrepreneurial importance are stressed in normal times, this is not supported by the crisis communication analysed.

Third, adopting a knowledge and learning perspective, we may argue that the externalisation of the organisational purpose, its components, and the hierarchy between these components creates organisational knowledge that can be further utilised.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on our findings, we draw several implications for practice and theorising on organisational purpose, not only in universities but also in other organisations.

Paradoxically, it seems that a crisis, such as the one we have been going through, has some positive effects on organisations, particularly if we study their purposes. A crisis helps to shape the purpose, to uncover the different components of a purpose, and to make the hierarchy between these components visible. Furthermore, a crisis forces an organisation to adapt their products, practices, or strategies quickly. Such a change may help redefine the existing purpose of an organisation and, thus, to uncover the core purpose of an organisation. If a decision maker utilises the window of opportunity that a crisis provides, the implications mentioned may have a positive effect on the future development of the organisation.

However, a crisis also has severe adverse effects. For many organisations, a crisis is critical to their existence and may even result in their collapse. Therefore, further research is needed to examine how to exploit the above-mentioned opportunities that a crisis provides, without threatening the organisation's existence. One possibility could be to induce a kind of 'monitored crisis' that is well accompanied. According to Nonaka and Takeuchi, creating a 'creative chaos' is one out of five enabling conditions for creating new knowledge in organisations. 'Creative chaos' stimulates a sense of crisis and change. However, benefits of creative chaos are only possible, if members can reflect on their actions. Otherwise, chaos leads to destruction.[48]

Based on these potential implications and challenges, future research may cover the following areas:

- Investigating the concept of purposing which refers to a 'continuous stream of actions by an organisation's formal leadership that has the effect of inducing clarity, consensus, and commitment regarding the organisation's basic purposes'.[49]

- Investigating how an organisation could unlearn those aspects of the purpose that are not part of its core.[50]

- Based on the assumption that organisational learning creates organisational knowledge, it can be argued that shaping and clarifying the organisation's purpose could be a result of a continuous organisational learning process. Therefore, further research is needed on how organisational learning processes need to be designed in order to generate knowledge about the organisation's purpose and its components.

47. M. Alvesson, Organizations as Rhetoric: Knowledge-Intensive Firms and the Struggle with Ambiguity, *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 30, no. 6, 1993, pp. 997–1015

48. I. Nonaka and H. Takeuchi, *The knowledge-creating company: How Japanese companies create the dynamics of innovation*, Oxford, Oxford university press, 1995

49. P.B. Vaill, The Purposing of High-Performing Systems, *Organizational Dynamics*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1982, p. 29

50. T. Grisold and A. Kaiser, Leaving Behind What We Are Not: Applying a Systems Thinking Perspective to Present Unlearning as an Enabler for Finding the Best Version of the Self , *Journal of Organisational Transformation and Social Change*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2017, pp. 39–55

- In terms of uncovering the different components of a purpose, it is also important to consider the possibility that achieving the different components may have conflicting effects. In this regard, an organisation faces some kind of optimisation problem at the level of its purpose. Further research shall, therefore, investigate whether existing multivariate optimisation methods could also be used at the level of organisational purpose.

- Further research should investigate the substance of the debate on the 'enterprise' or 'entrepreneurial university', and whether the third mission defines and shapes the core purpose of public universities.

This research endeavour carries several limitations. First, besides very limited connections with evolutionary change, we do not uncover the mechanisms and motives that cause one component of the purpose becoming more salient over others in times of crisis. Second, the data obtained came from a very limited timeframe, i.e., from when the university started crisis communication to the point when a preliminary new 'normal' was established. As a result, we do not know whether the communications analysed are performative, i.e., whether they will translate into actual behaviour and concrete actions in the long run. Third, although we diversified the data source we relied on, we cannot rule out that the university communicated what stakeholders and societies expected to hear. Further longitudinal research should analyse other means of crisis communication and triangulate this with in-depth data of the perception of stakeholders.

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