External Communications Governance Policy

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1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to set out a campus-wide approach to external communications at University of Limerick (UL). The document outlines the contexts in which the policy applies and the principles to which UL will adhere when engaging in external communications. Implementation of this policy and related procedures will ensure that UL's public messaging aligns with its strategic objectives.

1.2 Scope

1.2.1 To whom does the policy apply?

This policy applies to all UL staff and students, contractors, third-party agents and other affiliate associates who undertake external communications activities on behalf of the University or who seek the support of the central external communications service.

1.2.2 In what situations does the policy apply?

Along with relevant Marketing and Communications supporting policies and procedures, this policy relates to the engagement by representatives of UL in proactive and reactive UL profiling and promotional activities with external stakeholder groups, e.g. members of the regional, national and international media.

1.2.3 Who is responsible for ensuring that the policy (and any associated procedure) is implemented and monitored?

The Marketing and Communications Division's Head of External Communications is responsible for enforcing this policy and its related procedures. Ultimate responsibility for enforcing the policy rests with the Director of Marketing, Communications and Public Affairs.

The UL Executive Committee approves the policy and, where necessary, supports the Director to enforce the policy.

Faculty deans and directors of administrative areas are required to familiarise themselves with the policy. Where a breach of the policy is highlighted, faculty deans and directors of administrative areas must cooperate in ensuring that appropriate action is taken.

1.3 Definitions

In this policy, the terms below are assigned the following meanings in the context of communication at UL.

1.3.1 Communication

Communication is the process of exchanging information through speaking, writing or a visual medium, such as video or photography. The language used in spoken and written communication should be understandable and inclusive. Communication takes place

via multiple channels and platforms, including, but not limited to, press releases, media engagement, briefing materials, printed and online publications, digital platforms and social networking sites.

1.3.2 Corporate Communications

The term corporate communications refers to strategic, structured and integrated external communication with UL's stakeholders. Corporate communications at UL incorporates institutional messaging, both internally and externally.

1.3.3 Crisis Communication

The term crisis communication refers to the strategies, technologies, systems and protocols implemented to support UL's crisis management structures. The objective of crisis communication is to mitigate the operational and reputational impact of a crisis through proactive and timely communication and by managing engagement with stakeholders effectively.

1.3.4 Issue Mitigation

Issue mitigation is a strategic, anticipatory management process that forms part of an integrated and structured communication approach. Issue mitigation is used to address problems before they escalate by identifying and formulating an institutional position for proactive and reactive engagement purposes.

1.3.5 Public Affairs

The term public affairs refers to the strategic management of UL's relationships with its external stakeholders with a focus on national and local public representatives, government agencies, funding and regulatory bodies as well as civic and community groups. It involves promoting the University's mission, achievements and public image through communication, advocacy and community engagement.

1.3.6 Social Media

Social media comprises websites and applications through which users can create and share online content or participate in social networking. Social media enables UL to promote its brand across platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, LinkedIn and TikTok and to connect with various audiences, including prospective and current students, alumni, staff and the wider public. Social media is used to share news, promote events, highlight academic achievements, showcase campus life and support recruitment efforts. It also serves as a channel for real-time interaction, community-building and crisis communication, thereby helping to enhance the University's visibility and reputation online.

2 Context

2.1 Legal and Regulatory Context

This policy is based on the fundamental principles of freedom of expression, a plurality of diverse views, academic freedom, critical thinking, transparency and ethical conduct

as well as a rejection of any form of advocacy or discrimination based on race, age, religion, gender, marital status, national origin, physical or mental disability, sexual orientation or other grounds of discrimination prohibited under Irish or EU law.

2.1.1 Data Protection Laws and Legislation in the Jurisdiction

UL is committed to complying with all applicable data protection, privacy and information security laws and regulations in the locations in which it operates. Where the University processes personal data, it is subject to the obligations set out in the Data Protection Acts 1988–2018 and the EU General Data Protection Regulation, 2016/679 (GDPR) as well as related guidance issued by supervisory authorities, including the Data Protection Commission (Data Protection Legislation).

2.1.2 ePrivacy Laws and Legislation in the Jurisdiction

UL is committed to complying with the EU Electronic Privacy (ePrivacy) Directive. In Ireland, the ePrivacy Directive is transposed into the law of the State by Statutory Instrument No. 336 of 2011, the European Communities (Electronic Communications Networks and Services) (Privacy and Electronic Communications) Regulations 2011 (the ePrivacy Regulations).

2.1.3 Accessibility Laws and Legislation in the Jurisdiction

UL is committed to complying with the Web Accessibility Directive (Directive (EU) 2016/2102), which provides people with disabilities with better access to online digital content posted by public bodies. In Ireland, the Web Accessibility Directive is transposed into the law of the State by Statutory Instrument No. 358/2020 – European Union (Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications of Public Sector Bodies) Regulations 2020.

2.1.4 Irish Language Laws and Legislation in the Jurisdiction

UL is committed to complying with all applicable Irish language standards, laws and regulations as laid out in the Official Languages Act 2003 and the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021.

2.1.5 Copyright

UL is committed to complying with all copyright laws and ensuring that any content used on the UL News site or social media channels is either original or, if applicable, appropriately licensed for use.

2.2 Other Context

2.2.1 User Focus, Content Quality and Reputational Management

The University of Limerick (UL) External Communications function includes media management, strategic and crisis communications, public affairs, corporate communications, proactive and reactive public relations, issue mitigation, social media management and protocol.

The Marketing and Communications Division's External Communications team maintains a strong commitment to audience-led communications. This is achieved by tailoring a careful orchestration of messages, strategies and channels according to the unique behaviours, needs and expectations of each external stakeholder group.

Successful external communication requires a deep understanding of these groups as well as a strong commitment to transparency and ethical conduct. This allows the External Communications team to foster strong relationships with multiple varied external stakeholder groups and to build trust as a point of reference and key information source for the University.

A strategic communications approach is central to all proactive activity with the goal of delivering high-level, expert-driven communications to establish UL as a research-led institution. The objective is to provide a consistent, integrated and expert approach to research communications to strengthen this profile. At all times, this is expert-led, data-driven strategic communications activity that is focused entirely on the UL brand.

As a critical function within the central resource, public affairs plays a pivotal role in shaping and maintaining UL's reputation and ensuring that its public messaging aligns with its strategic objectives. Ensuring the quality of content is paramount as clear, accurate and compelling information fosters trust and engagement. Effective public affairs management (incorporating issue management) also involves proactively addressing reputational risks, thereby enhancing UL's public standing through strategic advocacy and transparent communication and ensuring that its values and achievements are consistently and positively represented.

UL's social media channels and digital presence are the public face of the institution. They provide a platform on which to display the University's best qualities and project a positive image. These channels are strategic assets that carry enormous influence and provide global access to all aspects of the University.

2.2.2 Brand Compliance

UL is committed to ensuring that all external communications and social media content conform to the guidelines laid out in the UL Brand Guidelines.

2.2.3 Marketing and Communications Strategy

This policy is implemented in alignment with the strategy specified in the Marketing and Communications Division 3x3 Strategy and Implementation Plan 2023–2026.

2.2.4 UL Risk Management Framework

As is the case for all UL policies, this policy must operate within the parameters of UL's Risk Management Framework.

2.2.5 Roles and Responsibilities

External Communications Team

The External Communications function includes media management, strategic and crisis communications, public affairs, corporate communications, proactive and reactive public relations, issue mitigation, social media management and protocol. The External Communications team is responsible for developing and maintaining policies, standards, guidelines and associated procedures relating to the external communications function. The team works with UL senior leadership on strategic communications and issue mitigation. By integrating these considerations into leadership decision-making, the team can proactively identify potential issues, craft clear and consistent messaging and respond swiftly to crises. This approach fosters transparency, builds stakeholder trust and minimises reputational risks.

The public affairs function sits within the External Communications team. Serving UL through strong relations with the public and the government involves building and maintaining positive relationships with key external stakeholders. Conducting the public affairs function effectively elevates UL's reputation by showcasing its achievements, research and community impact with specific political, civic and community stakeholder groups.

As the owners and custodians of the UL institutional social media accounts and in partnership with the Marketing team, the External Communications team directs the content, design and editorial strategies of these accounts.

The External Communications team manages requests for the services of public relations, public affairs and social media and has the authority to prioritise the central service based on the institution’s strategic priorities, best practice and potential yield.

The External Communications team implements and ensures adherence to corporate policies and aligns communications and public affairs priorities with the UL strategic plan.

Devolved Communications

The marketing and communications managers of UL-based institutes that are funded by Research Ireland are entitled to engage with the media without the prior approval of the External Communications team. However, we encourage these personnel to collaborate closely with the central team to avoid engaging in competing proactive activity.

UL communications personnel who operate outside of the External Communications team must direct any media engagement activity through the central team. A community of practice has been developed to provide a structured yet flexible platform for communication professionals within UL to connect, collaborate and grow professionally. The community of practice serves as a hub for exchanging ideas, sharing challenges and accessing resources with the ultimate aim of enhancing UL’s communication strategies.

3 Policy Statements: External Communications Principles

3.1 UL is committed to ensuring that all media inquiries seeking an official response from or statement on behalf of the University should be directed through the External Communications team.

3.2 UL is committed to ensuring that no organisational unit or staff member makes official position statements on behalf of the University without consulting with the External Communications team.

3.3 UL is committed to ensuring that no employee is authorised to speak "off the record" on behalf of the University to media on any matter pertaining to the University.

3.4 UL is committed to ensuring that external communications activities are conducted in a highly ethical, transparent, compliant and collaborative manner in line with its values of integrity, credibility, openness and success. As such, UL has no appetite for breaches of statutes, regulations, professional standards or research ethics or for any form of bribery or fraud.

3.5 UL is committed to ensuring that careful consideration be given by the External Communications team to the external sharing of information about the University to ensure that such information is appropriate and accurate and is not shared if it is commercially sensitive or in breach of data protection legislation.

3.6 UL is committed to ensuring that any engagements or dealings with elected representatives or policymakers at an organisational or individual level should be done in coordination with the External Communications team.

3.7 UL is committed to ensuring that while the External Communications team engages with external organisations and elected representatives, locally, regionally and nationally, to advocate on matters of importance to the institution, the University never involves itself in party political affairs and remains studiously politically neutral.

3.8 While the University encourages and supports involvement in community activities, the use of UL resources or any action or omission made by any person that may create the appearance that UL is supporting, endorsing or opposing any political position or political party or candidate is not permitted.

3.9 UL is committed to ensuring that the quality of content on its institutional social media channels is of the highest standard and adheres to best practice.

3.10 UL is committed to ensuring that its institutional social media channels are fully compliant with Irish and European legislation and regulations around GDPR, ePrivacy, accessibility, Irish language and copyright law.

3.11 UL recognises that the External Communications team is a finite resource and that any project work undertaken by the team must align with the University's strategic goals. The team reserves the right to prioritise support and level of engagement with projects.

3.12 Nothing in this policy is intended to restrict the freedom of staff members to engage in scholarly activities or to be personally involved in community activities. Nothing in this policy is intended to affect individual employees' rights to express personal opinions on UL or non-UL actions or policies.

4 Related Documents

UL Documents

- Current UL strategic plan
- Social and Online Media Use Policy
- Data Protection Policy
- Risk Management Framework
- Critical Incident Management Plan 2024

Marketing and Communications Division Documents

- Marketing and Communications Division 3x3 Strategy and Implementation Plan 2023–2026
- UL Brand Guidelines
- YouTube content submission and publishing procedure
- Brand Governance Policy
- Web Governance Policy

5 Document Control

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