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# "You can't host someone without explaining the rules of the house"

A deeper insight into how international students make sense of Lund University's COVID-19 communication

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# Abstract

**"You can't host someone without explaining the rules of the house" – How international students at Lund University make sense of Lund University's COVID-19 communication, and how employees at Lund University's Central External Relations team have assisted international students with sensegiving processes of Sweden's COVID-19 recommendations and regulations.**

The present qualitative study analyzed how international students make sense of Lund University's COVID-19 communication, as well as Sweden's COVID-19 approach as communicated by specific employees at Lund University. Moreover, the study examined how employees at Lund University's Central External Relations team have assisted the students with making sense of Sweden's COVID-19 strategy.

The theoretical framework centered on sensemaking, and the chosen research paradigm was symbolic interactionism. The data collection method included 17 semi-structured in-depth interviews, which were analyzed through a thematic content analysis.

The themes obtained in the thematical content analysis were rooted in the sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995). The findings indicated that, in relation to the international students' sensemaking processes, the existence of all seven characteristics. Additionally, two added concepts to the sensemaking theory were found concerning the findings from the Central External Relations team.

Drawing on the findings from the research, the main argument is that most international students do **not** seek information from Lund University regarding the COVID-19 situation in Sweden, but rather how COVID-19 affects their studies. The study concludes that international students make sense of COVID-19 communication in a myriad of ways and that the employees have tried to assist the international students in their sensemaking processes, although not always strategically.

The study ends with avenues for future research within the field of internationalization of higher education and health disaster communication.

Keywords: *disaster communication, health communication, Lund University, international students, employees, case study, sensemaking, sensegiving*

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# 1. Defining the research problem

## 1.1. Introduction & Problematization

The 21st century is to a great extent shaped by globalization, which makes strategic communication crucial. Recent decades have seen an increase in students' global mobility, English becoming a prevalent language for teaching and research, and the establishment of a more widespread cross-national research collaboration (Hsieh, 2020). To this phenomenon, Sweden is no exception.

However, unlike most countries, Sweden has had free education for all students, regardless of their country of origin, until 2011. In 2011, Sweden introduced tuition fees for non-EU/EEA (i.e. European Economic Area) students (Tolofari, 2009; Myklebust, 2017). With the introduction of tuition fees, Sweden saw a significant decline in the number of non-EU/EEA students coming to the country to pursue higher academic studies (Myklebust, 2017).

In 2018, the Swedish government shared its long-term vision regarding the internationalization of Swedish higher education institutions. They write:

> "Sweden shall be one of the most attractive, international knowledge nations with world leading quality of education and research. International understanding and intercultural competence shall constitute an unquestioned and integrated part of education and research. The internationalisation [sic] efforts of the higher education institutions are predicted upon constructive cooperation with the rest of society and efficient coordination between government agencies in order to overcome national and global challenges" (Swedish Government Official Reports, 2018, p. 14).

In January 2021, Times Higher Education published its latest ranking on the top international universities globally. What can be concluded from the ranking is that Sweden seemingly recovered from the previous setback and continues to be an attractive knowledge nation for international students. In the esteemed ranking, Lund University ranked as the 40th most international university globally, and, consequently and indirectly, the most international university in Sweden (Times Higher Education, 2021).

Being acknowledged as a top-international university in Times Higher Education is a prestigious recognition and can be indicative of a higher education institution aligned with the current societal globalization state, as depicted by Hsieh (2020). With Lund University gaining this favorable global reputation, one can claim that the Swedish vision from 2018, has been realized in some regards.

However, in contrast, the Swedish government also emphasized the importance of overcoming "national and global challenges" (Swedish Government Official Reports, 2018, p. 14). One such global challenge, presumably not foreseen nor predicted by any person, organization or sector is the present SARS-CoV-2 outbreak.

SARS-CoV-2, which hereafter will be abbreviated and solely referred to as COVID-19, was officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020 (Krisinformation, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020). The first COVID-19 case in Sweden was reported on January 31, 2020 (Sveriges Radio, 2020), and since then, the virus has spread rapidly throughout the country (The Local, 2021). On March 17, 2020, the Swedish government introduced recommendations to higher education institutions to continue academic studies digitally and by distance, and the day after, on March 18, Lund University's Vice-Chancellor officially decided to do so (The Department of Strategic Communication at Lund University, 2020; Lund University, 2020).

In response to the novel COVID-19 outbreak, Lund University has dedicated a specific page on their website with the latest updates and answers to questions, which students may have. In addition to providing self-written text-based information, Lund University also provides external links and sources to various authorities on local, regional, national, and international levels. Through these sources, the international students can themselves ensure that they are informed on the latest COVID-19 news. Moreover, Lund University regularly updates its Facebook page, *International Desk at Lund University,* with COVID-19 information.

Sweden has adopted a distinct strategy to manage the spread of COVID-19, in contrast to most countries worldwide. Thomas Erdbrink, writing for the New York Times, referred to Sweden as the "pariah-state" (Erdbrink, 2020). The Swedish authorities have not introduced the mandatory wear of face-masks, harsh curfews, or nationwide lockdowns, which, seen from a different cultural context than the Swedish one, can be viewed as confusing, too loose, or non-responsive. Particularly, it can be assumed to be more confusing for international students, considering the cultural aspect of the

Swedish COVID-19 strategy, which manifests itself through the concept **recommendations**. It can be thought to be problematic for the international students considering how these students first-hand witness their home countries opposite reaction to the unfolding disaster.

In Sweden, the authorities often speak in terms of recommendations, which can be viewed as infused with Swedish culture. Moreover, the term might be foreign to the international student community, not least because they have “one foot” in their home country and “one foot” in Sweden. The term recommendation might be difficult to comprehend in a health disaster context. When different countries take divergent stances on the management of COVID-19, it could potentially lead to internal clashes and conflicts among and within the international students, causing them not to know whom to trust, how to act, or behave.

Therefore, it is plausible to assume that particularly the international students rely on their university to assist and provide them with guidance, help, and support in these matters. Upon first viewing and reading Lund University’s official webpage with information solely about COVID-19, there does not appear to be an **explanation** of the reasoning behind the unique Swedish COVID-19 strategy. One can argue that this responsibility does not belong to Lund University, but, rather, to another authority entity. Nevertheless, it can be assumed to be significant for the international students to be aware of the explanations and background reasons of Sweden’s COVID-19 strategy. Further, it can be thought that the international students seek this information on Lund University’s communication channels.

When aiming to communicate to a heterogeneous audience in an evolving health disaster, it is crucial to communicate cultural aspects and perspectives that might not be necessary when communicating to an audience already familiar with it (Committee on communication for behavior change in the 21st century and improving the health of diverse populations, 2002). This can be assumed to be especially vital given Sweden’s **unique** COVID-19 strategy. Furthermore, an organization, such as a university, needs to establish and maintain a communicative relationship built on mutual trust with its stakeholders, especially during a disaster. Trust can be established through relationship building, which can occur through effective and strategic communication efforts on the organization’s part (Hunt et al., 2009).

Hence, the present research study investigates and problematizes Lund University's COVID-19 communication to current international students at the university. The communication that will be discussed in this thesis is communication available only in the English language. Lund University's COVID-19 communication in English may also be read by national students, as they also speak English and have access to some of the communication that Lund University provides to their international students (national students do not have access to internal newsletters and emails specifically directed towards international students). However, the focus of this thesis is only on international students. **The guiding research paradigm is symbolic interactionism, because of its focus on sensemaking processes and social construction of reality.** The empirical study consists of 17 semi-structured in-depth interviews, with both employees at Lund University and international students as participants.

The primary focus is to obtain an understanding of the international students' **sensemaking** processes of Sweden's COVID-19 strategy through Lund University's COVID-19 communication. The secondary focus lies in the chosen employees' reasoning, i.e. processes behind the communication. It is first vital to determine Lund University's communicative and **sensegiving** intent, which directly influences the primary aim, i.e. the international students' sensemaking processes. **The study aims to address the theoretical gap that exists in applying sensemaking principles to communication with a heterogeneous stakeholder group during a health disaster, which is also the study's contribution to the field of strategic communication.**

Further, the research seeks to provide practical guidelines to Lund University, and other Swedish higher educational institutions, organizations, or entities regarding how to communicate about and during a health disaster with a dynamic stakeholder group. Hence, the research aims to yield applicable and transferable results to other societal contexts, where international stakeholders are recipients of an organization's communication.

## 1.2. Research purpose & Research questions

This study aims to uncover and determine how sensemaking principles can be applied to **strategic communication** in a **health disaster context.** Consequently, the phenomenon that this study investigates is the COVID-19 pandemic and Lund University's health disaster communication regarding this specific phenomenon. The study aims to uncover whether Lund University planned its health disaster communication with international students strategically, which includes conducting environmental scanning or background research about their target audience(s). Besides this, the purpose of the study is to determine how international students in the Master programs Service Management and Strategic Communication make sense of the said communication. Only international Master students were included in the study, and not international Bachelor students or exchange students, because of the scope and time restraints.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to research how an organization can communicate to a heterogeneous target audience – in this case, international Master students – during a changing and ever-evolving disaster, taking their perspectives and accounts into consideration. For this purpose, two research questions were formulated:

- **How do international Master students enrolled in the Master programs Service Management and Strategic Communication at Lund University, Campus Helsingborg, make sense of the university's COVID-19 communication?**
- **In what way(s) did Lund University's Central Division of External Relations team assist international students with making sense of Sweden's COVID-19 recommendations and regulations?**

## 1.3. Relevance to the field of strategic communication

Zerfass et al. (2018) define the field of strategic communication in the following way:

> "Strategic communication encompasses all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Specifically, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals." (p. 493).

Zerfass et al. (2018) show that strategic communication is vital for an organization to continue thriving in its chosen field. During the twentieth century, the notion of communication expanded, and viewing everything in an organization as communication became popularized. This shift meant viewing organizations *as* communication, rather than as entities constituting *of* communication (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015).

The organizational context of a university differs from university to university, but all universities strive to recruit potential students to the programs and courses they offer. Lund University is no different. Moreover, Lund University has employees working with multiple areas in which international students might need assistance during their stay in Sweden. Throughout the ongoing global health disaster COVID-19, these employees, with job titles such as student coordinator, international officer, and international communication officer, have mainly been responsible for communicating about the COVID-19 pandemic from the university to the international students.

It is in Lund University's interest to ensure that its international students are satisfied with their studies and the communication they receive while in Sweden, as this can lead to them promoting Sweden and Lund University to friends and family back home. Building on that argument, it is significant for the university to maintain a strong relationship with these students. Consequently, Lund University, other universities alike, and organizations focusing on internationals need to be strategic, consistent, and timely with their communication, especially in the global health disaster the world is currently experiencing.

Previous studies have not focused on a **heterogeneous** community's **sensemaking processes** of **health disaster communication** during the **COVID-19 pandemic**. **Consequently, the present study aims to address the theoretical research gap that exists in applying sensemaking principles to disaster health communication with a heterogeneous stakeholder group.** This is precisely the study's contribution to the field of strategic communication.

## 1.4. Delimitations

One main delimitation is that it only focuses on international **Master** students enrolled in **two specific** Master programs at Lund University's Helsingborg Campus. Thus, only a limited number of participants from a limited number of a subset of the study population were interviewed, and therefore the results of this study cannot be statistically generalized to the student body of the entire university.

In addition, the researcher decided to delimit the study by not including intercultural communication, but only focusing on health disaster communication. This was because the scope of the thesis would be far too broad had it been included. Hence, only sensemaking and sensegiving processes were investigated in a health disaster communication context.

## 1.5. Disposition

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. Following the current introduction, the literature review is presented. The literature review is followed by the thesis' theoretical framework, which consists of the sensemaking theory. This is followed by the methodology, in which the research approach and research design are discussed. Hereafter, the fifth chapter on the thematical content analysis and empirical findings are presented. The sixth chapter includes a discussion and examination of the current empirical findings, situated to the sensemaking theory and studies presented in the literature review. The discussion is followed by the final chapter, the conclusion, where the implications of the study are discussed. The concluding chapter also includes practical recommendations to higher education institutions and other entities as well as limitations of the current study. Lastly, recommendations for future academic studies are highlighted.

# 2. Literature review

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive overview of research conducted within the field of disaster communication. As the concepts crisis, risk and disaster are, at times, erroneously used interchangeably (Fraustino et al., 2012), the chapter begins by elucidating these differences in the form of a table. The chapter then proceeds by explaining why disaster communication is the term that will be exclusively used in this thesis. Subsequently, previous relevant literature within the research field of health disaster communication will be presented. The literature review is concluded by a literature synthesis.

## 2.1. What are the definitional differences between a crisis, risk, and disaster?

The table below illustrates the conceptual differences between a crisis, risk, and disaster.

Table 1. Definitional differences between crisis, risk, and disaster

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| **Crisis** | A crisis occurs when there are perceptions of an event that can negatively affect stakeholders' expectations of an organization, as well as when these perceptions can negatively influence an **organization's** performance (Coombs, 2009). |
| **Risk** | Risk communication in a disaster context aims to inform communities affected by hazards that can **potentially** turn into a disaster if left unmanaged, on how to prevent or mitigate the risk of the hazard developing into a disaster (Wiggill, 2016). |
| **Disaster** | According to Wiggill (2014): "A situation occurs when a single emergency service can manage the situation, without dispatching assistance from other emergency services. When other emergency services' assistance is needed to manage a situation, it becomes an emergency. When **all the local emergency services** are working at an **emergency**, it becomes a **disaster**" (p. 323). |

## 2.2. Why focus on disaster communication?

As was illustrated in table 1, the COVID-19 health disaster cannot be limited to the concept of crisis, nor of that of a risk, as COVID-19 is already occurring (in contrast to risk) and affects all spheres of life for people globally in contrast to a crisis. Ergo, COVID-19 is nothing short of a disaster, and it is essential to address it accordingly. The result of referring COVID-19 to the incorrect concept of crisis or risk leads to applying organizational crisis communication aspects to a disaster context (Fraustino et al., 2012). In the study, COVID-19 will continually be referred to as a "**health disaster**" or "**pandemic**" and no mention of crisis communication or risk communication will be presented or discussed.

## 2.3. What is health communication?

Health communication is a constantly changing and vibrant field with several facets. It is highly renowned in and essential to the fields of public health, health care, as well as in the non-profit and private sectors (Kreps et al., 1998). Several definitions of health communication exist, but at its core, health communication is concerned with communicating health-related information, ideas, as well as methods, with the purpose to affect, strengthen, assist and activate different stakeholder groups (Wright et al., 2008; Schiavo, 2014). Ultimately, the purpose is to introduce positive health outcomes for the general population.

Aspects that are closely interconnected with health communication are, for example, the emphasis on people, the multidisciplinary approach, the strategic aspect, as well as the importance of relationship-building (Wright et al., 2008; Schiavo, 2014). The heart of health communication is the people affected, and their specific needs. To achieve positive health communication, Schiavo (2014) argues that it is essential to conduct an audience analysis. An audience analysis is a thorough investigation of the target audience(s), including factors such as their attitudes to certain topics, values, behaviors, demographics, preferences as well as needs. Consequently, the importance of understanding one's target audience is critical. To understand one's target audience better, Schiavo (2014) argues that audience segmentation is vital.

Audience segmentation is the praxis in which, to better understand large groups and populations, one divides them up into smaller units – or segments – who share similar traits, such as preferences, cultural backgrounds, and needs (Schiavo, 2014). These segments are created to better understand how they can holistically affect health communication, and hence, the segments also need to be considered when communicating in a global health disaster. Schiavo (2014) argues that the implementation of specific communication efforts needs to include a versatile approach. This versatile approach should address factors such as concerns, preferences, and other needs that a specific group may have. As different groups have unique needs, Hong et al. (2018) underscore the importance of creating different communication efforts for the respective groups. Wright et al. (2008) theorize that these different groups need to be provided with different narratives to help them make sense of the health communication messages.

Following the arguments presented by Wright et al. (2008), Schiavo (2014), and Hong et al. (2018), it can be assumed that international students, i.e. a specific body of the student community, with a different cultural perception and background than the overall Swedish student community, needs specifically tailored communication, to fill their specific communication needs. This becomes especially heightened when considering the potential negative repercussions of fake and unverified information spreading on social media. It is additionally amplified when reflecting on the importance this stakeholder group holds to the university, and, thus, it is in the university's utmost interest to address these special needs in their communication efforts. Furthermore, it is especially heightened when considering that these students might scan and read sources from more than one country, potentially causing information overload. Previous studies focusing on this topic will be addressed in the subsequent section.

## 2.4. Relevant health disaster communication research

The current section discusses health disaster communication studies relevant to the present research. These studies were deemed relevant because they focused on COVID-19 in an organizational, often higher educational, setting, and centered on leadership and communication.

Communication skills are essential during pandemics (Ataguba and Ataguba, 2020). Amid the ongoing pandemic, higher education institutions are facing severe communicative challenges (Chang et al., 2020; Fernandez and Shaw, 2020; Finset et al., 2020; Mackert et al., 2020). Finset et al. (2020) provide four suggestions of what is especially vital in determining how to effectively communicate health information to the public. Firstly, they highlight the importance of stating openly and in a truthful manner what is known and what is unknown, and to the highest degree possible only stick to the verified facts. Secondly, information should always be consistent and as specific as possible. The third suggestion they provide relates to the importance of leadership showcasing their ability to make decisions in situations heavily influenced by uncertainty. The importance of strong leadership in uncertain times is also underscored by Fernandez and Shaw (2020). Leadership should be done with candor and confidence and would thereby signal safety to one's stakeholder groups (Fernandez and Shaw, 2020). Lastly, Finset et al. (2020) highlight acknowledging emotions in times of disasters. In this aspect, they focus on the importance of communication messages to show empathy, include genuine concern, and deep understanding for the affected stakeholder groups.

Because of COVID-19, higher education institutions had to switch from an offline to an online setting. Moreover, they had to ensure that their target groups (the university student communities) are provided with essential information from the university regarding the unfolding disaster and the university's measures. Lederer et al. (2021) conducted a study focusing on the challenges and needs of U.S. college students during COVID-19. Their findings resulted in several recommendations for institutions of higher learning. These recommendations include the importance of communicating comprehensively, scientifically, and honestly. They write:

> "Institutions of higher education can be a trusted source of information and support by providing frequent, consistent, clear, reliable, and compassionate communication to students and the rest of the campus community, particularly through the channels that they utilize most readily" (p. 19).

Lederer et al. (2021) continue by underscoring that higher education institutions ought to prioritize student support services, such as counseling centers, health centers, and other salient offices. These can be open and available to students through digital and telephone means. They conclude by stating that student support services should be established and implemented with an equity lens, acknowledging that the most marginalized collegiate populations are particularly affected by COVID-19, and they are the ones most in dire need of assistance and recognition from the university.

Chang et al. (2020) conducted a study centering on international students and information behaviors during COVID-19. They argue that although international students are not the only affected student group when it comes to COVID-19, they do have challenges around information that national students do not have, challenges that need to be acknowledged, and needs that ought to be met. According to Chang et al. (2020), it is critical to acknowledge that some international students tend to seek information from a minimum of two different countries – their host country and home – simultaneously, which might cause information overload. Chang et al. (2020) reason that while information overload around COVID-19 may be overflowing in one specific country, adding the notion of international students potentially reviewing sources from two or more countries, such as both their home and host country, the information overload becomes especially palpable for them. Moreover, the information is, at times, highly conflicting, especially in the case of Sweden's alternative approach to managing the pandemic.

Mackert et al. (2020) sought to find the best practices to support a higher education entity's response to COVID-19, from a health communication perspective. The study was carried out at the University of Texas at Austin and consisted of 17 focus group interviews, with the participants being a mix of students, faculty and staff members, as well as parents of some students. In the research, the participants were able to examine the potential COVID-19 messages that the university was planning to provide their student community with.

The results of the study can be a potential roadmap for other universities facing similar communicative challenges, however, bearing in mind the specific context and unique demographic student population of the University of Texas and how it may or may not be applied to other university contexts. The results of the study showed that the participants emphasized the importance of empathy and safety in the university's communication, underscoring that the situation is tremendously difficult and stressful for everyone. Further, the participants shared that they did not wish to see the university give any promises of returning to a "normal state" as promises of this kind were seemingly unrealistic and could negatively affect the perception of the university.

Quattrone et al. (2020) carried out a similar study to Mackert et al. (2020) but in an Italian, and thus European, cultural, and societal context. Quattrone et al. (2020) wished to discuss priority actions for higher education institutions considering COVID-19. The priority actions they identified were based on international guidelines about the virus and their unique experiences as a small Italian university. However, it is of essence to point out that Italy was one of the hot spots for the COVID-19 outbreaks in Europe, a country severely affected by the virus (Day, 2021). Ergo, although the findings can be transferred and applied to a Swedish context, it is crucial to remember that the COVID-19 outbreak arguably caused more havoc in Italy, than in Sweden.

The first point of emergency preparedness that Quattrone et al. (2020) discuss is to build a response team. They state that building a response team and establishing clear leadership is essential during a disaster. Moreover, they emphasize the importance of providing a specific ad-hoc communication channel, which Quattrone et al. (2020) identified as an institutional email address. For all questions and matters concerning the virus, students and employees alike can turn to this ad-hoc communication channel for assistance.

Additionally, Quattrone et al. (2020) stated that universities ought to rearrange activities and take measures to protect the campus, such as online education. Lastly, the researchers looked to the future, and encourage higher education institutions to commence plans of restarting activities when it is deemed safe and complying with official authority guidelines. They also state that one should continue with safety measures, such as keeping a distance when commencing with physical meetings again.

A study conducted by Bavel et al. (2020), center on key insights and takeaways they identified for people in leadership positions during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, they addressed the importance of not speaking in terms of “us versus them”, but that we are all “us” and are working together against the virus.

Further, Bavel et al. (2020) urge leaders to promote cooperative behaviors. They could do this by informing people that it is the right thing to follow authority guidelines, but not only that – other people are already acting in line with these guidelines – and if other people can do it, then you as an individual will not be alone in acting according to the guidelines. The focus should also be moved from the recipient alone to also include other people who could be severely affected if the recipient does not behave safely.

Bavel et al. (2020) also encourage people in leadership positions to appeal to scientific norms to ensure that the messages are aligned with the recipient’s moral values. They suggest the communication practitioners shift from referring to *social* distancing to *physical* distancing, as social distancing inherently might imply that one cannot be social during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is incorrect.

Lastly, Bavel et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of preparing one's stakeholder groups with the fact that misinformation will inevitably spread. In this, communication practitioners need to make sure that their stakeholders have access to correct information. Further, communication practitioners can provide their stakeholders with counterarguments for unverified or incorrect information obtained from dubious sources. To be able to counter fake information and arguments, it also becomes crucial to be aware of the magnitude of the disaster and the challenges that arise from it.

Varga and Jacobsen (2020) identify three key communication challenges and priority areas in the current COVID-19 pandemic. In their research, they review key theories from the health communication literature, observations of interactions taking place in the media, as well as looking at government officials and health professionals during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic and their initial reactions.

The first point that Varga and Jacobsen (2020) discuss is information overload. They cite the World Health Organization, which has made usage of the term "infodemic." The concept refers to the risk of an information overload, especially when the risk of misinformation and fake news surrounding a specific event/phenomenon is likely (Tandoc and Boi Lee, 2020; Thomas, 2020; Varga and Jacobsen, 2020). In times when the challenges of information overload arise, such as during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Varga and Jacobsen (2020) emphasize that it is critical for all agencies in society with leadership positions, such as government agencies, health systems, and schools, to clearly establish their core messages, and communicate these effectively. In terms of communicating effectively, it is critical to communicate in an easily digestible, transparent, and clear way, in an approach that is fitting to the chosen communication channel. In this aspect, Varga and Jacobsen (2020) reach the same conclusions as Chang et al. (2020).

Moreover, Varga and Jacobsen (2020) stress that the essential information should always be communicated first. The reason is twofold, one being to ease the news coverage on the topic, while the other is to make it easier for the target audience who might not fully consume all the available news coverage. Further, Varga and Jacobsen (2020) encourage communication practitioners in organizations to identify their target audience when formulating messages and, if possible and deemed necessary, to also address the specific target audience in the message itself. In that way, the senders reflect on their target audience and their specific communicative needs. Varga and Jacobsen (2020), in the challenge of information overload, also reflect on the communication messages, and the importance of these being designed to accomplish the behaviors they set out to do.

The second challenge that Jacobsen and Varga (2020) discuss relates to information uncertainty. In the early onset of the pandemic, and, to some extent still today, a flux of uncertainty exists about the virus. This is a scientific research gap that needs to be filled, which is being done with time, but it is significant to address the communicative aspect of information uncertainty. As more and more scientific knowledge becomes available, it is essential to integrate it correctly into the existing communication messages.

Lastly, Varga and Jacobsen (2020) discuss misinformation in the face of a global health disaster. In a large-scale phenomenon such as COVID-19, misinformation is bound to occur. Varga and Jacobsen (2020) discuss two approaches to tackling misinformation on COVID-19 on social media. The first, and most vital in their argument, is to only communicate and share correct and verified information. That way, the likelihood of seeing and reading the verified information will be higher than the unverified "information." The second approach is to take an active stance in reducing inaccurate information, by not repeating, sharing, or verifying it.

Considering misinformation and fake news it is decisive that organizations act proactively, and that this becomes apparent in their communication efforts, too. It shows the importance of organizations thinking about the future and the effects their communication has on the relationships with their stakeholders. Consequently, the next section will focus on strategic communication and its relevance to relationship management.

## 2.5. Strategic communication and relationship management

Organizations strive to build healthy relationships with their stakeholder(s). Having a flourishing relationship with stakeholders will ensure the survival of the organization. Relationship management is the core of public relations, with the goal of effective public relations being to secure positive public relationships. For a higher academic institution such as Lund University, one of their main stakeholders is the students, with international students being highly regarded. According to Diers-Lawson (2020), organizations should perceive its behaviors and business practices through the eyes of their stakeholders. Diers-Lawson (2020) claims that this is precisely what will determine whether the organization is sustainable or not. If an organization is sustainable, will affect if it is strategic (Zerfass et al., 2018). If it is seen as strategic, it may also potentially be *excellent*.

Dozier et al. (1995) argue that what differentiates excellent from less-than-excellent communication programs is the application of two-way communication. To become excellent, Dozier et al. (1995) argue that communication practitioners need a wealth of knowledge about different research methods and interpretations. This body of knowledge should be derived from the social sciences. To conclude, they claim that two-way communication involves management role-playing, specifically strategic management.

Other pivotal characteristics of relationship management in organizations relate to the leadership and their capabilities of connecting with and maintaining a relationship with people of interest. These attributes include skills such as accountability, trustworthiness, and integrity (Fernandez and Shaw, 2020). According to Doraiswamy (2012), one of the most significant leadership skills is emotional intelligence and emotional stability.

Hon and Grunig (1999) conducted a study to determine the quality of organization-stakeholder relationships. They identified the outcomes and indicators of a strong relationship as being trust, mutual control, commitment, and relationship satisfaction. Control mutuality, as Hon and Grunig (1999) argue, is the extent to which the parties involved in the relationship, be it two or more, share a perception of who among them has the legitimate right to affect the other, i.e. what the power balance looks like.

Furthermore, Hon and Grunig (1999) state the importance of evaluating two-way communication when assessing relationships. Trust is a vital factor in determining and evaluating relationships, especially in a disaster context. Hon and Grunig (1999) argue for the existence of three sub-dimensions to trust, “integrity”, “dependability”, and “competence.” The factor trust, according to Schlesinger et al. (2016), is a variable that can enhance the relationship’s score, i.e. the higher the trust the stronger the relationship, and vice versa. Satisfaction, another important factor according to

Schlesinger et al. (2016), is decisive for continuing and maintaining the relationship. In other words, the more satisfied you are, the longer time you invest in the relationship.

For the ongoing research, this would entail that if the international students feel satisfied with and especially trust Lund University's COVID-19 health disaster communication, they might also be more favorable and loyal to the university. Although, one must realize that many other factors could affect the students' satisfaction levels. Satisfaction is seen as the degree to which each party in the relationship feels positive, or favorably toward the other party/parties, because of positive expectations about the relationship which have been met.

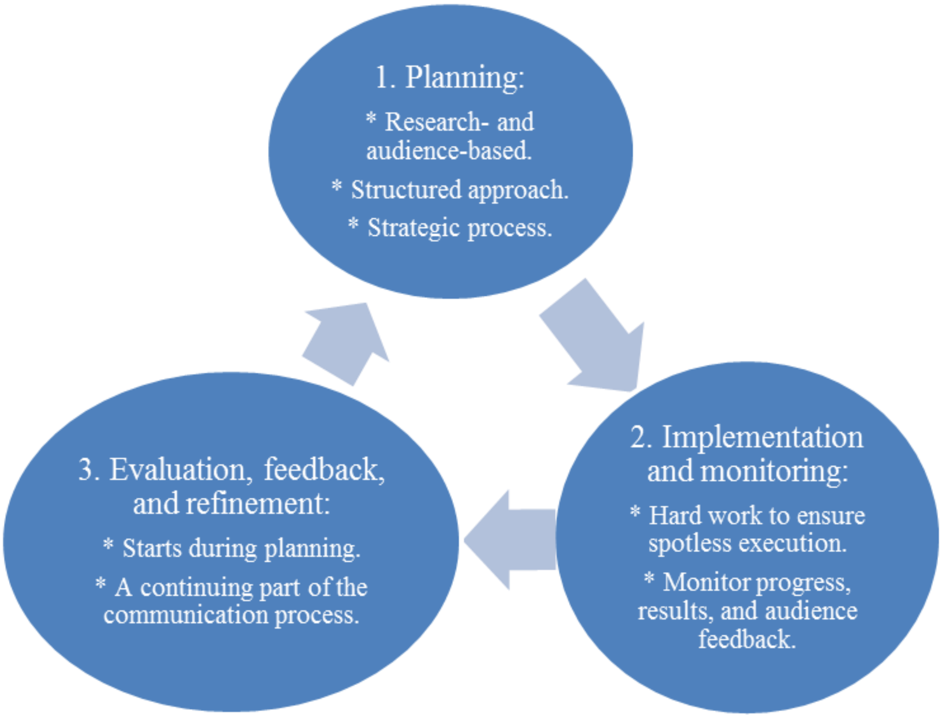
Lastly, commitment is understood as the degree to which both parties in the relationship believe and feel that the relationship is worth spending time and energy on (Hon and Grunig, 1999). These dimensions are interconnected. For instance, if one is more satisfied, one might be more trusting, and vice versa.

What can be concluded from Hon and Grunig's (1999) research is that building and maintaining a strong and mutually beneficial relationship with stakeholders, should not be overlooked by organizations. Hon and Grunig's (1999) findings indicate that Lund University should always strive to maintain positive relationships with international students. To this finding, Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) argue that relationships, trust, and legitimacy are primarily built on the communication department's ability to **actively listen** to their stakeholders and their perspectives. Considering that the current study investigates COVID-19 as a phenomenon, the health communication cycle was also understood to be crucial. Hence, the next section will discuss the health communication cycle.

## 2.6. Health communication cycle

Different models exist to describe and evaluate health communication (Schiavo, 2014). Generally, the key steps of health communication include (1) planning, (2) implementation and monitoring, and (3) evaluation, feedback, and refinement. These steps will now be discussed further and are visually represented in the image below.

Image 1. Visual representation of the health communication cycle. Source: Schiavo (2014, p. 288).




In the onset, several significant points of departure are taken into consideration. For example, it is at this stage that the overall program goal is set, the communication objectives are agreed upon, audience analyses and communication strategies are conducted, as well as tactical plans (Schiavo, 2014).

Second, the implementation/monitoring stage consists of continual feedback and dialogue with the relevant audience(s). Not only will the audience(s) be able to share their feedback in the form of input, but other vital input includes monitoring the context and situation (Schiavo, 2014). As is the case in the current global health disaster, the situation is constantly changing, meaning that communication practitioners constantly need to assess the situation and adjust communication accordingly.

Third and lastly is the evaluation step. In the context of health communication, this step can be explained as the process where the advantages and disadvantages of health communication interventions are examined (Schiavo, 2014).

## 2.7. Literature synthesis

First, the literature review introduced the concepts of crisis communication (Coombs, 2009), risk communication in a disaster context (Wiggill, 2016) and disaster communication (Wiggill, 2014). Hereafter, the literature review elucidated why disaster communication would be the term this study would refer to (Fraustino et al., 2012). Then, the literature review delved into previous research, highlighting some studies which had investigated the effects of COVID-19 on higher education institutions. Further, suggestions have been made for how universities can communicate about the current disaster events while ensuring the safety of their student communities (Bavel et al., 2020; Finset et al., 2020; Mackert et al., 2020; Quattrone et al., 2020). Some studies indicated the importance of communicative leadership skills in health disaster contexts (Doraiswamy, 2012; Zerfass and Viertmann, 2017; Ataguba and Ataguba, 2020; Fernandez and Shaw, 2020) while others showed how specific university students, such as international students, have different communicative needs during the ongoing COVID-19 disaster (Chang et al., 2020; Lederer et al., 2021).

Additionally, the literature review presented health communication research (Kreps et al., 1998; Wright et al., 2008; Hong et al., 2018) and the health communication cycle (Schiavo, 2014). Developing communication messages to fulfill the health communication needs of international students as well as countering the communicative challenges has also been discussed (Varga and Jacobsen, 2020).

Lastly, the literature review presented the importance of relationship management, and its effect on stakeholder relationships (Hon and Grunig, 1999; Schlesinger et al., 2016; Zerfass et al., 2018). Stakeholder perceptions were discussed (Diers-Lawson, 2020) and the difference between excellent and less-than-excellent organizations was elucidated (Dozier et al., 1995). The next chapter will discuss the study's theoretical framework: sensemaking theory.

# 3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that forms the foundation of this research study is the theory of sensemaking. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section explains the sensemaking theory, mainly discussed by departing in Karl Weick's (1995) explanations. The second section explains the concepts of sensegiving and sensebreaking, which have been introduced by researchers building on Weick's (1995) theory. Lastly, the chapter ends with a short discussion on the theory's relation to the present research purpose.

## 3.1. Sensemaking

Sensemaking is a widely known and popularized theory (Cuevas Shaw, 2021). Helms Mills et al. (2010) define sensemaking in the following way:

> "At its most basic, sensemaking is about understanding how different meanings are assigned to the same event. […] Because sensemaking occurs as a result of shock, or break in routine, the study of sensemaking during or as a result of an organizational crisis offers particular insight into the processes involved" (pp. 183-184).

Karl Weick (1988, 1995) is acknowledged as the architect of sensemaking (Cuevas Shaw, 2021). The theory has been closely researched in organizational studies, as well as in a variety of other settings, such as disaster events. In disaster events, the theory has been applied in a plethora of contexts, such as in Weick's (1988) study of the Bhopal disaster in India, the Tenerife air crash (Weick, 1990), the Mann Gulch fire (Weick, 1993) and climbing disasters (Kayes, 2004).

Through his extensive research, Weick (1995) identified seven interrelated characteristics, also known as properties, of sensemaking. These include: (1) being grounded in identity construction, (2) the act of being retrospective, (3) being focused on and extracted by cues, (4) being driven by plausibility rather than accuracy, (5) being enactive of the environment, (6) being a social activity and (7) constantly ongoing (Weick, 1995; Weick, 2009). For sensemaking to take place, all these interrelated characteristics need to act together.

It is vital to examine each property to understand the sensemaking theory better. The first property is about having grounds in **identity construction**. This can be understood in the light of each unique experience that helps shape and mold humans. Each event and experience influence how humans understand their surroundings (Weick, 1995).

For example, if an organizational crisis happens to us at work, we might think back to previous organizational crises we experienced and how we dealt with them, as these previous crises influence how we see the current one. The second property, the act of being **retrospective**, is closely tied to the former property. Retrospection occurs because humans rely on things that they know to help them understand and make sense of a new and foreign situation (Weick, 1995).

Third, sensemaking as being focused on and extracted by **cues** implies that cues, or **signals**, that humans perceive from their environment influences how they view an ongoing situation (Weick, 1995). For instance, in the current ongoing pandemic, humans receive many cues or signals from health authorities, informing them how to act and behave, which could also affect how severe the situation is perceived to be.

The fourth property is that sensemaking is driven by **plausibility** rather than accuracy (Tandoc and Boi Lee, 2020). Sensemaking is not about obtaining a definite, accurate and universal truth, but rather about constantly adding additional information from the outside world into the story one holds, to find a **better story** (Weick et al., 2005). However, it is central to emphasize that what one individual, group, or organization holds as the truth may show to be implausible, or nothing further from the truth, for other people (Weick et al., 2005).

Consequently, this property specifically and sensemaking generally is not about finding the *right* answer, as the *right* answer differs depending on whom one asks. Sensemaking is driven by what is plausible, i.e. what is likely to be the case. However, what is likely to be an accurate description of something highly depends on whom you ask. For that reason, sensemaking is seen as an individual process, but it is also seen as being part of a grander collective scheme. This can be explained by the fifth property, sensemaking as **enactive in the environment** (Weick, 1995).

Being enactive in the environment implies that sensemaking always takes place in a specific environmental setting, i.e. the surroundings play a key role in the sensemaking (Christianson and Barton, 2020). This can be seen through looking at how multiple agents can contribute to an individual's specific sensemaking. It is a process in which humans gauge what others understand, how they make sense of different events and occurrences, and frame their sensemaking related to (either in contrast to or in line with) other peoples' perception. This is also what is meant by the seventh property, that sensemaking is **social**. It is a social process that, although it is individual, is simultaneously collective. Oftentimes, it is easy to theorize sensemaking at the "individual level of analysis" (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010, p. 562), neglecting or simply forgetting the social processes and the shared meanings that can contribute to the individual sensemaking. Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) argue that the construction of shared meanings is especially crucial in a crisis or change context, and thus also in a disaster context. The final property of sensemaking, according to Weick (1995), is the notion that it is **ongoing**. Simply put, this implies that sensemaking is constantly happening. Humans continually receive a myriad of signals and impressions from their surroundings and constantly need to make sense of their environment to minimize what else could be classified as *chaos*.

Lastly, Maitlis (2005) stresses the importance of environmental scanning as a sensemaking activity. Specifically, Maitlis (2005) argues that environmental scanning is crucial for top managers, stating:

> "Sensemaking activities are particularly critical in dynamic and turbulent contexts, where the need to create and maintain coherent understandings that sustain relationships and enable collective action is especially important and challenging" (p. 21).

## 3.2. Sensegiving & Sensebreaking

Research has elaborated on Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory and popularized new concepts, such as sensegiving and sensebreaking, to provide a more nuanced, robust, and accurate account of what processes occur during meaning-making (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Giuliani, 2016; Cuevas Shaw, 2021).

Sensegiving is the attempt of the sender to influence the receiver's sensemaking processes in a specific direction (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007; Mantere et al., 2012). The idea behind sensegiving is the notion that organizational communication needs to "maintain coherence among beliefs within the organization and among stakeholders. They build bridges between complex, unordered meaning structures, allowing collective meaning to emerge" (Aula and Mantere, 2012, p. 343).

Sensebreaking, on the other hand, is the process in which members of an organization transmitting a message must break down the sense they are receiving as input to give sense to others (Mantere et al., 2012; Giuliani, 2016).

Pratt (2020) argues that in situations when the sensebreaking and sensegiving practices are successful, members of an organization positively identify with the organization. In contrast, when either practice breaks, the members disidentify with the organization. Hence, the importance of positive perceptions of the sensebreaking and sensegiving processes in organizations cannot be stressed enough. However, as Aula and Mantere (2012) conceptualized in their statement, it is not only important that the sensegiving and sensebreaking processes be positively identified by the members of the organization, but also by the stakeholders. The next section will discuss the theoretical framework's relation to the current research purpose.

## 3.3. Theoretical framework's relation to the research purpose

Concerning the current research – international students' sensemaking processes of Lund University's COVID-19 communication about Sweden's COVID-19 strategy, and Lund University's sensegiving processes through this communication – the sensemaking theory plays a pivotal role. The theory taps into the intricacies of meaning-making, which can occur during a disaster such as COVID-19. Moreover, the theory helps to exemplify the different meaning-making mechanisms at play. Additionally, the theory contributes by and enables an examination of Lund University's Central External Relations team's sensegiving and sensebreaking processes.

However, one must also stress that other theories could have been used in the study. The current theory does not come without limitations, but the researcher nevertheless deemed the theory applicable to the chosen research topic. The sensemaking theory contributes by guiding the research, chosen research methodology, interview questions, and data analysis, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

# 4. Methodology

In this chapter, the methodology applied in the study is presented and described. On a broad scope, the following chapter includes the research approach and research design. More specifically, it contains information about and motivations for the sampling method choice, the interviewees, the data collection method, and the data analysis method. Further, the chapter includes a discussion about transferability, applicability, and building rapport, a short reflexivity statement by the researcher, and a reflection on the interviews' language translations accuracy. The methodology chapter is concluded by a discussion on ethical considerations of the research.

## 4.1. Research approach

### 4.1.1. Qualitative versus quantitative research approach

The qualitative research approach is distinguished by its emphasis on meaning-making, interpretation, and understanding. Qualitative researchers, contrary to quantitative researchers, aim to interpret and understand how people make sense of reality and phenomena around them (Moen and Middelthon, 2015). The researcher plays a significant role in qualitative research, as they can influence the study's outcome (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2009): "Qualitative research can give us compelling descriptions of the qualitative human world, and qualitative interviewing can provide us with well-founded knowledge about our conversational reality" (p. 47). A qualitative research approach was deemed the most appropriate to attain the aim of the current research as the research was focusing on sensemaking, a theory strongly connected to qualitative research. A qualitative research design with semi-structured in-depth interviews was chosen to help find the answers to the research questions. In-depth interviews, as understood by Sennet (2004) is:

> "In-depth interviewing is a distinctive, often frustrating craft. Unlike a pollster asking questions, the in-depth interviewer wants to probe the responses people give. To probe, the interviewer cannot be stonily impersonal; he or she has to give something of himself or herself in order to merit an open response. Yet the conversation lists in one direction; the point is not to talk like friends do" (pp. 37-38).

A mix-method design, i.e. including quantitative research methods, was also considered, to complement the interviews with quantitative surveys to gain more widespread data. However, this was soon dismissed because of the scope of that kind of research, which would have been too time-consuming for the limited time frame allocated to complete this master thesis. Moreover, it was not deemed fitting to the nature of the research, as quantitative research relates to quantifiable measurements and relationships between different variables, whereas the nature of the present study, in line with the qualitative research approach, focused on human sensemaking processes (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). As the present study and researcher chose to adopt a qualitative research approach, it was also important to choose an appropriate research paradigm, which would be guiding the researcher in the research process. The next section will focus on the research paradigm of symbolic interactionism (SI), as well as why it specifically was chosen.

## 4.2. Research design & strategy

### 4.2.1. Research paradigm

Symbolic interactionism, abbreviated as SI, was chosen as the research paradigm in the present research. Symbolic interactionism is part of the post-positivist tradition. According to the post-positivistic tradition, there is no *objective truth* out there in the world for researchers to investigate and find (Panhwar et al., 2017). Consequently, the notion of truth is *subjective*, what is true for one person may not be true for someone else. As sensemaking is an individual process taking place in a collective, the researcher concluded that the post-positivistic tradition, which symbolic interactionism adheres to, should be guiding the study. The motivation behind this was that the participants in the study would, most likely, also provide different answers to the same questions.

The reason behind choosing symbolic interactionism as the guiding research paradigm was because of it being commonly used in interviews, symbolic interactionism's strong emphasis on sense-making processes, as well as an understanding of multiple social and subjective realities (Prasad, 2015; Prasad, 2017).

Though the researcher does not necessarily discard the existence of realities that can be studied empirically, such as the COVID-19 virus, the present study focuses on communication, a social reality that is subjective and constructed in social interaction. Therefore, when striving to understand the participants' social realities, it is also essential to reflect on how they were sampled to the study, which is discussed in the next section.

### 4.2.2.Sampling

The chosen sampling technique was convenience and voluntary response sampling, as well as purposive snowball sampling. In a convenience and voluntary response sampling, the participants are sampled based on convenience or opportunity, such as being willing to participate in the research, geographical proximity to the researcher, or available time (Etikan et al., 2016). On the other hand, snowball sampling is the procedure in which members of a specific population help the researcher(s) identify other suitable participants for the research (Guetterman, 2015). In the study, the international students were sampled through a convenience and voluntary response sampling, and the interviewed employees were sampled through purposive snowball sampling. First, the researcher interviewed the applicable employees at Lund University, and after having conducted these interviews, interviews with the international students were carried out.

The first participant to be identified among the employees was an employee of high position at the Division of External Relations at Lund University. During the interview, he referred the interviewer to other employees in the same department, but also to an employee in another Division. In total, seven employees at Lund University were interviewed, with the other six employees being sampled through purposive snowball sampling.

When the international students were to be sampled, the researcher reached out to the program coordinators for the two respective programs, Service Management and Strategic Communication, and asked them if they could inform their students about participating in the research. The researcher also included a survey requesting contact details for those students who wanted to participate in the research, please see Appendix G. Through this approach, five students indicated their interest. Furthermore, the researcher asked some of the participants who had shown interest if they could ask some of their peers to participate. Through this approach, one student was sampled. The researcher also asked some of her acquaintances in the Service Management program if they were willing to participate. Through this approach, four students were sampled. In total, ten international students participated in the study.

The chosen sampling methods come with both advantages and disadvantages. First, the snowball sampling entails that the researcher does not need to find *all* participants herself but can instead reach out to members that have been identified by other participants (Etikan et al., 2016). Second, the identified people might be more likely to participate, knowing that they had been recommended by one of their peers and that a minimum of one of their peers already has participated in the research. Lastly, considering the time aspect of the research, the researcher thought a convenience sampling method was most appropriate. However, while simultaneously being an advantage, a disadvantage of this sampling method is that it is a non-probability sampling method (Thompson, 2002), meaning that the researcher might miss finding other participants, who might also be suitable for the research.

In a similar vein, a convenience and voluntary response sampling method also includes advantages and disadvantages. The convenience sampling method is based on nonprobability or nonrandom sampling. Due to the sampling method being convenient for the researcher, she might not reach participants who could also fit the participant criteria but are not as easily accessible. On a similar note, the voluntary response sampling method indicates that the participants themselves show interest in participating in the research. The voluntary response sampling method includes the limitation that specific student characteristics, such as those who are most satisfied or have a high degree of trust in the university, might be more represented in the study or vice versa.

Moreover, some students who would be interesting, considering the research topic might not have seen or read the information provided, and could not thus participate. In this regard, the researcher argues that voluntary participation is always part of the ethical considerations of a study. It is also vital to underscore that as sensemaking was used as the guiding theoretical framework of the study, and the study itself is of qualitative design, the purpose of the study has never been to be representative of or statistically generalizable to the whole international student community of Lund University or other Swedish universities.

Considering these aspects, the researcher argues that the purposive, convenience, and voluntary response sampling methods were the most fitting choices for the current research.

##### *4.2.2.1. Participants*

This section discusses the participants in the study. It has been divided into two parts: international students and chosen employees at Lund University.

#### 4.2.2.1.1. International students

The sample consisted of ten **first-year** international students in Strategic Communication, and **second-year** international students in Service Management. The former, of only having first-year students, was an active decision by the researcher, whereas the latter, only including second-year students, was a mere coincidence. The researcher did not wish to interview any of her classmates, i.e. second-year students enrolled in the Master program Strategic Communication. The reason for this is that she believes that her relationship with them could cloud her judgment, as she might be too familiar with her classmates' situations and potentially more prejudiced concerning their circumstances. The latter, i.e. the fact that only second-year international students in Service Management were interviewed, was a mere coincidence, as no first-year Master's students in Service Management wished to participate in the research. Given that the researcher has no connection with first-year students enrolled in this program, their sensemaking processes were not researched.

In total, four students belonged to the Master program in Strategic Communication, and six students were enrolled in the Master program in Service Management. The two Master programs Service Management and Strategic Communication were chosen because both programs are situated at Campus Helsingborg, and the researcher already had established contacts with the program coordinators. Due to the limited time and scope of the study, the researcher decided to limit the participants to these departments.

Table 2. Overview of the interviewed students

| International student | Country of origin | Level of studies |
|---|---|---|
| Interviewee A: "Nick" | Singapore | First-year-student |
| Interviewee B: "Monica" | Hungary | First-year-student |
| Interviewee C: "Ana" | Spain | First-year-student |
| Interviewee D: "Isabella" | Costa Rica | First-year-student |
| Interviewee E: "Amanda" | Taiwan | Second-year-student |
| Interviewee F: "Elisabeth" | Vietnam | Second-year-student |
| Interviewee G: "Judy" | Nepal | Second-year-student |
| Interviewee H: "Nils" | France | Second-year-student |
| Interviewee I: "Zeinab" | Egypt | Second-year-student |
| Interviewee J: "Vivian" | China | Second-year-student |

#### 4.2.2.1.2. Employees at Lund University

Seven employees at Lund University participated in the study. Six of the participants work at the Division of External Relations, and the seventh at the Division of LU Estates. They were purposively sampled because of them either having worked with Lund University's COVID-19 communication to international students or belonging to one of the two COVID-19 groups at the university: the central crisis management group (Swedish: *centrala krisledningsgruppen*) or the operative working group (Swedish: *operativa arbetsgruppen*).

From around February 2020 to February 2021, Lund University had two specific groups working with all questions related to COVID-19. One of these groups was the central crisis management group (Swedish: *centrala krisledningsgruppen*), which consisted of directors of different divisions and people working closely with the Vice-Chancellor of Lund University. Together, the group discussed and established internal guidelines and measures the university could or ought to take, and these were presented to the Vice-Chancellor, who then formally signed the measures he deemed appropriate. The second group, called the operative working group (Swedish: *operativa arbetsgruppen*) consisted of employees at the different divisions around the university, of which the Division of External Relations was one. Just like in the central crisis management group, all questions related to COVID-19 were discussed. The employees in the operative working group were responsible for the communication efforts to the students. The Division of External Relations, which is, under "normal" circumstances responsible for communication towards the international students (together with the communication practitioners on faculty level), was also responsible for the communication during COVID-19.

Working in and between these two groups was an employee of a high-security position at Lund University, Roberto, who acted as the communication liaison between the two. In February 2021, these groups were disintegrated. The reason behind this action is not fully clear, but appears, given the employees' answers, to be due to the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor in January 2021, in addition to the perception that COVID-19 no longer constitutes a "crisis", but a "lasting condition."

Table 3. Overview of the interviewed employees

| **Employee** | **Position at Lund University and role in the COVID-19 communication** |
|---|---|
| Interviewee 1: “Paulo” | Holder of a high-level management position at the Division of External Relations and part of the central crisis management group at Lund University from its formation in February 2020 until the disintegration of the group in February 2021. |
| Interviewee 2: “Roberto” | An employee in a high-security position at the Division of LU Estates. Also acted as the liaison, or messenger between the operative working group and the central crisis management group from February 2020 until these two groups dissolved in February 2021. Worked as the manager for the operative working group from its formation to its disintegration. |
| Interviewee 3: “Wilhelmina” | Student coordinator at the Division of External Relations. Was present in the operative working group from around March 2020 until it dissolved in February 2021. |
| Interviewee 4: “Terri” | Student coordinator at the Division of External Relations. Was present in the operative working group from around March 2020 until it dissolved in February 2021. |
| Interviewee 5: “Susan” | International officer at the Division of External Relations. Was **only** present in the operative working group in **spring 2020**. |
| Interviewee 6: “Angelica” | International communication officer at the Division of External Relations. Responsible for the newsletter to the international students, which goes out quarterly throughout the academic semester. Also responsible for the COVID-19 communication from Lund University on the Facebook page *International Desk at Lund University*. Her status of activity in the operative working group is unknown. |
| Interviewee 7: “Karen” | International officer at the Division of External Relations since October 2020. Worked at one of the faculties as an |

| | |
|---|---|
| | international coordinator from March 2020 to October 2020. Her status of activity in the operative working group is unknown. |

## 4.2.3.Methods

### *4.2.3.1. Data collection method*

The researcher decided to use semi-structured in-depth interviews, because of the flexibility the method generated. Out of the ten interviews with the students, six students were interviewed in pairs, i.e. a group interview. The remaining four students were interviewed individually. Regarding the seven interviews with the employees, two were individual interviews. The remaining five were group interviews, wherein two interviewees were interviewed together, and three interviewees were interviewed together. Each interview lasted around one hour, apart from interviews where there was more than one participant present. When more participants were present, the interviews lasted roughly one and a half hours. The interviews with the chosen employees were conducted in February and March 2021 by using the Zoom platform, and the interviews with the international students were conducted in March 2021, through the same platform.

The chosen data collection method, semi-structured in-depth interviews come with both advantages and disadvantages. The structure provided the researcher with great flexibility in terms of which questions to ask and when. Consequently, the structure allowed the researcher to state the questions in a different order than originally planned if this was deemed to be more beneficial for the participant(s) being interviewed. Because of the prepared interview guide, which included all the questions asked to the interviewees, it was possible to compare the material, which helped in the pursuit of reaching more nuanced and broader conclusions (O’Reilly, 2005).

Finally, given the flexible structure of the interviews, it oftentimes tended to feel more like conversations, rather than strict interviews. This relaxed approach was assumed to positively influence the interviewees’ answers and make them feel more at ease with the digital interview setting, researcher, and answering her questions.

However, semi-structured in-depth interviews also come with disadvantages, such as not always including valuable questions to probe the interviewees with. This can be due to the lack of structure of the flexible interview guide and the pressing interview situation for the researcher, who might feel pressure to invent new and hands-on questions. This obstacle was overcome by basing the interview guide on the literature review as well as on the theoretical foundation as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Please see Appendix C (international students) and Appendix D (employees) for the interview guides.

Due to these aspects, the researcher argues that a semi-structured interview was the most appropriate data collection method. The next section will discuss the data analysis and procedures for analyzing the data acquired from the 17 interviews.

#### *4.2.3.2. Data analysis method*

For the data analysis, the researcher used a **thematical content analysis** (Leedy and Ormrod, 2013). A thematic content analysis was deemed appropriate considering the research constituted a **deductive** study. Consequently, the researcher used the sensemaking theory, the guiding theory in this study, to identify broad themes. It was based on these themes that the data was analyzed and coded (Clarke and Braun, 2017). In other words, the codes form "the building blocks" (Clarke and Braun, 2017, p. 297) of the themes, and, considering the current research was a deductive study, these themes were rooted in the sensemaking theory. More specifically, the researcher reviewed Weick's (1995) seven characteristics when coding the international students' interviews, and the additional concepts of sensegiving and sensebreaking when coding the employees' interviews. The coding and thematizing processes were constructed in two separate Excel sheets, one for the employees and one for the students. Further, a limited number of quotations were chosen to verify the themes and illustrate some of the interviewees' answers.

The thematic content analysis was chosen because of the method's focus on identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning, more commonly referred to as "themes" in qualitative studies (Leedy and Ormrod, 2013; Clarke and Braun, 2017). Considering that was what this study also aimed to do, a thematic analysis was understood as the best fit. Moreover, the chosen data analysis method also allowed the researcher to root the themes in the theoretical foundation, which the researcher saw as an advantage.

## 4.3. Transferability, applicability, and building rapport

Concepts commonly used in quantitative research, such as reliability and validity, cannot be directly translated to qualitative research, at least not with their definitions in quantitative research. The present study used the concepts of transferability, applicability, and building rapport, as these are more readily used in qualitative research.

Transferability and applicability relate to if the current research findings can be transferred and applied to other settings (Levitt, 2021). Although this might occur in some respects, it is also necessary to underscore that sensemaking, the guiding theory in this study, is both collective, as well as individual, and thus the **exact** transferability and applicability of the current research findings are seemingly unlikely.

Lastly, building rapport is crucial in interview settings (McGrath et al., 2018). As the interviews took place over Zoom, building rapport was more difficult. To resolve this, the researcher ensured to begin the interviews by asking the interviewees "easier" questions, such as "How long have you been studying at Lund University?" and "What position do you hold at Lund University?" Furthermore, the researcher also inserted herself in the study, as is common in qualitative research, to ease the flow of the conversation (McGrath et al., 2018). As a result of this action, the researcher deems it crucial to underscore her previous relationship to the research field in the form of a reflexivity statement, presented in the next section.

## 4.4. Reflexivity statement

Research suggests that in qualitative research "[…] the researcher is the prime instrument of data collection" (McGrath et al., 2018, p. 1004). Other research indicates that the qualitative researcher can become affected by the phenomena they are investigating, and in other cases, they can affect the social phenomena (Ritchie et al., 2014). Consequently, it is of essence that the researcher provides a reflexivity statement, underlying their potential role in the research and how they may be biased or influence the study's outcomes.

In the present study, the researcher is a white, 23-year-old Swedish female. She is currently finalizing her Master's degree in Strategic Communication at Lund University. Since August 2019, she is a student worker at the Division of External Relations, mostly involved with the International Desk at Lund University. Moreover, she has been active with international students in several ways throughout her academic studies.

The researcher has a strong passion for international students and higher education institutions, which she is aware of and wishes to acknowledge, as these experiences could cloud and potentially influence the research results. To overcome this obstacle, the researcher looked at the empirical findings objectively and grounded the identified themes in the theoretical framework.

## 4.5. Translation reflection

It is significant to address the language of the interviews and the translations. As the researcher is Swedish, it was natural to conduct some of the interviews, where Swedish-speaking people were present, in Swedish. This was only the case for the employees at Lund University. Therefore, the seven interviews conducted with the employees were all conducted in the Swedish language, and all ten interviews with the international students were conducted in English.

When transcribing the interviews in Swedish, the researcher first aimed to translate the transcripts to English, but as this showed itself to be very time-consuming the researcher dismissed this plan. However, all quotations by the employees presented in the next chapter were translated, by the researcher, from Swedish to English. When translating, the researcher tried to be as precise and accurate as possible and to formulate the sentences word by word as it was stated in the original language.

## 4.6. Ethical considerations

When conducting studies, ethical treatment of the participants is crucial. In this study, the researcher ensured to inform the participants well about their participation rights. For example, participants were given a digital consent form – one specifically to the employees and one specifically to the international students – where they could read what the research entailed and their rights. Upon agreeing to participate, they signed the consent form digitally and sent it back to the researcher. Before starting the interviews, the researcher made sure to reiterate the ethical considerations once more to ensure that the participants were entirely aware of them (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2009; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018).

The ethical considerations in this study included the points of informed consent and confidentiality. This meant that the participants received information – both verbally and available to read digitally – on what the study focused on, how their contribution would affect and be used in the study, that they would never be referred to by their real name, and that only the researcher would be able to identify them and their answers. Their rights include that they can opt-out of the research at any time, both during and after the interview, if they should wish to do so (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2009; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). Lastly, the informed consent form also stated that all the interviews would be conducted online over Zoom to ensure everyone's safety, considering the COVID-19 pandemic. For more information on the consent forms, please see Appendix A (international students) and Appendix B (employees).

# 5. Thematical analysis & Empirical findings

In this chapter, the study's thematical analysis and empirical findings will be presented. The chapter is structured by the overarching themes that were identified in the study, rooted in the sensemaking theory. These are presented in bullet points. The chapter is divided into three sections, with the first two sections focusing on the research questions. Within each section, the specific overarching themes for that research question are discussed. The final section summarizes the main empirical findings of the study.

There is a minimum of one quotation illustrating the sensemaking or the sensegiving processes for each overarching theme in the thematical analysis.

Overarching themes of the international students' sensemaking processes:

- Grounded in identity construction and the act of being retrospective.
- Being enactive of the environment and being a social activity.
- Being focused on and extracted by cues.
- Being driven by plausibility rather than accuracy and constantly ongoing.

Identified overarching themes of the employees' sensegiving processes:

- Sensebreaking.
- Sensegiving.

## 5.1. International students' sensemaking processes

**How do international Master students enrolled in the Master programs Service Management and Strategic Communication at Lund University, Campus Helsingborg, make sense of the university's COVID-19 communication?**

Four overarching themes emerged when analyzing the data related to the international students' sensemaking processes of Lund University's COVID-19 communication. These themes will be now discussed separately.

### *5.1.1. Grounded in identity construction & The act of being retrospective*

In contrast to their home countries, some students believed that Sweden was not taking preventive measures or taking the situation seriously enough, while others believed that Sweden's approach was the right one. While not fully agreeing with Sweden's strategy, five students stated that they believed they could still understand it. Amanda was one of those students, and she shared the following answer when she was asked:

*How do you make sense of Sweden's COVID-19 strategy?*

"Like, because I really think the cultural thing is very big thing, for us, we can't, ehm, because I know [sic] until today Swedish government don't really make wearing mask mandatory, right? And for us, in the very beginning, like, January of 2019 [sic], we already make it as a [sic] mandatory. Because we can't really, we can't have social distancing, it's too crowded […] So, for us [in her home country], wearing mask I think is the only choice, so, I can understand why Swedish government, they still don't really, ehm, make it as mandatory, because you don't need that."

When analyzing the quotation, the two characteristics "grounded in identity construction" and "the act of being retrospective" are evident. In the quotation, Amanda describes how she (erroneously) made sense of Sweden's COVID-19 strategy: by comparing Sweden to her home country, *her identity construction,* and thinking back to her home country's initial reaction in January 2020, i.e. by being *retrospective*. Further, the quotation illustrates how Amanda wrongly assumes that the Swedish government did not make the wear of face-masks mandatory because of the population dispersion within the country.

### *5.1.2.Being enactive of the environment & Being a social activity*

When analyzing Lund University's communicative role regarding COVID-19, the students made sense of it in different ways. Some students, such as Isabella, thought that Lund University could communicate more about the reasons for Sweden's alternative approach to managing COVID-19, especially the cultural driving forces behind it. In contrast, others, such as Ana, disagreed and said that although it would have been "nice" if Lund University explained Sweden's stance, she does not believe that Lund University could effectively communicate the background of Sweden's strategy. Ana stated:

*Do you think it is in the task of Lund University to communicate Sweden's cultural context to the COVID-19 pandemic, or is that in the hands of another entity?*

"Because, and I also think, kind of there is no needs [sic], maybe, […] I feel [sic] most of the things you experience while living here, and while seeing how people act and how people work in their day to day. So, I would say it is a bit hard, like, how could they explain? I think the university has kind of the responsibility to inform us, which are the recommendations from the government, because, knowing that the people, most of the people don't speak Swedish […]."

In her answer, Ana shows how Lund University is, according to her, unable to properly communicate an explanation behind Sweden's COVID-19 strategy. She implies that Lund University cannot know what the Swedish health authorities are thinking when they are formulating the COVID-19 recommendations and regulations, and thus Lund University is unable to communicate about this. She exemplifies how Lund University's COVID-19 communication is one part of a greater whole, hence *enactive of the environment* and a *social activity* in conjunction with other authorities. Moreover, Ana states that she does not believe there is a need to communicate the *explanations* behind the Swedish COVID-19 strategy, but rather about *what* the recommendations and regulations are. She continues her line of reasoning by stating that she believes that most international students may not access this information in other ways, due to not speaking, understanding, or reading Swedish.

Another answer was given by Isabella, who said the following:

"I guess maybe like in the university context, like the International Desk for example, could give like a, I don't know, a webinar or something talking about, yeah, the strategy goes in this direction because, of whatever input they have. […] And try to, maybe they could be like, like, an entity to help international students make sense of it. But, yeah, it is still relative to everyone's experiences, I guess."

In her answer, Isabella states an opinion contrary to Ana's. Isabella does state, similar to Ana, that sensemaking is *enactive of the environment* and a *social activity*, which can be understood when she says that the International Desk could potentially be an entity to help students make sense of the COVID-19 strategy, a strategy which not only affects Lund University but the greater environment, too. However, her answer in itself is different from Ana's, and also alludes to a degree of hesitation and uncertainty, shown in the usage of the words "I guess maybe…", "I don't know" and "I guess." She appears to not be as convinced that Lund University needs to help international students make sense of Sweden's COVID-19 strategy, as Ana appears to be convinced that the task is outside of Lund University's control.

Two students, Zeinab and Vivian were interviewed together. Zeinab shared the following insight:

*What is your overall perception of how Lund University is communicating to international students about COVID-19? […] What would you like to see from the university when it comes to communication about COVID-19 to you or to other international students?*

"[…] if there is an opportunity to have for the, not for the whole Helsingborg Campus, but for each and every department […]. So that students can have an opportunity to interact, maybe there should be someone who is representing the Campus during this time. If they want to ask questions, then we can create this kind of bilateral communications. […] It is a commitment [to the international students], like, you are hosting them. And you can't host someone in your home without explaining the rules of the house. The rules of the house is [sic] the rules of Sweden. Not only the university. But I did not get guided to the International Desk. I felt that Canvas was […] where I get official information about Lund University strategies, regarding COVID-19. So that is why. But I was not guided to it, […]. However, I think more explanations are needed."

Here, Zeinab describes what she feels is a lack of communication from the faculty and a suggestion of how to improve it. Her answer implies that the university is not engaged in two-way communication. She expresses an interest in interacting more with the university, although on a faculty level, a *social activity*, as it would occur in conjunction with other people, in this case, faculty representatives. She also describes how she feels that Lund University should communicate about Sweden's COVID-19 approach and explain it more – not only the university's stance – but also Sweden as a whole. Furthermore, she also alludes to not having been guided to the International Desk, who could assist her in the sensemaking processes. Consequently, her answer is also *enactive of the environment.*

Vivian, agreeing with Zeinab, provided this answer to the same question:

"[…] like Zeinab said, we don't have someone we can communicate, it's more like we are being informed. They give us the information by website, by newsletter, by all these text information [sic], so you just passively, […]."

Vivian also exemplifies sensemaking as being a *social activity* in her answer. In her answer, she describes the difference between *information* and *communication*, seemingly frustrated that the students, in her opinion, are only being informed. She echoes Zeinab's answer in wanting someone to *communicate* with, and not solely being *informed* on the Swedish COVID-19 recommendations and regulations.

### *5.1.3.Being driven by plausibility rather than accuracy & Constantly ongoing*

Despite the negative repercussions of COVID-19 and their differing views on Sweden's COVID-19 strategy, no student said that they were completely dissatisfied with their time at or their relationship with Lund University. Monica, who said she debated studying her Master's degree in Copenhagen, instead of at Lund University, said she chose Lund University and Sweden because of Sweden's seemingly less restrictive measures. She also spoke about the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 and when they will be able to fully return to campus.

*Has Lund University's communication about COVID affected your relationship with them in any way? Do you feel like it's become better or worse?*

"Maybe next month I can go to campus. And this uncertainty, this is what really bothers, I guess, most of us."

In this short statement, Monica implies that the uncertainty of the situation of COVID-19 is what irritates her. Here, she exemplifies that sensemaking is *constantly ongoing*, as she describes how she and her peers might be able to go back to Campus and in-person lectures next month, and maybe they will not be able to do that.

Monica also shared one incident in which she was upset and distressed with the university, due to their communication:

"Because, a month ago, I guess, we got an email that everything is going to be on campus, in November, we got information from our course directors that they are going to do their best to have more on Campus classes. So we had the hope, oh yeah, we already know that it is going to be better. And then with that message, I knew, I knew that it is not going to be better. But still that message hit me, and it was a shock to me, I was so mad about the university, and about our course directors, and I feel bad because I know it is not their fault, but they mislead us, in a way."

In this answer, the reader can deduce that Monica's sensemaking is *driven by plausibility rather than accuracy* and *constantly ongoing*. This was implied when she described that she "knew" that the COVID-19 situation would not be better in November, as she deduced that from the COVID-19 situation in Sweden. The information provided by the university was not accurate. The course directors, who Monica implied communicated this, seemingly had a different sensemaking process and deduced that, given the COVID-19 situation, it would be plausible to resume in-person lectures again. Moreover, Monica describes her anger with the university, having provided incorrect information, and raised her hopes, only to quickly shatter them.

Nick, a student being interviewed together with Monica, was, in contrast to Monica, seemingly positive about his relationship with Lund University and shared the following answer to the same question:

"And eeeh, but for the most part I would have preferred going to Campus for classes. To meet friends and everything. And… with regards to the updates about COVID, I… I generally started to take the emails with a grain of salt […]. I didn't take it too seriously, after like Christmas or January, when they started to send out updates […]."

Consequently, one can deduce that Nick is of another opinion than Monica. He explains how he does not believe everything that the university communicates to him about when he and his classmates can return to in-person classes. In the answer, he states that he would, for the most part, have preferred to be at Campus Helsingborg, if nothing else for the social environment, but he also alludes to the fact that there are reasons why he would like to continue with distance education. These reasons are not exemplified in the statement above. However, Nick's sensemaking processes can be seen as *driven by plausibility rather than accuracy,* as he states that he does not think it is plausible that they can return to Campus anytime soon, and thus it is not likely to happen in the foreseeable future, but it is an *ongoing activity*. What can be understood from his answer is that he will believe the students can return to in-person classes when he sees it happening with his own eyes.

### *5.1.4.Being focused on and extracted by cues*

When analyzing and coding the transcripts, the researcher found that the international students often used many sources when obtaining information on COVID-19. Nils exemplified this in his answer below.

*How do you stay updated and informed on the current circumstances around COVID-19?*

"Eehm, well, I mostly use… social media […], like, social media pages about newspapers, like, mostly French ones, like le Monde, Figaro, even like English like BBC or I also read some Reddit, dedicated to COVID-19."

Nils's answer exemplifies that there are many agents, in this case, different newspaper outlets, who influence his sensemaking on COVID-19. By Nils mentioning sources such as le Monde, Figaro, and BBC, it can be understood that he integrates information from all of these sources, and consequently, his sensemaking is *being focused on and extracted by cues*, or by signals, that he receives from these sources. In his answer, he states that he mostly accesses these sources through their presence on social media, which can imply that he also uses other social media pages, perhaps not newspaper outlets, to gain more information on COVID-19. To the same question, Monica answered:

"To know how many cases, and that cases, Sweden has, I read newspapers, but not the [sic] Lund University's website. It's more important to me to read the [sic] Lund University website to know what is going to happen [sic] the school […]."

In Monica's answer, she indicates that she does not see Lund University as a go-to source when it comes to information about the case development in Sweden, or, what is implied, the Swedish COVID-19 strategy. For these matters, Monica states that she turns to other sources, such as newspapers. In her answer, she states that she does search for information about COVID-19 on Lund University's website, but only for how COVID-19 will affect her studies. It can be interpreted, based on this statement alone, that she does not believe Lund University is a credible source to deliver information on Sweden's COVID-19 strategy, but, what is more plausible is that she thinks it is more natural to seek information from newspapers about Sweden's strategy, rather than her educational institution. These newspapers can be thought to influence her perceptions of Sweden's strategy. Hence, in this regard, her sensemaking is also *focused on and extracted by cues.*

## 5.2. Employees at Lund University's sensegiving processes

**In what way(s) did Lund University's Central External Relations team assist international students with making sense of Sweden's COVID-19 recommendations and regulations?**

When analyzing the data material related to the chosen employees' sensegiving processes of Lund University's COVID-19 communication, two overarching themes emerged. These themes will be discussed separately.

### *5.2.1.Sensegiving*

Given that the Division of External Relations is, under "regular" circumstances, responsible for the communication with the international students (in addition to the faculties), the employees naturally understood that it would be their task in the COVID-19 pandemic, too. This was exemplified by Susan when she said:

*How did you reason when communicating about COVID-19 to the international students?*

"[…] the Corona situation was special in many ways, but we make usage of the same channels that we use in normal circumstances […]. And we have the same task as we have under normal conditions, too. […] I was responsible for the communication to the international students, as I normally am. […] well, despite it being an extreme situation, we thought the same as we tend to think."

(Translated by researcher).

In her answer, Susan illustrates how the Central External Relations team's *sensegiving* processes were not differentiated during or from before COVID-19. She explains that they made usage of the same communication channels they use under regular circumstances, such as email, newsletters sent out by email, Facebook, and the International Desk (i.e. help desk). This implies that the Central External Relations team did not distinguish between a "pre-COVID-19" and a "during COVID-19" period, and the communication channels remained the same. However, they did amplify their communication to include COVID-19, too.

Paulo had not been part of the operative working group and thus not directly responsible for the communication. Instead, he had been involved in the central crisis management group, and gave this answer when asked about Lund University's Central External Relations communication role:

*How did you translate the Swedish strategy, or how did you explain it to the international students?*

"There was information, we referred a lot to the Public Health Authority, Crisis information's English sites, so they [the international students] could directly read from the correct authorities, about what is happening. We are only communicating what Lund University's strategy is and how Lund University is acting. It is very dangerous if we go in and try to reinterpret the Public Health Agency's information. But a lot of our communication was through email that was regularly sent to the students, and then we had webinars, for instance, Deputy Vice-Chancellor had a webinar where international students could ask questions to Deputy Vice-Chancellor and me, we made it together. […] We also had video messages that we published, from the executive management, and so on. Then of course in social media and such."

(Translated by researcher).

What can be deciphered from Paulo's answer is that he believes Lund University should **not** explain the reasons for Sweden's unique COVID-19 strategy for the international students. Instead, he argues that it is significant that they, as a higher education institution, act as a communication liaison for the international students, directing them to the relevant health authorities to read information about Sweden's COVID-19 recommendations and regulations on these first-hand sources. Thus, this is his *sensegiving* process. Paulo reasons that Lund University should only communicate Lund University's strategy, which pertains to aspects related to, for example, the students' education.

During the interview with Susan, she emphasized the importance of planning and doing work before a disaster occurs. This is illustrated in her answer below.

*Is there anything else you would like to add that we have not discussed?*

"[…] that what one does before it truly becomes a crisis feels pretty important. That one, if everyone has gotten their student guides at Arrival Day and there is says everything about insurances, information about the health care, where you can find information. It has everything of that kind. Having prepared everything, I think is pretty important."

(Translated by researcher).

Susan argues that preparations are significant when trying to communicate in a crisis, or, in this case, disaster. She exemplifies this by referring to the student guides which the international students receive upon their arrival at Lund University, and how all the vital information about Swedish health care is stated there. Consequently, she implies that as the Central External Relations team has provided the international students with the student guide before and during COVID-19, when faced with questions from the students the employees can guide them by referring to information from the student guide. Thus, this is her *sensegiving* process. Susan's answer can be understood to imply that without the preparation of this student guide, communicating in a disaster context may be more difficult.

### *5.2.2.Sensebreaking*

Related to the cultural aspects of the Swedish COVID-19 strategy, and the cultural dimensions of Sweden compared to other countries, Paulo provided the following answer:

*Is there anything else you would like to add that we have not discussed?*

"One thing that often strikes me when you compare Lund, or Swedish universities with other universities in the world is that we view our students as adult individuals who are seen as capable of making their own well-informed and wise decisions. But many of the students who are international, they maybe come from a background where they are expecting the university to tell them what to do, and how to act in all situations."

(Translated by researcher).

In his answer, Paulo alludes to the perceived differences of how a student is viewed at a Swedish university and a university elsewhere. He *breaks down the sense* by exemplifying how all students at Swedish universities are seen as adults, capable of reaching intelligent and informed decisions. Consequently, he implies that Swedish universities do not take it upon themselves to "spoon-feed" their students with information, whether it be related to COVID-19 or other matters, as their perception is that the students can inform themselves. However, it is crucial to underscore that despite the Swedish universities' perception of students at their institutions as grown adults, employees, such as the employees at the Central External Relations team at Lund University, are still available to assist the students with questions they may have. This notion was not seen in the quotation above, but was illustrated in, for example, Angelica's statement below:

*Have you felt that there is a big need to communicate, for example the Swedish COVID-19 strategy and explain it a little bit, in a Swedish context, so that students can understand it better?*

"We have tried to do that in emails and messages as well. To put the whole thing in a context. Because the advice/recommendations have been pretty much the same […]. And if you should then 'feed' the same thing, you must almost put it in a context. […] They [international students] do not know the city image as it usually is, where people in different generations are swarming, there are young and old, and maybe they do not notice that there is a whole population layer missing, of people who are walking around. They [international students] do not have parents, and paternal and maternal grandparents who are isolated and perhaps have not seen children and grandchildren in a very long time."

(Translated by researcher).

In her statements, Angelica implies that considering the Swedish recommendations and regulations to COVID-19 have been the same throughout the lived COVID-19 period, she understood it to be significant to contextualize the COVID-19 situation for the international students. This can be understood as an attempt from Lund University's Central External Relations team to *break down the sense* and to instill the significance and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic with their international students. To achieve this purpose, Angelica explains how she, as she perceived the international students to, during their studies in Sweden, perhaps not have knowledge of, or personal connection to, anyone from other generations, she aimed to communicate this to the students. Her intention was thus to implant a sense of unity among the students, and for them to understand the severity of the COVID-19 situation based on how it has affected other people.

Lastly, Wilhelmina provided the following answer when asked about what questions they at the International Desk received from the students.

*What kind of questions did the students have?*

"[…] There is a lot of information that is not available in English. But then there are also things that are written in English, written in Swedish, which is difficult to interpret. For example, that we have an entry ban from Denmark to Sweden, it says that it is enough if you live in Sweden, but that is not correct. When we have been in contact with the police, they say that you have to show that you are registered here for a year. […] And, where we actually, where students reach out to us and we should guide them, but we do not know a lot of times, either."

(Translated by researcher).

In Wilhelmina's answer, she exemplifies how critical it is that correct information is given to them at the Central External Relations team, for them to provide the students with correct information, that the students can make sense of. She implies that information on health authorities' websites, written in English is not updated as regularly as information written in Swedish. Consequently, the international students who do not understand Swedish will not receive this information as often as the Swedish-speaking population. This could mean that the international students reach out to the Central External Relations team, who cannot *break down the sense,* as they are meant to do, due to lack of information from the health authorities. In her answer, Wilhelmina appears to also express frustration at different interpretations from people working in health authorities, and how these, in this case, faulty interpretations, can cause problems for them working at the Central External Relations team.

## 5.3. Summary of main empirical findings

Based on a closer and thorough examination of the transcripts, the chosen quotations from the interviewees, and the thematic content analysis, the following constitute the **main** empirical findings of the research study:

### *5.3.1. International students' sensemaking processes*

- Sensemaking is a complex process. To exemplify, some students thought that Lund University should provide more information on Sweden's reasoning behind the COVID-19 strategy, whereas others thought this was not manageable for them to provide.

- Two students voiced that they wished for more **two-way** communication with the university.
- Most of the students primarily used other channels than Lund University when researching information on Sweden's COVID-19 strategy. When they sought information from Lund University, it tended to be about how COVID-19 would affect their academic studies. However, some students were not aware that Lund University was an entity that could assist them in their COVID-19 sensemaking processes.
- The international students did not perceive their relationship with Lund University to be directly negatively (nor directly positively) affected by the university's COVID-19 communication. They were pleased with the fact that many of the student services were still open, although limited.

### *5.3.2. Employees at Lund University's sensegiving/sensebreaking processes*

- Although the COVID-19 health disaster is a specific occurrence, employees at the Division of External Relations did not reason any differently than they normally do regarding communication to the international students.
- Employees at the Division of External Relations tried to place the Swedish COVID-19 strategy, with its recommendations and regulations, in a societal context, to help the international students make sense of the situation. Moreover, the employees often needed to "break down the sense" to be able to "build up the sense" again.
- Communication preparations are significant, according to the employees. They exemplified communication preparations in the form of a student guide given out to the international students when they arrive at Lund University.
- Lund University and Swedish universities have different traditions and perceptions of their responsibilities towards their students, compared to other nations.
- Lund University's Central External Relations team did not divide the communication messages based on their receivers, for example, different

demographical points, but rather divided up their messages based on if the student was a Master's, Bachelor’s, or exchange student.

# 6. Discussion

The empirical findings of the study generated insightful takeaways, which both verified and dismissed existing knowledge presented in Chapters 2 and 3. Consequently, this chapter will compare and discuss the main research findings within the context of the literature review and theoretical foundation, to obtain an understanding of the international students' sensemaking and the employees' sensegiving processes. The discussion is divided into the investigated research questions.

## 6.1. International students' sensemaking processes

The international students' sensemaking processes of Lund University's COVID-19 communication was investigated through the first research question:

**How do international Master students enrolled in the Master programs Service Management and Strategic Communication at Lund University, Campus Helsingborg, make sense of the university's COVID-19 communication?**

Regarding the international students' sensemaking processes, the empirical findings support the sensemaking theory and the existence of its properties (Weick, 1995; Weick, 2009). Furthermore, the current results also support other studies on sensemaking, such as Weick (1988), Weick (1990), Weick (1993), Kayes (2004), Weick et al. (2005), Tandoc and Boi Lee (2020), and Christianson and Barton (2020). These studies, investigating the sensemaking theory, argue that sensemaking is highly complex and both an individual as well as a collective process, constantly taking place to help humans understand their surroundings better. This was also found by the present research findings, for example when the students sought COVID-19 information from a plethora of sources. Weick et al. (2005) argue that humans continually add new "layers" to their sensemaking "stories", to improve the stories and make them more robust and intact. Through the international students seeking information from multiple sources, the researcher argues that the findings support the "story" notion presented by, for example, Weick et al. (2005).

The empirical findings suggest that Lund University and its communication channels constituted merely a portion of these sources. Nevertheless, Lund University is a vital source for the students. Some students stated that they did not consult Lund University for information on COVID-19 in Sweden. Instead, the students expressed seeking COVID-19 information from Lund University to stay informed on how COVID-19 would affect their studies. **Consequently, there was a difference between seeking information about updates on the COVID-19 situation in Sweden, and how the COVID-19 situation in Sweden would affect the students' academic studies.**

Deriving from this insight, it appears that the interviewed international students, despite reading a plethora of different sources on COVID-19, are not overwhelmed with information, that is, experiencing information overload. Chang et al. (2020) argued that particularly international students may experience information overload on COVID-19, seemingly because of scanning information from sources from at least two countries. Varga and Jacobsen (2020) claim that information overload is especially palpable during the COVID-19 pandemic, as there is an excess of information circulating online and offline, some of which are confirmed and others not. In contrast to the findings by Chang et al. (2020) and Varga and Jacobsen (2020), the results did not indicate that the students experienced information overload.

Furthermore, the findings suggested that two of the international students wished for more **two-way communication** with the university. This would, according to the students, ideally be facilitated by the faculty, i.e. on a decentral level, and not from a central management level. Consequently, the findings showed that the interviewed employees at Lund University, all working on a central level, need not dedicate **more** resources to COVID-19 from their management level, but that more could be done from the different faculties. This finding is crucial when examining it from a relationship management perspective. It is also in line with Dozier et al. (1995) and their findings on **excellent** communication practices, which, given the students' answers, Lund University does not have. Furthermore, the finding also supports Ataguba and Ataguba (2020) and their argumentation for communication being critical and crucial in disasters.

For that reason, it can be assumed that Lund University would potentially receive a more favorable image among the international students, if two-way communication between the students and the university, on a faculty level, would be facilitated. This would further support findings by Hon and Grunig (1999), who indicated that one must first determine which public relations processes are most vital and effective with a specific stakeholder group, to strategically maintain these relations.

However, the empirical findings also indicated that the international students tended to review and read information from Lund University regarding how COVID-19 would affect their studies. This can be compared to students reading information from Lund University regarding the COVID-19 situation in Sweden, which appeared to be rather uncommon among the interviewed students. Moreover, the students indicated satisfaction that Lund University decided to keep specific study places open, at least to some extent. This finding verifies the results by Lederer et al. (2021). Lederer et al. (2021) also argued that keeping certain student facilities and services open will benefit the students. Simultaneously, three students stated that they were not aware that Lund University's Central External Relations team, or the International Desk, was a source they could utilize when needing assistance. As a result of this, some of the students were not reached by the communication messages from the International Desk, which could have aided the students in their sensemaking processes.

In contrast to previous studies, misinformation regarding COVID-19 was not seen as a palpable threat by the students. Varga and Jacobsen (2020) and Bavel et al. (2020) claim that misinformation is a major communicative challenge during COVID-19. On the contrary, the current empirical findings suggested that the international students did not perceive misinformation to be an imminent threat to them when they searched for information on COVID-19. However, it is important to stress that the absence of this finding in the present research results does not, by default, indicate their inexistence.

When placing relationship management in the limelight, the empirical outcomes suggest that the international students do **not** perceive their relationship with the university to be worsened or improved because of the COVID-19 communication. Some students indicated that they trusted the university, and this finding can be understood and interpreted as in the students being content and happy with the relationship, and, overall, with Lund University. Seen from this angle, the study supported the outcomes by Schlesinger et al. (2016), who found that satisfaction was a significant factor for continuing and maintaining a relationship. It can also be thought that the relationship would be affected by information uncertainty.

Information uncertainty was something that some of the international students discussed, notably seen in the answer provided by Monica. Varga and Jacobsen (2020) view information uncertainty as one of three communicative challenges during

COVID-19. One student, Monica, indicated that she was once upset with the university, who seemingly gave her "false hopes" of returning to in-person lectures on campus. This was precisely what the findings by Mackert et al. (2020) warned against, suggesting that this kind of promise was unrealistic and could lead to negative perceptions toward the university. Consequently, the current findings support Mackert et al. (2020). As the study by Mackert et al. (2020) focused on how the students at the University of Texas at Austin wished their university communicate to them about COVID-19, and empirical findings in this study, in part, reached similar conclusions, it is plausible that students studying at other universities share this perspective. To conclude, Monica further claimed that it was the uncertainty, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which made her the most upset. However, in this regard, the university cannot act, as the employees cannot change, modify or improve the current pandemic; it is outside of their control.

Lastly, the researcher concludes that the international students all make sense of Lund University's COVID-19 communication in multiple ways, but appear to be united that in some regards, the university has been helpful, such as in keeping study places open, but in other regards, they could have acted in other ways, such as not misleading them.

When investigating the international students' sensemaking processes, it is also important to address the employees' sensegiving processes, i.e. their communicative intent behind the COVID-19 communication. This will be explored in the next section.

## 6.2. Employees' sensegiving processes

The secondary research question considered the employees' sensegiving processes. The secondary research question was:

**In what way(s) did Lund University's Central External Relations team assist international students with making sense of Sweden's COVID-19 recommendations and regulations?**

The current research findings both verified and contradicted existing knowledge when it came to the employees' sensegiving processes. For example, the results supported the existence of the nuanced version of sensemaking with concepts such as "sensebreaking" and "sensegiving", as found by, among others, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), Aula and Mantere (2012), Giuliani (2016) and Cuevas Shaw (2021). This was seen when employees at Lund University first had to *"break down the sense"* of the input they received from other authorities, only to later *“build up the sense”* for the international students.

Consequently, this finding verified results from previous research, such as Maitlis and Lawrence (2007), Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010), Mantere et al. (2012), and Maitlis and Christianson (2014). In line with this, the study also suggested that the employees found the sensebreaking and sensegiving processes difficult, as they perceived to, at times, not have enough or correct information from the health authorities. This was illustrated by Wilhelmina’s answer.

Furthermore, when examining how employees viewed Lund University’s communication efforts, the researcher concluded that the employees have, with their available and limited resources, *tried* to efficiently communicate with the diverse international student population. This was seen when they *broke down the sense* by communicating about the elderly generation being self-isolated and the importance of the students to follow the guidelines not only for themselves but for others.

However, if the sensegiving procedures that the Central External Relations team assisted the students with are the same as the students’ sensemaking processes is what determines whether the sensegiving is successful, according to Pratt (2000). As the students’ sensemaking processes were seemingly divergent and the university’s sensegiving processes were not reached to all students, the researcher concluded that, despite Lund University’s Central External Relations team’s communication efforts, their sensegiving processes cannot be defined as successful, per Pratt’s (2000) definition. Nevertheless, the researcher argues that Lund University’s Central External Relations team did try, given their resources. Diers-Lawson (2020) suggested that organizations should perceive their business and practices through the eyes of their stakeholders. To achieve this, a deep understanding of the stakeholders is necessary.

To gain more knowledge and a better understanding of one’s stakeholders, Schiavo (2014) argued that audience analysis is a good strategy. Seen from a communication perspective, audience analysis is vital, as the communication practitioners need to know how to formulate themselves, how to tailor their arguments, essentially how to communicate, to their specific stakeholder group. Schiavo (2014) argues that this can be done by dividing the stakeholders into different segments. One such segment could be the demography of the stakeholders. Given the answers by Lund University’s

Central External Relations team, they have not conducted a **thorough** background check on their stakeholders, but they have divided the communication messages based on factors such as the educational level of the student, and also whether they were an exchange student or a student studying abroad, for instance. Thus, the researcher concludes that the audience analysis was not deep enough.

Similarly, Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) claim that it lies in the task of the communication department, ergo the communication practitioners, to **listen** to their stakeholders and their viewpoints. However, the researcher deduced that, given the answers by the students, Lund University did not listen enough. In a similar vein, Maitlis (2005) argues that environmental scanning is of the utmost importance for organizations, especially if they want to be strategic. The results indicated that Lund University has not conducted a thorough environmental scanning on their stakeholders, but, at the same time, perhaps an environmental scanning to the best of their abilities.

Considering this argument, one cannot entirely blame the Central External Relations team for not listening **enough** to their stakeholders, as only **one** of the participants interviewed from this Division is working as a communicator. Hence, the question arises: **Who owns the task of communicating to the students?** In the current circumstances, it appears that Lund University communicates both on faculty and central level, and who communicates when about what to who appears blurry. Consequently, to build the organization-stakeholder relationship with the students, the findings suggest, in line with Wright et al. (2008) and Hong et al. (2018), that clarifying this question would be beneficial for the university and its employees.

Moreover, findings by Varga and Jacobsen (2020), supported by the current empirical findings, suggest encouraging communication practitioners to identify their target audience when formulating messages. The present findings indicate that interviewed employees at the Division of External Relations tried to do it by informing the international students of how people of different groups were previously seen in the city and around the city center, **situating** the international students in the communication efforts. This finding can be argued to contradict Bavel et al. (2020), who argued for not speaking in terms of “us versus them” in a health disaster communication context. However, at the same time, the university’s communication effort can also be argued to support Bavel et al. (2020). The researcher argues that when

Lund University informed the international students about how other people may be isolated as a consequence of COVID-19, and that it is also for these people that the international students should be careful, employees at Lund University are trying to connect these groups and build a stronger feeling and sense of “us.”

Further, the health communication cycle, as described in Chapter 2, was, to a certain degree, supported by the findings. The different stages, as described by Schiavo (2014), included planning (step 1), implementation and monitoring (step 2), and evaluation, feedback, and refinement (step 3). The first step, planning, was found in the results when the Central External Relations team spoke about the preparation of the student guide. However, at the same, the researcher argues that this preparation is not enough when communicating during a health disaster but can be enough in a “normal” situation. Nevertheless, the researcher also acknowledges that the student guide is a good base in a health disaster context, but that the communication during such contexts needs to be intensified. The findings suggest that in a health disaster, there are many factors to take into consideration when communicating, such as information uncertainty and emotional distress. When viewed from the employees’ perspective, wherein one of them, Paulo, shared that it was not in the university’s task to interpret the health authorities’ communication, but rather to direct the students to the official sources, the university has done extensive work and implemented many communication efforts.

The study is in line with the findings by Finset et al. (2020), who indicated that effective health communication should be done truthfully, which employees Lund University also tried to ensure. Regarding this, the employees spoke about often sending informative emails and newsletters to the students and providing them with links to first-hand authority sources. Additionally, the results showed that Lund University demonstrated high leadership skills, exemplified in the two leadership groups: the central crisis management group and the operative working group. As a result, clear leadership in health disaster was found, which supports the findings by Fernandez and Shaw (2020) and Quattrone et al. (2020). Lund University can still improve on this point when they clearly define **who is responsible for what communication to whom when, and through what channels.** If this would be done, the students would potentially find it easier to know who to turn to when they face communicative challenges during disasters such as COVID-19.

Lastly, given these findings, the researcher concludes that Lund University's Central External Relations team has tried to assist and help the international students in their sensemaking processes, but not to the greatest extent possible. Considering the parameters these employees are working within (i.e. not interpreting Sweden's COVID-19 recommendations and regulations but only communicating about Lund University's COVID-19 strategy), the employees have succeeded in assisting the students. But, when seen from a broader picture of Sweden's COVID-19 approach, the same conclusion cannot be reached.

# 7. Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, the relevance and relation to the research field of strategic communication are highlighted. The chapter also discusses recommendations for organizations working towards a heterogenous target audience. This is followed by a discussion on the study's limitations. Lastly, the researcher concludes the study by providing suggestions for future studies based on the current findings and limitations.

## 7.1. Contribution, relation, and relevance to the field of strategic communication

The present study aimed to contribute to the research gap of sensemaking and sensegiving processes of a university's COVID-19 communication. Through the empirical findings, the research and wider community have gained more knowledge about how an organization can provide sensegiving through their communication in a health disaster context.

Although outside the scope of the research questions in the study, the current findings indicated an interesting angle to the interviewed Lund University employees' sensemaking processes of the Swedish COVID-19 communication from other Swedish authorities. Weick (1995) and the researchers who have built on his theory, where Weick et al. (2005) and Tandoc and Boi Lee (2020) are but a few names, have all found that one of the characteristics of sensemaking is that it is driven by plausibility, rather than by accuracy. However, the current empirical findings suggest that sensemaking is not **always** driven by *plausibility*, but indeed sometimes driven by *accuracy*. This was exemplified when Wilhelmina discussed how they, the employees, sought accurate COVID-19 information from other Swedish authorities. She points to the notion that sometimes, for sensemaking to occur, it needs to be driven by accuracy, in contrast to what Weick (1995), Tandoc and Boi Lee (2020), and Weick et al. (2005) theorized. Thus, the current research suggests that there are indeed truths to be obtained in the disaster health context of COVID-19, specifically regarding certain guidelines, recommendations, and regulations. Therefore, the research findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the sensemaking theory in the regard that the plausibility over accuracy characteristic is not applicable in all situations.

## 7.2. Recommendations

The current research yielded several recommendations for (international) communication practitioners. These recommendations are presented below in bullet form.

- Provide the students with, at faculty level, someone they can turn to and discuss the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic with. The person could be a communication practitioner, dedicated to helping them with understanding the COVID-19 disaster.
- Many students are not aware of the university's efforts in ensuring to provide them with thorough and correct information. Thus, it can be beneficial for the university to communicate the efforts and time that goes into the work "behind the scenes." Moreover, some students were not aware of Lund University providing information about Sweden's COVID-19 recommendations and regulations. Hence, this ought to be communicated more.
- Continue the work that is currently being done and act as the information **messenger**, directing the students to the direct sources, but, if needed, to act as a support to the students to help them understand the Swedish recommendations and regulations better.
- Clearly define who owns the "communication rights" to the international students.

## 7.3. Limitations

First, the research study was limited in both time and scope, as the researcher had a specific limited number of months devoted to working on the study. This affected the findings of the research and the data that was analyzed was consequently limited. Had there been more time available for the research, more international students and employees could have been interviewed, which could have yielded more nuanced and transferable data.

Building on this limitation, one of the main limitations of this research is that no employees from the faculty of Social Science were interviewed, and thus their sensegiving processes were not investigated. The motivation behind not including employees from the faculty of Social Science was because the primary focus of the study was on the international students' sensemaking processes, because of the limited time frame, and because the researcher found the interviewees mostly through them being recommended to her by other interviewees, wherein two employees at the faculty of Social Science were recommended at a later stage of the research. Given the decentralization of Lund University, this would have been interesting to investigate.

Moreover, there were limitations to the interviews themselves. The interviews were conducted at a specific point in time, namely in February and March 2021, which was roughly a year since the initial disaster officially began (March 2020, in Europe). Therefore, the answers obtained are highly retrospective, potentially causing the answers to be faulty and inconsistent. Further, it might also cause the participants not to remember specific situations or opinions they had in greater detail.

Additionally, the interviewees in this study were sampled based on convenience and purposive sampling. The international students, who were sampled based on convenience sampling, indicated that they wanted to be part of the research. This means that students who might have very different opinions and sensemaking views but were not interested in participating in the study were also not acknowledged. This student cohort is also significant for the university, but their opinions are still unknown.

Lastly, a limitation is that it did not include local, or Swedish national students. Had more faculties and Swedish higher education institutions been presented and discussed, comparisons could have been made. Hence, the answers obtained in the study cannot be assumed to apply to all students at Lund University or all Swedish universities. However, given the qualitative research approach, it is important to remember that generalizing the findings obtained in the study in statistical terms has never been the intention, but rather to draw **analytical** generalizations.

## 7.4. Suggestions for future studies

There are several suggestions for future research, derived from the empirical findings and limitations of the current study.

- Research how international students at other Swedish higher educations and faculties make sense of the university's COVID-19 communication.
- Investigate how other organizations with international stakeholders, such as Region Skåne, the Public Health Agency of Sweden, and the Swedish Government Offices contribute to the international students' sensemaking processes.

- Research how international communication officers in other organizations try to make sense of the COVID-19 communication from other authorities, and how they reason when providing communication and sensegiving processes to their international stakeholder group(s).

## 7.5. Concluding remarks

To conclude the study, based on the research questions, it can be restated that the international students make sense of Lund University's COVID-19 communication about Sweden's COVID-19 recommendations and regulations in copious different ways. However, most students do not use Lund University as a source to learn more about Sweden's COVID-19 approach, although some expressed this interest. Additionally, employees at Lund University's Central External relations team have tried to assist the international students in their sensemaking processes. However, this has not always been done strategically, given the broader picture of Sweden's COVID-19 approach. Hence, the results showed that the sensemaking theory and its properties developed by Weick (1995), in combination with the sensegiving and sensebreaking processes, can also be utilized in a disaster health context.

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# 9. Appendices

For more information on the consent forms to the international students and the employees, the interview guides, the connection between the codes and the thematical analysis, and the contact information survey, please see the appendices below.

## 9.1. Appendix A: Consent form (international students)

**Informed Consent Form**

**Lund University's Communication to International Students during the novel COVID-19 outbreak**

This consent form is part of the process required for ethical treatment of participants in research. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about the research process or procedures, please ask.

*Invitation to participate*

The research is twofold. Firstly, the research investigates how international students make sense of the communication they have received from Lund University regarding the novel COVID-19 outbreak. Secondly, the research focuses on how communication officers at Lund University have reasoned when planning and conducting the aforementioned communication to the international students. The research is conducted by Daniela Dolenec for her master thesis in strategic communication at Lund University.

*Research purpose*

The research paper looks at how international students at Lund University make sense of the communication from the University in light of COVID-19, as well as how Lund University communication officers have reasoned when communicating to the international students.

*Research method*

If you decide to participate, we will invite you to participate in a semi-structured in-depth interview. For example, you will be asked how long you have studied at Lund University and your perception of how Lund University has communicated during the disaster COVID-19. Your answers will be reported and analyzed together with data from other research participants.

*Benefit*

By participating, you will contribute to a better understanding of how Lund University has reasoned when communicating to international students in the disaster that is

COVID-19. Moreover, upon the request you are welcome to read the thesis after it has been finalized and published, to learn more about how other international students make sense of the communication from the University.

*Confidentiality – Anonymity – Security*

If you decide to participate, your identity as a participant in this study, and other personal information gathered about you during the study, will be kept strictly confidential and will never be made public. All data containing personal information from which you could be identified will be deleted after the data analysis. Electronic data will be password protected. When the study is completed, all data containing personal information will be destroyed. The published results of the study will contain only data from which no individual participant can be identified.

*Voluntary participation*

You are being asked to make a voluntary decision whether or not to participate in this study. If there is any part of the information that is not clear, please feel free to ask for clarifications. If you would like to consult with someone not associated with this study that will be alright, too. If you decide not to participate, or if you later decide to discontinue your participation, your decision will not affect your present or future relations with the researcher or Lund University. Upon request, a copy of the information, data, and results will be made available to you. You will always be free to discontinue participation at any time, and all data collected up to that time as a result of your partial participation will be destroyed without being used in the study. If you decide to participate, please provide your signature as indicated below.

*What your signature means*

Your signature on this Consent Form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this research project and agree to participate as a participant. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without any consequence. Your continued participation should be informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

______________________________________________

Signature of Participant                                        Date

______________________________________________

Print Name:

______________________________________________

Signature of Investigator                                        Date

*Contact Information*

Email: da3627do-s@student.lu.se

Best regards,

Daniela Dolenec

## 9.2. Appendix B: Consent form (employees)

**Informed Consent Form**

**Lund University's Communication to International Students during the novel COVID-19 Outbreak**

This consent form is part of the process required for ethical treatment of participants in research. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about the research process or procedures, please ask.

*Invitation to participate*

The research is twofold. Firstly, the research investigates how international students make sense of the communication they have received from Lund University regarding the novel COVID-19 outbreak. Secondly, the research focuses on how communication officers at Lund University have reasoned when planning and conducting the aforementioned communication to the international students. The research is conducted by Daniela Dolenec for her master thesis in strategic communication at Lund University.

*Research purpose*

The research paper looks at how international students at Lund University make sense of the communication from the University in light of COVID-19, as well as how Lund University communication officers have reasoned when communicating to the international students.

*Research method*

If you decide to participate, we will invite you to participate in a semi-structured in-depth interview. For example, you will be asked how long you have worked at Lund University, the role of the crisis communication group and your perception of how Lund University has communicated during the disaster COVID-19. Your answers will be reported and analyzed together with data from other research participants.

*Benefit*

By participating, you will contribute to a better understanding of how Lund University has reasoned when communicating to international students in the disaster that is

COVID-19. Moreover, upon the request you are welcome to read the thesis after it has been finalized and published, to learn more about how other international students make sense of the communication from the University.

*Confidentiality – Anonymity – Security*

If you decide to participate, your identity as a participant in this study, and other personal information gathered about you during the study, will be kept strictly confidential and will never be made public. All data containing personal information from which you could be identified will be deleted after the data analysis. Electronic data will be password protected. When the study is completed, all data containing personal information will be destroyed. The published results of the study will contain only data from which no individual participant can be identified.

*Voluntary participation*

You are being asked to make a voluntary decision whether or not to participate in this study. If there is any part of the information that is not clear, please feel free to ask for clarifications. If you would like to consult with someone not associated with this study that will be alright, too. If you decide not to participate, or if you later decide to discontinue your participation, your decision will not affect your present or future relations with the researcher or Lund University. Upon request, a copy of the information, data, and results will be made available to you. You will always be free to discontinue participation at any time, and all data collected up to that time as a result of your partial participation will be destroyed without being used in the study. If you decide to participate, please provide your signature as indicated below.

*What your signature means*

Your signature on this Consent Form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this research project and agree to participate as a participant. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without any consequence. Your continued participation should be informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Signature of Participant                                                    Date

Print Name:

Signature of Investigator                                                    Date

*Contact Information*

Email: da3627do-s@student.lu.se

Best regards,

Daniela Dolenec

## 9.3. Appendix C: Interview guide (international students)

**Interview questions to international students in the master programs Service Management and Strategic Communication at Lund University**

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself, including factors such as what you are studying, how old you are, which country you are from and other information you find relevant to that question.
2. How long have you been studying at Lund University? When did you first arrive at Lund University?
3. How do you stay updated and informed on the current circumstances around COVID-19?
4. Is the way in which Sweden manages COVID-19 the same or different from the way in which your home country manages it?
5. Do you read information from the University regarding Sweden's approach to COVID-19?
   a. When/if you read information, where do you read this information? How often do you read the information?
6. What is your perception of the University's communication to international students in light of COVID-19?
   a. Is there anything you feel is good or missing in their communication?
   b. What would you change/add to their communication? What would you like to see from the University's side (in terms of communication)?
7. What is your perception of the Swedish strategy to COVID-19? How did you perceive it in the beginning of the pandemic and how do you perceive it now, a year later? Has your perception changed? Please motivate. How did you understand the strategy? Did you understand it correctly? If not, who explained it to you?
8. If you thought/think it was/is difficult to comprehend the Swedish strategy:
   a. Do you feel like the university explained it in understandable terms? Please motivate.
   b. Do you think it is the task of the university to explain Sweden's COVID-19 strategy to international students?
9. In what ways has the university's **communication** about COVID-19 influenced your relationship with the university? For instance, do you trust the

university more/less; do you think the university is committed to ensure international students' safety; does the university's communication contribute to you being satisfied with your relationship with the university?

10. Is there anything else that you would like to add/shed light on, related to the current research topic of disaster communication in higher education institutions (in this case, Lund University), that we have not discussed?

## 9.4. Appendix D: Interview guide (employees)

**Interview questions to Lund University employees, working in the Division of External Relations and Division of LU Estates**

1. What is your current role at Lund University? How long have you worked at Lund University and which roles have you held?
2. You belong to the crisis communication group at Lund University. Can you describe this group? If you are a new group, how is the communication different, this communication that you are managing now, how is it different from an ordinary organizational crisis communication? If it is different, is it only disaster specific, does that mean that you add to disaster communication in theory and practice?
3. Does the crisis communication group include any general guidelines? Can you exemplify the role of the crisis communication group?

a. If needed to clarify the question: Such as, what should be communicated to the students, when it should be communicated, where it should be communicated, and what should not be communicated? How much planning and research (about their needs and views) did the group do before communicating to the students?

b. (Is there constant monitoring of how the students receive the communication? E.g. focus group interviews and other types of feedback. Do you conduct surveys? How do you perceive the students' perception of the information?)

4. Did Lund University already have a health strategy in place for a crisis? Did Lund University have to adapt your crisis communication strategy? If yes, in what way(s) did you adapt? How does your "regular" health strategy **differ** from your current health disaster that you have to apply? In what way do you **translate the Swedish way/approach/strategy for international students**? In what ways do you explain it and make sense of it to international students?
5. What is your perception of the communication from the University to the international students in the current health disaster? How would you explain the communication from the University to the international students enrolled at the University?
6. What do you think can be improved with Lund University's current communication to international students?

7. Is there anything that you would like to bring up, in light of the current topic, disaster communication of Lund University to international students, that we have not discussed?

## 9.5. Appendix E: Coding frame (international students)

The following code frame was created after thorough examination of the international students’ transcripts.

| Overarching theme | Code |
|---|---|
| **Grounded in identity construction and the act of being retrospective** | • Background of the interviewee<br>• Differences between home-country and Sweden<br>• Perception of COVID-19 communication (overall in Sweden)<br>• Do you understand the Swedish approach?<br>• Final remarks / Sum-up / Closure |
| **Being enactive of the environment and being a social activity** | • Do you read the COVID-19 information from Lund University?<br>• The role of Lund University in communication about COVID-19<br>• Perception of Lund University’s COVID-19 communication |
| **Being driven by plausibility rather than accuracy and constantly ongoing** | • Trust, satisfaction and safety perceptions at Lund University<br>• Trust, satisfaction and safety perceptions of Sweden’s approach<br>• How do you perceive the Swedish COVID-19 strategy? |
| **Being focused on and extracted by cues** | • How do you stay updated on COVID-19?<br>• What would you like to see more of in terms of communication from Lund University? / How |

| | |
|---|---|
| | would you like Lund University to communicate with you? |

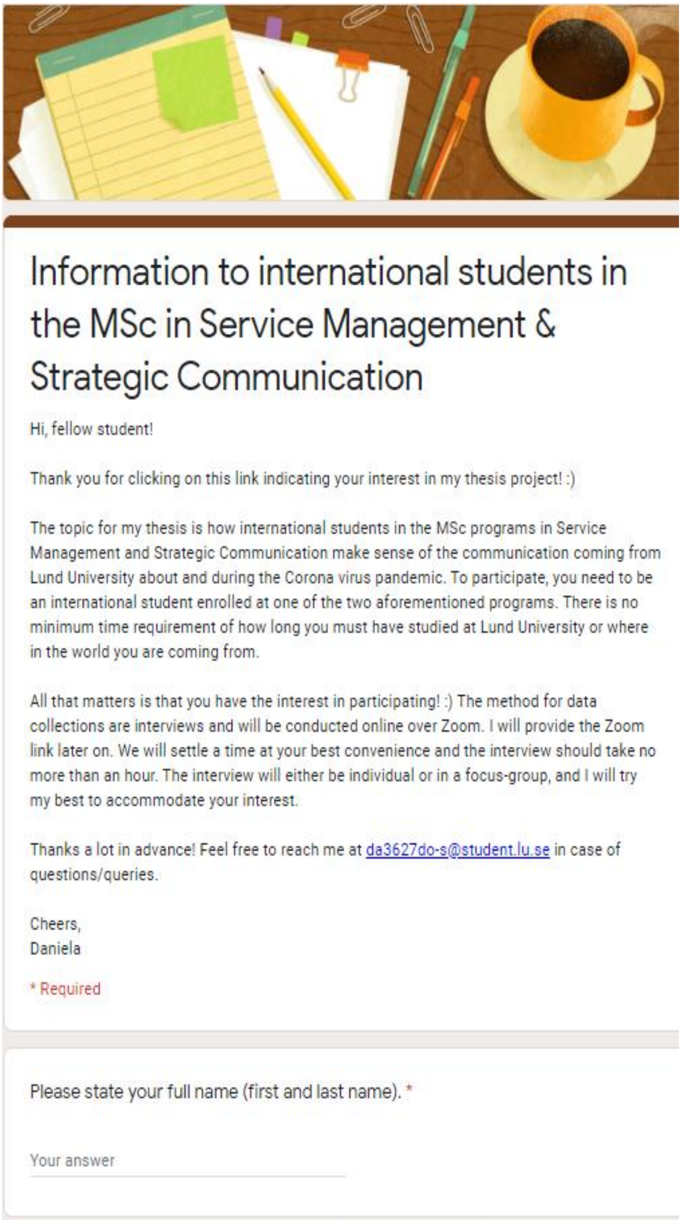
## 9.6. Appendix F: Coding frame (employees)

The following coding frame was created after thorough examination of the employees' transcripts.

| Overarching theme | Code |
|---|---|
| **Sensegiving** | • Current role at Lund University and background information<br>• Lund University COVID-19 pandemic organizational structure<br>• Faculty perception<br>• Employees' experiences of pandemic times<br>• Final remarks / Close-up / Summary / Anything you would like to add? |
| **Sensebreaking** | • Sweden's COVID-19 strategy<br>• Lund University COVID-19 communication with international students |

## 9.7. Appendix G: Contact information survey (international students)

Two screenshot images of the contact information survey sent out to the international students in the Master programs Service Management and Strategic Communication is presented below.



Information to international students in the MSc in Service Management & Strategic Communication

Hi, fellow student!

Thank you for clicking on this link indicating your interest in my thesis project! :)

The topic for my thesis is how international students in the MSc programs in Service Management and Strategic Communication make sense of the communication coming from Lund University about and during the Corona virus pandemic. To participate, you need to be an international student enrolled at one of the two aforementioned programs. There is no minimum time requirement of how long you must have studied at Lund University or where in the world you are coming from.

All that matters is that you have the interest in participating! :) The method for data collections are interviews and will be conducted online over Zoom. I will provide the Zoom link later on. We will settle a time at your best convenience and the interview should take no more than an hour. The interview will either be individual or in a focus-group, and I will try my best to accommodate your interest.

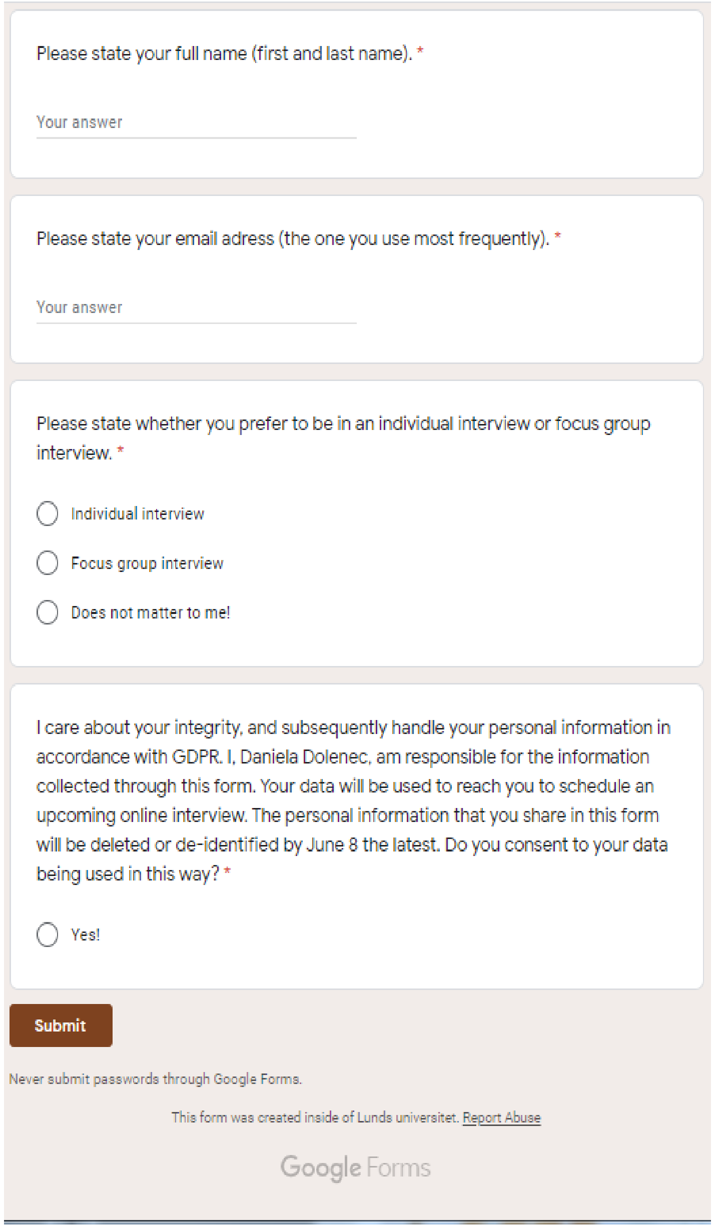
Thanks a lot in advance! Feel free to reach me at da3627do-s@student.lu.se in case of questions/queries.

Cheers,
Daniela

* Required

Please state your full name (first and last name). *

Your answer



Please state your full name (first and last name). *

Your answer

Please state your email adress (the one you use most frequently). *

Your answer

Please state whether you prefer to be in an individual interview or focus group interview. *

- Individual interview
- Focus group interview
- Does not matter to me!

I care about your integrity, and subsequently handle your personal information in accordance with GDPR. I, Daniela Dolenec, am responsible for the information collected through this form. Your data will be used to reach you to schedule an upcoming online interview. The personal information that you share in this form will be deleted or de-identified by June 8 the latest. Do you consent to your data being used in this way? *

- Yes!

Submit

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

This form was created inside of Lunds universitet. Report Abuse

Google Forms