

Zeitschrift: Bulletin / Vereinigung der Schweizerischen Hochschuldozierenden = Association Suisse des Enseignant-e-s d'Université

Herausgeber: Vereinigung der Schweizerischen Hochschuldozierenden

Band: 47 (2021)

Heft: 3-4

Artikel: Status quo and dynamics of public communication efforts of all Swiss higher education institutions

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-966151>

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Status quo and dynamics of public communication efforts of all Swiss higher education institutions

Isabel Sörensen*, Silke Fürst*, Mike Schäfer*, Daniel Vogler**

The COVID-19 pandemic has once again highlighted the importance of the interaction between science and the news media. Institutions of higher education (HEIs) are important actors in this dynamic, and their public communication efforts – as well as their effects on the news media – are worth analyzing in more depth.

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Foto: Isabel Heller Sörensen

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Foto: Silke Fürst

Since the early 1990s, the increasing need for societal legitimation has driven HEIs to expand their communication and marketing activities, including increased efforts to influence news media coverage as well as communication via new channels (Engwall, 2008; Hauser, 2020; Marcinkowski, Kohring, Fürst, & Friedrichsmeier, 2014; Rowe & Brass, 2011). Until today, the news media remain an important source of information for stakeholders of HEIs.

However, despite the practical relevance of HEIs' public communication, little is known about the interactions between the external communication of HEIs and news media coverage. The research project “Communication of Higher Education Institutions in Switzerland”¹ is the first of its kind to collect and analyze nationwide data on the external communi-

¹ This research was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) under Grant Agreement No. 174992. For more information, please visit the website <https://c3h.ch/en/>.

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Foto: Mike S. Schäfer

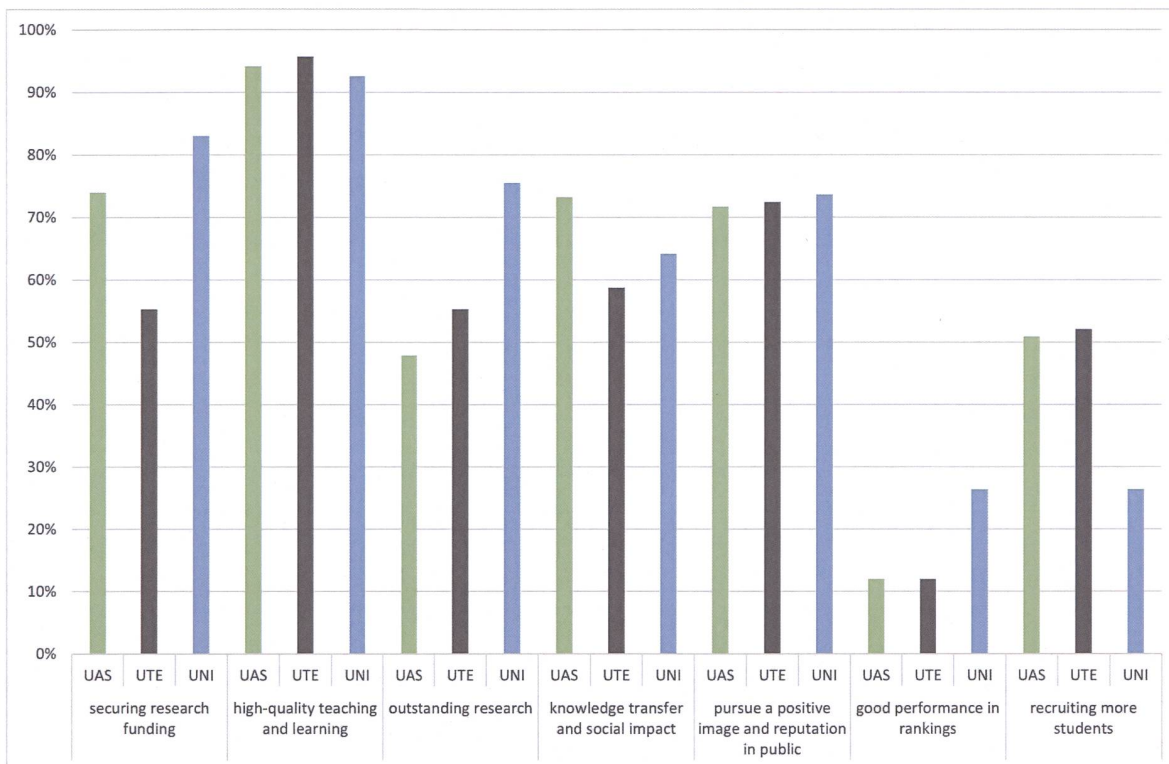
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Foto: Daniel Vogler



UAS = Universities of applied sciences, UTE = Universities of teacher education, UNI = Research universities. Members of the institutional leadership were asked to reply on a 7-point scale from 0 (not at all) to 6 (very strongly) to the question “In the past five years, how much has your university focused on the following aims?”. The visualized data above show the percentage of respondents who indicated a strong or very strong focus (5 or 6).

Figure 1. Goals of HEIs by type.

cation of HEIs in Switzerland. The project encompasses all Swiss HEIs ($n = 42$), including universities of applied sciences (UASs), universities of teacher education (UTES) as well as the Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology and full research universities (UNIs). The SNFS-funded project runs from 2019 to 2023 and aims to explore the public communication and visibility of the higher education sector in Switzerland.

In this article, we present and discuss data from two quantitative surveys. In the first survey from autumn 2020,² we asked respondents to describe the status quo of their institutions’ external communication. In the second survey from summer 2021, focus was specifically placed on changes during the COVID-19 pandemic.³

1. Which goals do HEIs in Switzerland pursue?

Ideally, the overall strategic goals pursued by an HEI translate into an outreach strategy and define the broader lines for its communication. In autumn 2020, members of the leadership at all Swiss HEIs were asked about which goals their institutions primarily

pursued. Relying on prior scholarship, seven goals were inquired on. Three of the goals were related to the HEIs’ core mission of research and teaching, such as “securing research funding”, “high-quality teaching and learning”, and “outstanding research”. Four of the goals were related to a “third mission” and competition between HEIs, such as “knowledge transfer and social impact”, “pursuing a positive image and reputation in public”, “good performance in rankings”, and “recruiting more students”.

Our results show that “high-quality teaching and learning” and “pursuing a positive image and reputation in public” are the most prominent goals across the entire higher education landscape in Switzerland. A “good performance in rankings” is rated as the least important goal, with only 16% of HEIs claiming to strongly pursue this goal.

When looking at differences between types of HEIs, research universities focus more on research. Most members of the institutional leadership stated that their research universities have a strong focus on “securing research funding” and on “conducting outstanding research” (see Figure 1). Interestingly, “recruit[ing] more students” is significantly less important among UNIs than among UTEs and UASs. This may point to stronger competition among UTEs and UASs.

² Data collected between 01.09.2020–01.11.2020, response rate for university leadership 57% (276 respondents), response rate for communication professionals 44% (230 respondents).

³ Data collected between 01.06.2021–20.07.2021, total response rate 42% (202 respondents).

2. How do HEIs envision “good” communication?

In addition, we aimed for a closer look at the involved actors’ assessment of what they consider as “good” communication. We asked both institutional leadership members as well as communication professionals to rate seven potential goals on a 7-point scale. Four of these goals align with traditional values of science and academic outreach: “accurately representing scientific facts”, “making uncertainties and limitations in academic studies transparent”, “making a broad range of scientific disciplines publicly visible”, and “reaching people who are distant to science”. The other three goals align more with news media logics: “attracting a lot of attention from news media”, “presenting content in an entertaining way”, and “raising public awareness of the university’s best academics”.

The most prominent goal of HEI communication is “to attract a lot of attention from news media”. Most communication professionals (around 70%) and institutional leadership members (nearly 60%) considered this highly important. Following this goal are three closely bundled goals: “accurately representing scientific facts”, “making a broad range of scientific disciplines publicly visible”, and “raising public awareness of the university’s best academics”. For these goals, more than half of both respondent groups showed strong support.

The results also show that goals aligning with more traditional scientific values find more support among institutional leadership compared to their colleagues in communication departments. The opposite is true for the goals “attracting a lot of attention from news media”, “presenting content in an entertaining way”, and “raising public awareness of the university’s best academics”, which align more with news media logics; communication professionals give higher ratings to these aims than institutional leadership members.

Compared to the other HEIs, universities of teacher education stand out with their lower support for the three goals aligning with news media logics (see Figures 2 and 3). Furthermore, while “coverage of a broad range of scientific disciplines” is very important for more than half of their leadership, this is only true for 35% of their communication professionals. A similar pattern occurs for the goals “making uncertainties and limitations in academic studies transparent” and “reaching people who are distant to science”.

3. How important are news media for HEIs?

We also asked members of the institutional leadership and HEIs communication professionals how important different media are for their organization.

Our results show that local and regional media are considered most important, followed by national media. Communication professionals generally give higher ratings to the importance of news media than members of institutional leadership.

However, clear differences can also be seen between the HEI types (see Figure 4). For research universities, national media are as important as local and regional media, which is, once again, more pronounced among communication professionals compared to institutional leadership members.

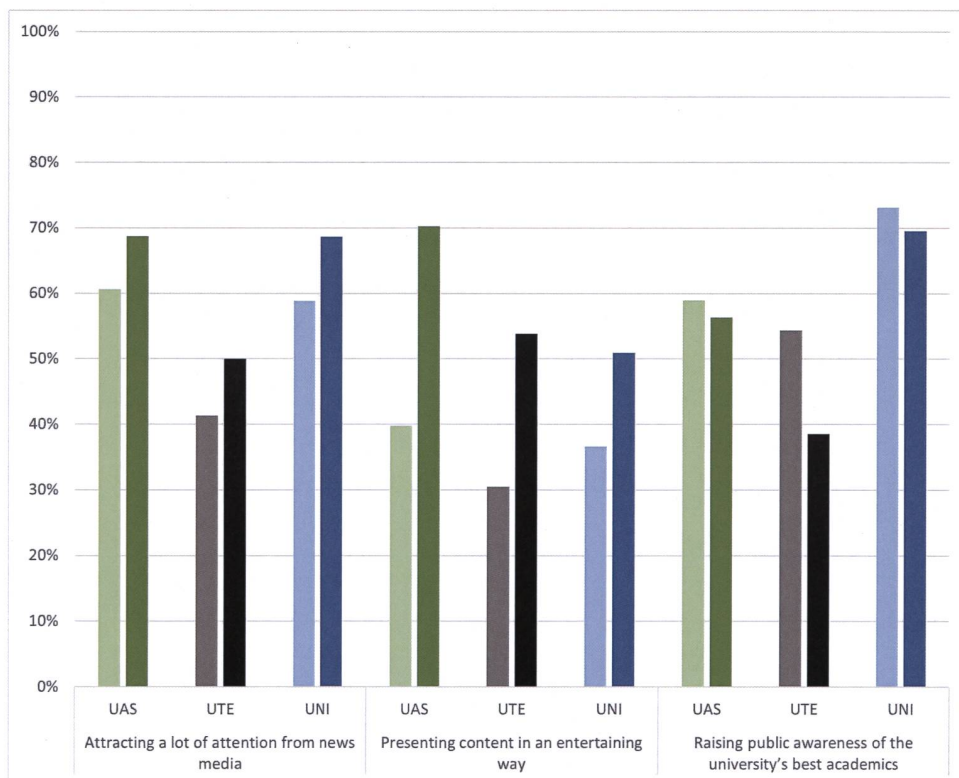
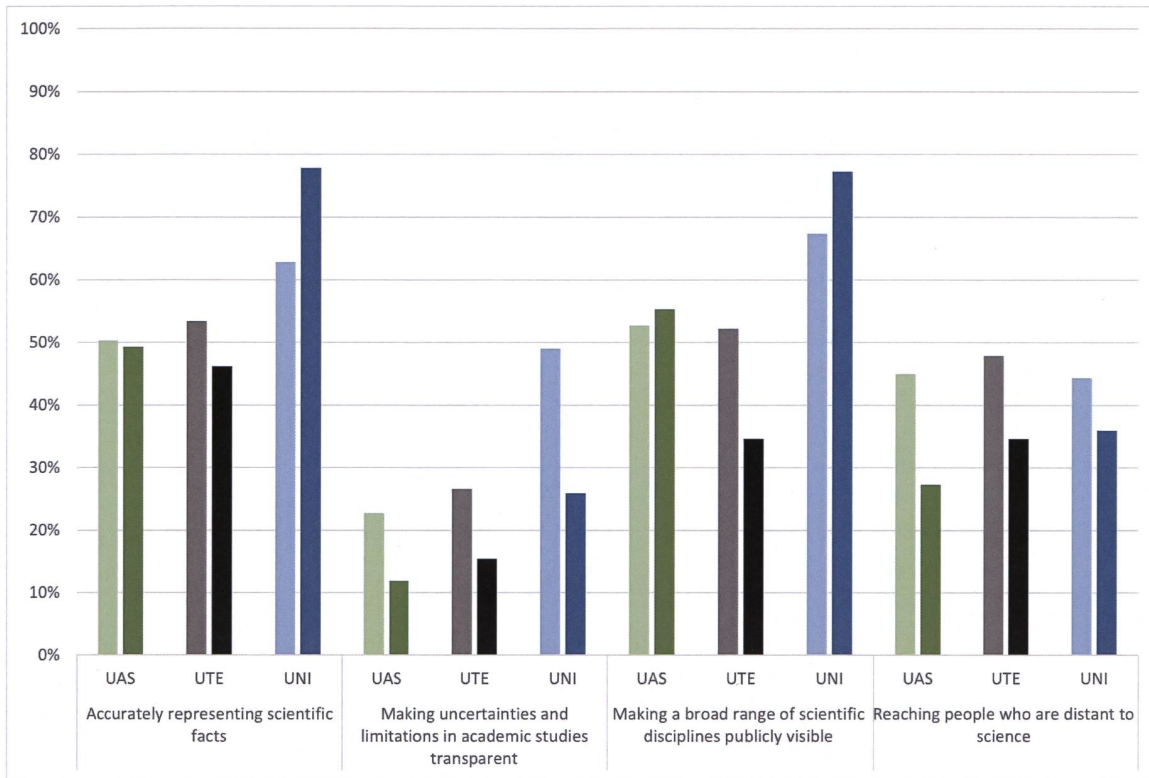
Universities of teacher education rate the importance of news media lower on average than UNIs and UASs. For UTEs, the importance of local and regional media is much higher than national media; international media do not appear to be of much importance. This is not surprising, given the historically strong roots of universities of teacher education in local and regional communities in Switzerland, where every canton has its own UTE.

For universities of applied sciences, local and regional news media are very important, an answer given by nearly 65% of communication professionals and close to half of all institutional leadership members. National media are considered important by close to 50% of communication professionals and by 33% of institutional leadership members. International media are not a focus of UASs.

4. How are communication departments working with news media?

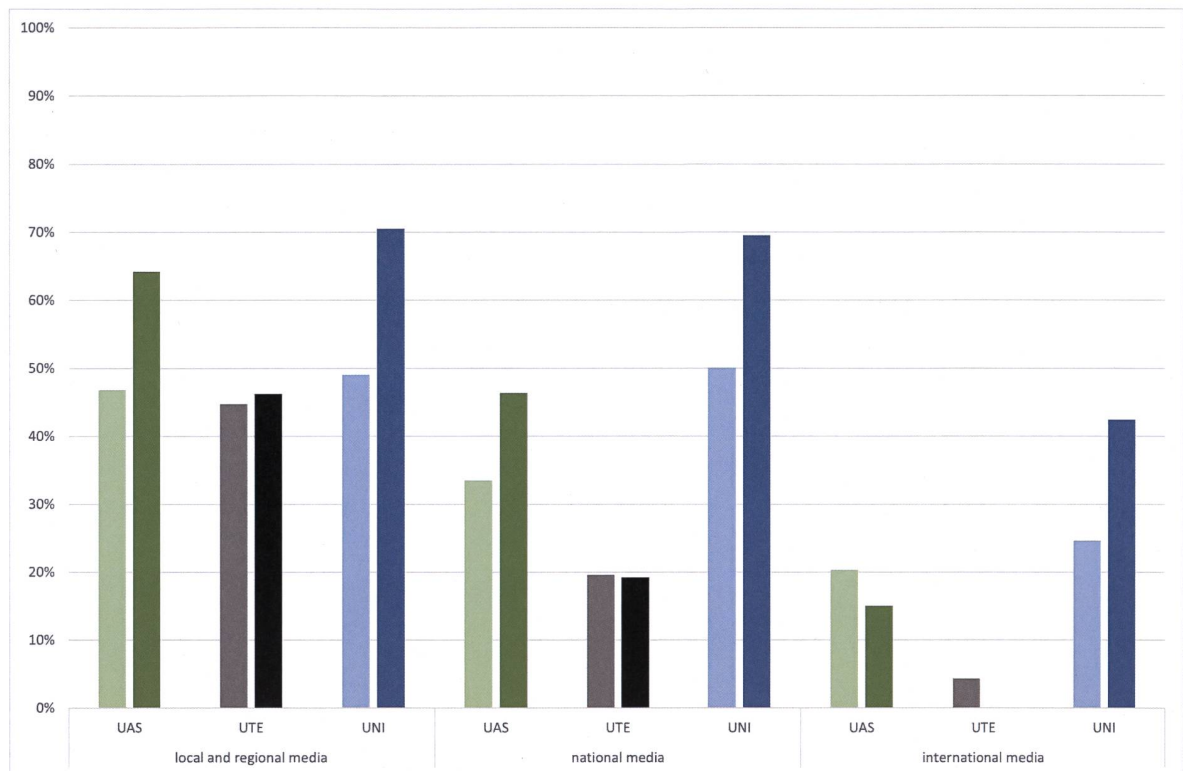
Upon closer examination of the working routines of central communication departments of HEIs in Switzerland, the importance of working for and with the news media becomes even clearer.

The results above show that most communication professionals interact with news media on a regular basis, pointing at the importance of classical media work in the communication departments of Swiss HEIs. Many communication professionals report monthly contacts with journalists. More than 30% indicate having contact with journalists at least once a week or even once a day. Every fourth respondent, however, states to (almost) never have contact with journalists. Furthermore, more than 70% of all communication professionals say that classical media work is important in their communication department. The importance of media as an arena for HEI communication is also underlined by the fact that the vast majority of communication departments count media clippings as part of their work routine.



UAS = Universities of applied sciences, UTE = Universities of teacher education, UNI = Research universities. In lighter colors = University leadership, in darker colors = Communication professionals. The respondent group of communication professionals were asked to reply on a 7-point scale to the question "How important are the following success and quality criteria in your current department?" and leadership members replied to the question "In your opinion, what constitutes good communication? The communication department at my university is doing its job properly when it..." (0 = not at all/not at all important; 6 = very strongly/very important). The visualized data above show the percentage of respondents who indicated a strong or very strong importance (5 or 6).

Figures 2 and 3. Communication goals of HEI by type. University leadership (left columns) vs. communication professionals (right columns).



UAS = Universities of applied sciences, UTE = Universities of teacher education, UNI = Research universities. In lighter colors = University leadership, in darker colors = Communication professionals. The respondent group of communication professionals were asked to reply on a 7-point scale to the question "At which target groups are your department's communication activities aimed?" and leadership members replied to the question "How important are the following stakeholders and institutions to your university?" (0 = not at all/not at all important; 6 = very strongly/very important). The visualized data above show the percentage of respondents who indicated a strong or very strong importance (5 or 6).

Figure 4. Media focus by HEI type: University leadership (left columns) vs. communication professionals (right columns).

Typically, communication professionals at UASs and UTEs have at least monthly or weekly interaction with journalists (see Figure 5). At research universities, the results are more diverse. Some members have contact with journalists several times a day or at least once per day. At the same time, research universities also have higher shares of communication professionals who never interact with news media or only interact with news media a few times per year. These results might be the consequence of higher specialization in the typically larger communication departments at research universities, with some members being exclusively responsible for media relations. Others, for instance, are only responsible for own communication channels, such as the university's website.

5. What is the background of HEIs' communication staff?

The educational and professional background of communication professionals working at Swiss HEIs likely influences how they interact with news media and how news media are perceived within HEIs. Our results indicate a high level of professionalism in all types of HEIs, with many communication staff having been educated or possessing work experience in journalism, PR, or organizational communication.

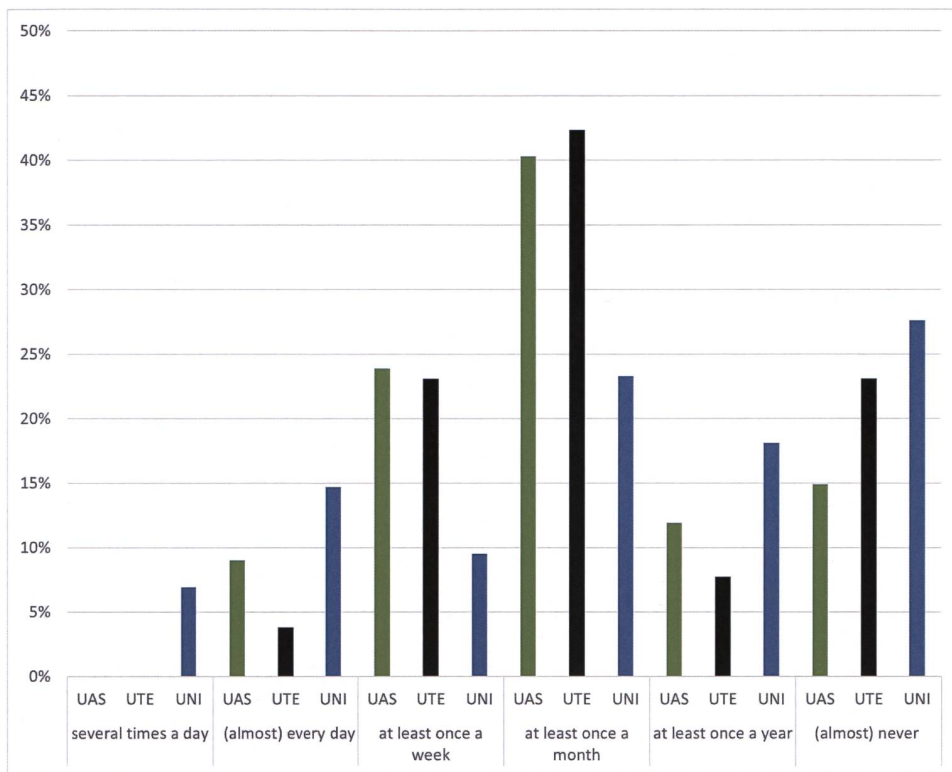
At universities of applied sciences, 68% of all respondents say they have either an educational background or work experience in printed, online, or broadcast journalism. More than 90% have an educational background or work experience in PR and organizational communication.

At universities of teacher education, the numbers are slightly higher, with 84% of respondents having an educational background or work experience in journalism. A total of 92% have an educational background or work experience in PR and organizational communication.

Research universities have the least percentage of staff members with an educational background or work experience in journalism (66%) or PR and organizational communication (78%). Again, this might be the result of higher specialization in large communication departments of research universities.

6. The impact of COVID-19 on HEI communication in Switzerland

In summer 2021, we conducted a second survey focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on HEI communication. The survey was specifically directed at communication professionals.



UAS = Universities of applied sciences, UTE = Universities of teacher education, UNI = Research universities. The respondent group of communication professionals were asked to reply to the question "How often do you typically have contact with journalists?".

Figure 5. Communication professionals' contact with journalists.

We asked respondents about the extent to which the department's communications work had been directed at different target groups since the beginning of the pandemic. The results show that internal stakeholders – such as employees and students – were given the highest priority during the pandemic (see Figure 6). Around 75% of all respondents replied that HEI communication during the pandemic was directed very strongly toward employees or students. This is in line with the literature on crisis communication, suggesting that organizations focus on internal stakeholders during times of crisis (Schwarz, 2015).

In terms of communication to news media, clear differences between the different types of HEIs emerge. Compared to UASs and UTEs, news media were addressed in a much stronger manner by research universities. Nearly 60% of communication professionals at research universities said that they strongly targeted their communication efforts toward news media. The same pattern occurs when looking at communication aimed toward the Swiss population, which only seemed to be a relevant target group for communication departments of research universities during the pandemic.

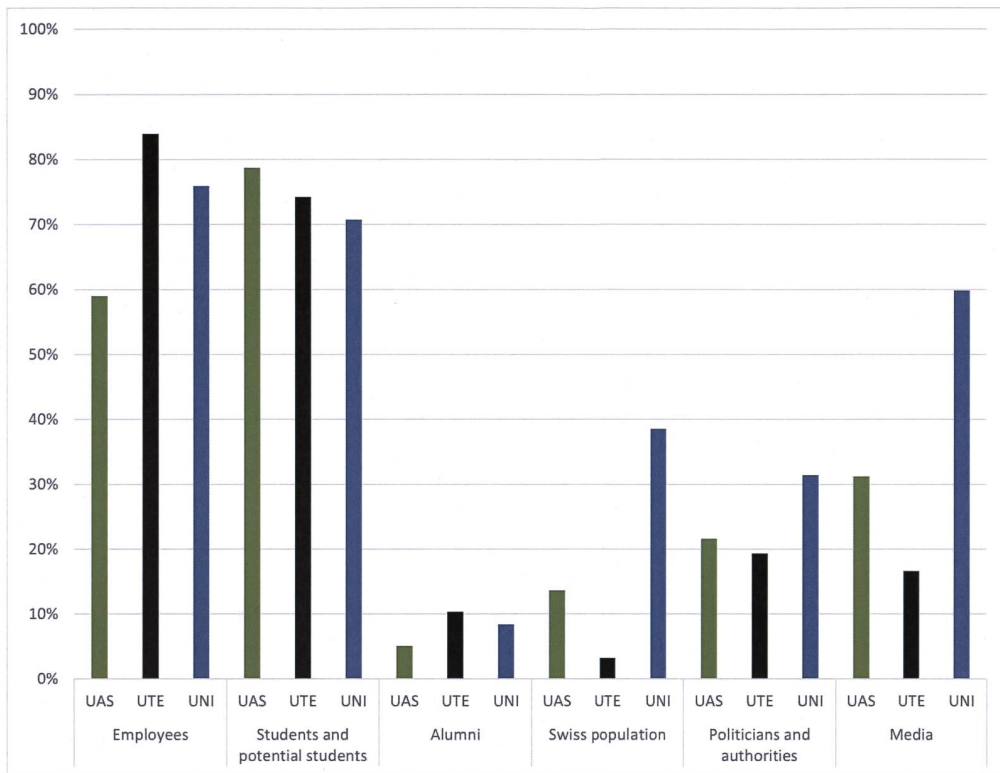
We interpret these findings as the result of the high public demand for information on the pandemic and

the strong focus of research universities on COVID-19-related research on the supply side.

Our results also show that research universities communicated more about COVID-19-related research results during the pandemic than UASs and UTEs. This applies to communication through the news media as well as through their own channels (see Figure 7). Around 70% of communication professionals strongly agreed that they brought experts from their research university in contact with journalists. Moreover, 67% strongly agreed that they communicated COVID-19 related research through own channels. This compares to moderate levels of communication related to COVID-19 research by UASs and very low levels of communication by UTEs.

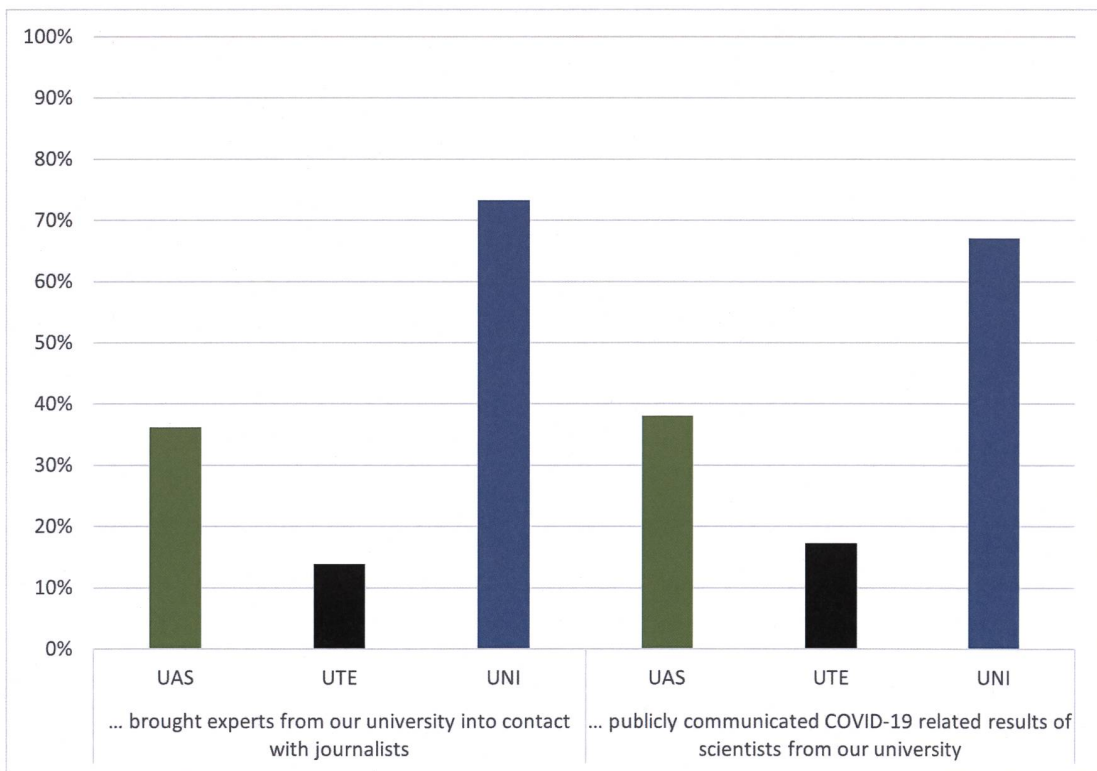
7. Conclusion

In the present study, clear evidence has shown that news media remain a very important stakeholder for HEIs of all types. This finding aligns with previous studies (Friedrichsmeier, Laukötter, & Marcinkowski, 2015; Scheu, Volpers, Summ, & Blöbaum, 2014) and it complements our recently published study on media representations of academia, in which we mapped and typologized the news coverage of all Swiss HEIs (Fürst, Vogler, Schäfer, & Sörensen, 2021). This study also revealed that the external communication of HEIs strongly influences news media coverage, with



UAS = Universities of applied sciences, UTE = Universities of teacher education, UNI = Research universities. The respondent group of communication professionals were asked to reply on a 7-point scale to the question "Since the beginning of the pandemic, to what extent has your department's communications work been directed at the following target groups?" (0 = not at all, 6 = very strongly). The visualized data above show the percentage of respondents who indicated a strong or very strong importance (5 or 6).

Figure 6. Target groups of HEIs since the beginning of the pandemic.



UAS = Universities of applied sciences, UTE = Universities of teacher education, UNI = Research universities. The respondent group of communication professionals were asked to reply on a 7-point scale to the question "To what extent has your department supported scientists at your university in communicating about COVID-19? My department has ..." (0 = not at all, 6 = very strongly). The visualized data above show the percentage of respondents indicating strong or very strong importance (5 or 6).

Figure 7. COVID-19 related communication of HEIs per type.

a particular influence of a few large and strongly resourced universities.

However, the survey data presented here also show that communication professionals place a higher value on the news media as stakeholders than members of the university leadership do. Pronounced differences occurred between HEI types when examining which news media are regarded as important. UTEs and UASs focus on regional and national news media as a target for their communication. Additionally, research universities see international news media as a relevant target group aside from national and regional news media.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the data presented also clearly indicate that internal stakeholders, namely

employees and students, were most often addressed by all HEI types. However, in examining external communication, we saw clear differences between the types of HEIs. Research universities placed a much stronger emphasis on the news media and the Swiss public as stakeholders than universities of applied sciences or universities of teacher education did. Research universities also engaged more in communicating COVID-19-related expertise to the public, either through the news media or through their own channels. Further studies may reveal whether the more intense external communication by research universities during the pandemic will lead to a sustained rise in media coverage of research universities at the expense of UASs and UTEs. ■

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