

Communication Issues in Associations within Public Universities

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Abstract

Communication is a crucial element in ensuring the smooth functioning of any organisation. It serves as a medium for conveying information, instructions, feedback, and for building relationships among members. Nevertheless, communication challenges often arise within organisations and may negatively affect productivity, morale, and the achievement of collective goals. This article explores communication issues faced by student associations within a public university. The study employed a qualitative approach, with five (5) representatives from student associations at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) selected as informants. Purposive sampling and in-depth interviews were used as data collection techniques. Employing thematic analysis, the study identified several recurring issues, namely one-way communication, information overload, and divergent objectives. The findings suggest that improvements in systematic communication procedures and clearer communication channels could help to reduce barriers to effective communication within such associations.

Keywords: *Communication, Information Flow, Communication Barriers, Organisational Association*

1.0 Introduction

Associations or organisations represent macro entities comprising groups of individuals working together to achieve specific objectives. Organisations may take the form of associations, unions, institutions, boards, or similar entities involving more than one individual [13]. Within associations or organisations at universities, communication plays a vital role in facilitating social activities and ensuring the effectiveness of goal attainment. According to Awaludin and Zin [4], communication is the most important element of daily life, acting as an intermediary medium between members of society for transmitting and receiving information or news. Ahmad [2] defines effective communication as the process of exchanging ideas, opinions, knowledge, and data in a manner that ensures the message is clearly received and understood. Communication may occur in verbal, non-verbal, written, visual, or auditory forms, and may take place in person, online (forums, social media, websites), by telephone (apps, calls, video), or via email. Kechot, Shahidi and Aman [13] argue that communication in organisations can be defined as the process of sending and receiving information, a critical element in managing complex organisations. Effective communication processes help streamline organisational operations and improve efficiency. Suryawati [23] further describes communication as a form of interaction between two or more individuals – despite its importance, communication issues present significant challenges to achieving organisational goals within student associations. Nevertheless, ineffective communication has become a concern for many members involved in these organisations.

2.0 Literature Review

Communication is a fundamental element determining the effectiveness and success of an organisation. It not only serves as a medium for transmitting information, but also underpins work relationships, problem-solving, and the attainment of shared goals. Nonetheless, communication problems frequently occur in organisations, producing adverse effects on productivity and workplace

harmony. One of the challenges in communication is the misinterpretation of messages. Robbins and Judge [19] note that misunderstandings often occur when the message delivered is not understood as intended by the sender. This may be due to language style, insufficient information, or disruptions in the communication channel. For example, organisations that rely heavily on technical or formal language may leave employees unable to accurately interpret instructions, leading to errors in task execution.

Unclear or overly hierarchical communication channels also contribute to problems. Mintzberg [16] observed that highly bureaucratic organisations are prone to “distortion of information”, whereby messages lose clarity as they pass through multiple management layers. This results in decision-making delays and confusion over responsibilities. This will lead towards a communications gap between the management and subordinates. This gap may lead to disharmony in an organisation. Tourish and Robson [24] found that one-way communication from management often causes employees to feel excluded and undervalued, which undermines morale and can generate internal conflict – of whence employees are not given opportunities (to voice opinions, feedback, or concerns), unhealthy workplace cultures emerge.

In organisations comprising individuals from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, language and communication styles may also create barriers. Hall’s [11] concepts of “high-context” and “low-context communication” highlight differences between Eastern and Western styles of interaction – whereby, misunderstandings and confusion can easily arise when members are unfamiliar with such differences, thereby reducing inter-departmental cooperation. Davis [6] warns that informal or inaccurate information can spread in the absence of reliable official communication, fuelling rumours and damaging organisational reputation as well as work relations. This issue occurs when employees do not get accurate information, resulting in assumptions and unverified information filling the information vacuum.

Moreover, technological advances in communication bring new challenges. Although emails, instant messaging apps, and digital communication systems enhance efficiency, they also create issues such as “information overload” and reduced face-to-face interaction. Daft and Lengel [5] argue that the absence of non-verbal cues in digital communication increases the risk of misinterpretation. Virtual communication may also weaken interpersonal bonds and erode a sense of belonging within the organisation. Weak communication skills among organisational leaders represent another significant issue. Leaders who fail to clearly convey vision, strategies, and instructions may cause confusion among employees. Goleman [9] emphasises that emotional intelligence and communication skills are essential to effective leadership – of which, without empathy and clarity, organisations risk instability and reduced performance.

The consequences of these challenges are considerable, affecting work efficiency, interpersonal relationships, and organisational goal attainment. Understanding the forms and root causes of communication problems is therefore vital for developing more effective and inclusive communication strategies. Hence, this article seeks to investigate the communication challenges faced by associations within public universities.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore communication issues within associations in a public university. A case study approach was adopted, with Universiti Sains Malaysia chosen as the research site. Five representatives from student associations were interviewed in depth to obtain accurate insights into the communication problems within their organisations.

The sample size for this qualitative study was determined based on the principle of data saturation. Data saturation was considered to be achieved when additional interviews no longer generated new themes, variations, or significant information relevant to the research objectives. Data saturation was achieved when the information obtained became repetitive and consistent.

Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method. A total of five informants participated in the study. Each interview session lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, depending on the flow of the discussion and the informant's willingness to share their experiences. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at a location and time mutually agreed upon by both the researcher and the informants.

An interview guide was utilised to ensure that the discussion remained aligned with the objectives of the study. The guide consisted of open-ended questions that allowed informants to elaborate on their experiences, views, and perceptions in depth. Follow-up questions were also posed when necessary to obtain further clarification and to enrich the data collected.

All informants were provided with a participant information sheet and an informed consent form before taking part in the study. The confidentiality and anonymity of the informants were ensured through the use of codes or pseudonyms. All research data were stored securely and were used solely for academic research purposes.

With the consent of the informants, all interview sessions were recorded using a digital audio recorder to ensure the accuracy of the data. The interview recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim by the researcher shortly after each session in order to preserve the authenticity of the information and to facilitate the data analysis process. The data were analysed using the thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke.

This study was conducted at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), as the university has an active and diverse student association structure, providing a suitable context for examining communication issues in the management and implementation of student association activities. The selection of USM was also influenced by the researcher's accessibility to student associations and the cooperation of stakeholders at the university level, which enabled systematic and ethical data collection. Focusing on a single institution also helped to minimise variations in organisational context, thereby enhancing the precision of the analysis of the communication issues identified.

Responses were analysed using thematic analysis.

TABLE 1
Summary of Methodology

Research Method	Qualitative
Research Design	Case Study
Sampling Technique	Purposive Sampling
Number of Respondents	5 Representatives Associations
Data Collection Technique	In-depth Interviews
Research Instruments	Semi-structured Interview Guide Researcher
Data Analysis	Thematic Analysis

4.0 Findings

The interviews conducted revealed three main communication issues faced by informants within their organisations: one-way communication, information overload, and goal misalignment. Each challenge is summarised and discussed below.

4.1 One-way Communication

Three informants reported that one-way communication practices within their organisations had led to problems in the dissemination of information. Most associations relied heavily on WhatsApp as the primary medium, which often resulted in communication being dominated by one individual.

"I feel that, overall, communication among association members is smooth, with most members paying attention to the information provided, so that projects can run well. However, some members rarely use their smartphones during class or when busy, which

leads to delayed receipt of information. This prolongs discussions, causes misunderstandings, and reduces cooperation. For example, when we had a programme, some members were not paying attention to the information shared in the WhatsApp group, which affected productivity. This led to dissatisfaction among active members who were working hard to ensure the project's success.” (Informant 1)

“Communication among members is not smooth because, at times, the style of communication causes misunderstandings and disrupts workflow. Important information is often only shared by the main coordinator in the WhatsApp group, which has created difficulties. For example, as project leader, I faced issues when members ignored or failed to reply to my messages in the WhatsApp group, making it impossible to make decisions promptly. Members were also reluctant to share their opinions in the WhatsApp group since I was the one who usually conveyed notices in the group, which further disrupted project planning.” (Informant 3)

“In my view, communication among members is generally smooth and a quick method for sharing brief updates, but certain issues still arise. In our association, the main coordinator assigns tasks via the WhatsApp group, yet delays occur when some members fail to read the notices on time. This is very challenging in project planning and disrupting planning procedures. This affects decision-making and slows project planning. At times, I have had to contact members individually to confirm details. Some members are also ignorant about key information, such as the dates and venues, leading to absenteeism and disruption to the activities.” (Informant 4)

One-way communication refers to the transmission of information from one party to another without opportunities for feedback. In an organisational context, communication is often used by a leader to convey instructions or information to the members. While one-way communication can accelerate the delivery of information, it frequently weakens comprehension and reduces participation. Abed, Abed and Shackelford [1] argue that one-way communication can hinder both personal and professional growth due to limited interaction and clarification. For example, as Informant 1 noted, “... lack of attention to WhatsApp messages among association members negatively affected productivity and resulted in the issue of members not cooperating...”.

Informant 3 highlighted communication challenges concerning cooperation among the members, “...this style of communication is causing some difficulties. For example, as project leader, I faced issues when members ignored or failed to reply to my messages in the WhatsApp group...” This is affecting the project leader’s ability to make immediate decisions due to the lack of prompt response from the members. This not only delayed the decision-making process but also affected the effectiveness of project planning, as members are reluctant to share their views on a communication platform such as a WhatsApp group.

According to Informant 4, one-way communication is a quick way to disseminate information, but the delay among the members in reading the message poses a challenge in the project planning procedure. Informant 4 stated, “...there are members of the association who do not check the information or notices issued, which leads to issues such as delays in decision-making or in taking the necessary actions...”. This situation disrupts the flow of the project when there are members who do not take note of important details such as the date or location of an activity, thereby affecting its implementation.

According to Morsing and Schultz [18], one-way communication is highly vulnerable to misinterpretation as it generates multiple perspectives and inconsistent understandings. Although it may expedite message delivery, the drawbacks include poor attention, delayed responses, and reluctance to engage—ultimately reducing cooperation and productivity. Thus, leaders should adopt more interactive platforms that enable constructive feedback to strengthen collaboration and project planning.

4.2 Information Overload

Several informants indicated that the excessive and simultaneous flow of information caused members to struggle in filtering and identifying priorities.

“...Sometimes, there is simply too much information being sent by the treasurer, department heads (such as EPEHub, publicity, mediation, and mobility), project leaders, and me as the main coordinator for the association in our WhatsApp group to ensure everyone receives important information. Members often feel confused about what requires immediate attention. Many eventually ignore messages altogether, as they perceive the notifications as “irrelevant...” Moreover, some mute the group, which makes them inactive in discussions. This results in the members not being actively involved in the discussion, and eventually they feel that there are too many messages being shared by the leadership, which further contributes to misunderstandings.”
(Informant 2)

“As project leader, I am responsible for planning activities or projects to be executed after the meeting. Each project leader is responsible for each project. The issue of information being conveyed simultaneously occurs when, at times, two projects are scheduled to take place within the same week, and the two different project leaders send information into the WhatsApp group to ask for members who are able to assist in carrying out the projects. However, members may occasionally overlook the information that has been shared in the WhatsApp group, or other messages may be sent by fellow members... Therefore, the problem of excessive communication frequently arises when multiple pieces of information are delivered simultaneously within the WhatsApp group.”
(Informant 4)

“Information overload is common in our association, which complicates my responsibilities as treasurer. For example, when I repeatedly share reminders about payments or donations in various formats, members become confused about whether they need to take action. They often message me privately to confirm details. I have also received duplicate claims for purchases, making it difficult to verify legitimate requests.”
(Informant 5)

Information overload refers to a situation in when individuals receive excessive amounts of data within a short time, making it difficult to process and prioritise. Arnold, Goldschmitt and Rigotti [3] note that the volume of information produced in today’s world has reached overwhelming levels, often impeding prompt decision-making. In this context, the information receiver is facing difficulties in prioritising and confused. As stated by Informant 2, *“...Sometimes, there is simply too much information being sent by the treasurer, department heads (such as EPEHub, publicity, mediation, and mobility), project leaders, and me as the main coordinator for the association in our WhatsApp group to ensure everyone receives important information...”* [EPEHub stands for *Environmental Protection and Education Hub*]. Information shared in the *WhatsApp* group confused the association members on matters that require their immediate attention and causing confusion in their actions. This occurs when a person fails to integrate and filter all information received in the decision-making process, which is also known as information overload [8]. Several key factors contributed towards this information overload issue. One of the main reasons is that the amount of information being disseminated by the association members. As stated by Informant 2, *“The association members tend to get confused on matters that require their attention.”* Simultaneous updates from multiple members make it difficult for the receivers to focus on critical information. *“In this situation, it becomes difficult for the recipients of information to filter and prioritise the relevant details, ultimately leading to confusion and difficulty in recalling the information”* [21].

The next factor is when several projects or tasks are taking place simultaneously. Informant 4 provided an example, stating that, *"...at times, two projects are carried out within the same week, and the two different project leaders will send information into the WhatsApp group to ask members who are able to assist in implementing the projects..."* This results in a large amount of information being shared simultaneously, making it difficult for members to give their full attention to each message, which in turn leads to information being overlooked or misinterpreted. Excessive information within organisational communication brings about various negative effects, particularly on the smooth execution of a project or task within an association or organisation. One of the impacts is a decline in member engagement. Informant 2 shared that, *"Most members rarely read the messages in the WhatsApp group because they have muted the notifications."* This illustrates how members begin to ignore notifications due to the excessive flow of communication, causing their participation in discussions to decrease and resulting in a passive discussion environment. More, excessive communication creates confusion in carrying out tasks. As highlighted by Informant 5, *"When I disseminate information related to fee payments or fundraising contributions for various activities in the WhatsApp group repeatedly and in various formats, members become confused as to whether they are required to take action or not."* This confusion demonstrates that it not only disrupts productivity but also hinders the smooth process of decision-making and task execution. Consequently, members require repeated clarifications, which delays the implementation of tasks and negatively affects the overall effectiveness of the association.

It's evident that excessive information can result in confusion among organisational members. It may also lead to negative consequences such as information fatigue (information overload), which undermines efficiency and makes it difficult for members to distinguish between important and less important information. This may lead to reduced productivity, work-related stress, and errors in decision-making. According to Eppler and Mengis [8], uncontrolled information overload causes cognitive strain and diminishes individuals' capacity to process information, thereby disrupting effective communication and the smooth running of organisational operations. Indeed, excessive information may create confusion, delay organisational responses to critical issues, and trigger internal conflict when different messages are conveyed simultaneously without proper coordination.

4.3 Goal Misalignment

Several informants highlighted issues of goal misalignment within their organisations. Differences in objectives between individuals in an organisation often result in ineffective communication, which in turn undermines the achievement of collective goals. When organisational units pursue conflicting or poorly aligned priorities, messages are frequently inconsistent, leading to confusion and misunderstandings. This happens when the party concerned does not share a similar framework understanding of priorities, responsibilities, and the required goals.

"... there are situations where members not fully understand or misunderstand their scope of tasks, but it is not spotted in the WhatsApp group. Each member interprets their responsibilities differently, which may lead to errors, particularly when members in the same department carry out tasks incorrectly due to misinterpretation. This complicates matters and creates disharmony. For example, when a member receives unclear instructions, he or she may fail to perform properly. Others may view this as a lack of commitment, even though the root cause lies in ineffective communication. As a result, the working relationship was strained, and the trust level among the members was affected. (Informant 1)

"I think every member has their perspective and understanding, but this affects relationships among the members when people hold different views yet fail to discuss them openly. Online communication may lead to misunderstandings among the association members and the head of the department, especially when information is unevenly distributed, leading to misunderstandings and probably bickering. The situation worsens if poor communication is not managed effectively." (Informant 3)

“In my opinion, at times, in an association, misaligned information occurs due to unclear communications online. This confuses members about their tasks. This may create disharmony among members. Poor communication could affect the level of trust and respect among members. For example, when directives from a superior or department are inconsistent or unclear, members may receive incomplete or contradictory instructions about their task. A member might feel unappreciated if told that their completed task was wrong despite a genuine effort. Such experiences create frustration, resentment, and strained relationships unless addressed properly.” (Informant 4)

Differences in objectives within organisational communication can lead to various negative effects that undermine the effectiveness of daily operations and the achievement of the organisation’s strategic goals. When individuals or departments pursue differing objectives, communication becomes misaligned, which may result in messages being misinterpreted or poorly received. Such misunderstandings often give rise to conflicting decisions, delays in task implementation, and failure to achieve the desired outcomes. Robbins and Judge [20] note that when organisational goals are not collectively shared, communication becomes defensive, with individuals prioritising personal agendas over common objectives. This defensive posture creates a serious communication gap, misinterpretations, affects information flow, and increases the risk of misunderstanding, which may lead to conflicting decisions, ultimately weakening the organisation.

Furthermore, misalignment fosters siloed working cultures, where departments operate independently without regard for interdependence due to unclear goals. Lack of understanding of shared goals also limits communications among departments and is often marred by conflicts. Eisenberg, Goodall, and Trethewey [7] argue that effective organisational communication depends on clear, shared goals across all levels, enabling messages to be shared effectively and coordinated actions. In their absence, organisations risk delays, inefficiency, missed opportunities for innovation caused by a lack of idea sharing, and increased operational costs due to inefficiency in human resources management.

Misaligned goals also affect employee psychological well-being and overall organisational culture. Lack of communication clarity, vague organisational goals, or misaligned with their roles generates feelings of exclusion, undervaluation, and uncertainty regarding responsibilities, among the employees. This contributes to job stress, dissatisfaction, and higher turnover intentions. Shockley-Zalabak [22] warns that organisations that fail to unify goals risk fostering negative cultures where trust and commitment towards the organisation deteriorate. Therefore, management must ensure that communication aligns with shared organisational goals, involving all stakeholders in the communication process to promote clarity, cohesion, and collaboration.

5.0 Systematic Communication Procedures

Systematic communication refers to purposeful, structured practices designed to achieve organisational objectives. This statement is supported by several informants who emphasised that an organisation or association should have structured communication procedures. As one informant stated, *“Problems related to information not reaching the intended recipients require a more systematic and organised flow of information”*. Unlike ad hoc exchanges, systematic communication is planned and deliberate, ensuring clarity, consistency, and alignment with strategic goals [12]. Systematic communication is communication applied with purpose by an organisation to achieve specific goals. The systematic concept is structured in nature, instead of being random. Systematic communication in an organisation facilitates the execution of strategic communication. It helps in conflict resolution in an organisation by having periodic meetings. For example, a systematic communication procedure, such as having regular scheduled meetings, whether weekly or monthly, ensures members remain updated on progress and current issues. It is evident that when chairpersons hold periodic meetings, members stay informed and aligned with organisational developments, reducing risks of misinformation or exclusion. Documentation is another vital element of systematic communication. Secretaries play a crucial role in recording meeting minutes and decisions, thereby producing official references accessible to all members. This may help to reduce complexities in an organisation. This statement is supported by the Government Communication Service [10], which stated that organisations require

clear vision, mission, and goals to reduce complexity. Its documentation is pivotal in achieving systematic communication and in making strategic decisions, the type of approach used, risks and perception among members in an organisation.

The next systematic communication procedure is establishing a clear information flow. Hierarchical communication, where information moves from the chairperson to bureau heads and then to members, creates an information flow order and prevents confusion. This is in line with the importance of communication as a medium to generate and boost organisational productivity. Lack of strategy implementation in information flow may affect and halt the effectiveness of executing a plan. According to Men [15], the effectiveness of implementing systematic communication that has been carefully planned and structured will have a significant impact on an organisation. This is because communication within an organisation serves as the main catalyst in planning and shaping the systematic development of the organisation's human capital. If there is a failure on the part of the management in establishing a strong system, it will lead to shortcomings in producing proactive members, mature in thought, competitive, creative, and innovative. Therefore, the type of information flow in the form of communication that can be applied within an organisation is through downward communication. Downward communication refers to the transmission of information from leaders to their subordinates. The purpose of this communication is to provide specific instructions on the implementation of tasks and how they should be carried out, to supply the necessary data required for organisational procedures, and also to convey clear information in outlining the mission and objectives to be achieved in the implementation of projects. These three purposes illustrate how important it is for downward communication to be carried out effectively in an organisation to create a successful association. Hence, with information flow being delivered through the correct levels, the intended message will be conveyed systematically.

6.0 Clear Communication Channels

An organisation or association must establish clear communication channels to ensure that information is delivered accurately and promptly. This view was also supported by Informants 3, 4, and 5, clear information dissemination is essential for the effective functioning of an association. As one informant stated, *"Clear communication channels should be implemented in all university associations so that confusion in information can be reduced and conflicts among members can be avoided"*. Clear communication channels not only facilitate the dissemination of information but also help to reduce misunderstandings and conflicts that may arise. Clear communication channels refer to the mediums used to convey messages between individuals within an organisation. The use of appropriate platforms for communication is crucial to ensure that the intended message is clear.

According to Mohd Yusuf [17], a message must reach its target, whereby the recipient receives and retains the information obtained. The choice of communication tools to deliver a suitable message is an important element of communication to ensure that effective communication can be achieved, thereby reducing internal conflict. In keeping with the pace of modernisation, leaders within an organisation must take advantage of current technological developments. This is because media and communication technologies are part of the tools that can be used to deliver information directly to members. Today, various applications can be utilised to ensure clear communication, such as *WhatsApp*, *Telegram*, and email, without any barriers. In addition, other platforms that can be employed for project management include *Google Workspace* or *Trello*. The sophistication of modern technology should not be an obstacle to establishing clear communication, ensuring that no information is overlooked.

The importance of technology in providing clear communication channels lies in its role as a medium for message dissemination that has a positive impact on the organisation and its management. This is because the activities carried out within an organisation can be improved with the help of communication technology. However, it requires cooperation and commitment from all parties within the organisation to ensure that the chosen technology brings positive outcomes. This statement is supported by a study conducted by Mahbob et al. [14], which found that an organisation efficient in using communication technology will achieve its objectives more quickly and be able to compete with other organisations. Furthermore, the selection of effective communication channels also influences the

quality of the information conveyed. This is because information that is delivered accurately, has the appropriate degree of validity, and meets requirements is considered quality information, which in turn helps to address conflicts and drive change within the organisation. Therefore, clear communication channels are an efficient step in ensuring that an organisation functions effectively. The impact of clear communication can be seen in increased productivity, reduced misunderstandings, and enhanced member satisfaction within the organisation.

7.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, communication challenges such as one-way communication, information overload, goal misalignment, interpersonal conflict, and leadership styles frequently disrupt organisational functioning. These issues extend beyond verbal exchanges, encompassing non-verbal cues and differences in interpretation.

However, such challenges can be mitigated through practices that promote more effective two-way communication, systematic procedures, and clear communication channels. When properly applied, these approaches ensure that messages are easily received, understood, and acted upon without risk of omission or misinterpretation. Ultimately, effective communication fosters collaboration, reduces conflict, and enhances the organisation's ability to achieve its collective objectives.

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