

## COMMUNICATION IN THE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE OF UNIVERSITIES

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### *Abstract*

The text focuses on perception of communication in the academic environment by academics. In particular, on communication among academics, department and faculties managers, or university managers. It gives a brief characteristic of the environment of Czech universities, especially the social and cultural areas in relation to organizational climate of university as an organization. Theoretical starting points are illustrated by outcomes of a survey carried out at teacher training faculties. It is followed by an interpretation of the significance of communication attributed by academics to communication in the organization of university, i.e. at their departments, among academics and department or faculty managers.

### *Key words*

perception, communication, academic environment, Czech universities

### **Introduction**

Communication in an organization has been the subject of study since the start of industrial society; its importance even increased in post-industrial society, and it is the same in the contemporary society marked with various designates. Interest in the study of communication in organizations has not been decreasing; still, communication in an organization has changed lately: beside interpersonal communication, media, e.g. email and online communication by means of videoconferences and various types of communication enabling and accelerating software has entered it in a greater extent. This change has affected models of communication that functioned on the interpersonal level but that change the form of communication and limit its meanings when in the electronic form.

The change of the forms and content of communication has affected not only transnational corporations where communication mediated by electronic media has fully got on but also organizations

like universities. Communication in university-like organizations was usually based on direct communication of colleagues, mutual communication of academics with administrative staff and academics with department, faculty or university managers. What we witness today is increasing isolation and individualization of individuals while the humans' natural ability and need to communicate is suppressed and limited /1/. What cannot be omitted either is modification of communication through specialized texts by academics that are usually peer-viewed what brings another participants into this deferred communication.

Sociology provides a useful lens through which to view faculty guilds and their evolved structure, the collegium /2/, /3/. The group, society, and community are the units of analysis and interest. This group emphasis is expressed in the collegium through emphasis on peer review, professional authority, self-governance, and the community of scholars. In a larger sense, written Manning /4/, societal institutions (e.g. governments) and goals

(e.g. equality) are central to the mission and purposes of higher education institutions.

Ellen Earle Chaffee /5/ or Kathleen Manning /6/ describes higher education organizations through organizational theory and labelling it as collegial. Collegial perspective is founded primary on participative decision making. Actions are based on consensus and discussion. Mechanism for reality creation is shared constructions. Sources of meaning are academic disciplines. Power represents experts and professionals. Structure of collegial organizational frame is circular. Metaphorically it can be described as a circle. The legal process, the faculty senate and professional associations are typical examples of this organizational framework. Leadership correspond with rule first among equals. Communication is protracted and oral based. Scope of influence is faculty. Reward structure is founded on expertise in discipline and peer review. Academic disciplines are source of structure. Co-workers perceive workers as colleagues.

The communication process is related to organizational climate. On one hand it influences climate, on the other hand it is influenced by climate. Richard Bessoth /7/ describes organizational climate as a "personality" of social system; it corresponds with what is termed "operational climate". It is defined as prevailing ethos created by the organization management. This is why an important element of organizational climate is not only employees' conduct but also management's

conduct /8/. Organizational climate of the academic environment is a feeling arising in academic staff on the basis of long-term experiencing and assessment of the academic environment, especially its social and cultural areas (cooperation, communication, coordination, participation, work activity, decision making, leadership styles, motivation etc.).

There are studies focused on communication climate. The classic of communication studies Charles W. Redding /9/ specified five factors in relation to communication climate as one of the variants of organizational climate: supportiveness; participative decision making, trust, confidence, credibility; openness and candor; and high performance goals. Marshall Poole /10/ added reflections on ideal communication climate consisting of five dimensions of "collective beliefs, expectations, and values regarding communication, and generated in interaction around organizational practices via a continuous process of structuration". Communication climate is created by continual evaluation of interaction with other members in the organization. Even more dimensions were shown from statistical analyses of researches in communication climate. Pamela Shockley-Zalabak /11/ describes dimensions of structure, decision making, motivation, creativity and teamwork.

Jack Gibb /12/ wrote how to proceed in creating of positive communication climate in his classical study (table 1).

Supportive climate	Defensive Climate
1. Description	1. Evaluation
2. Problem orientation	2. Control
3. Spontaneity	3. Strategy
4. Empathy	4. Neutrality
5. Equality	5. Superiority
6. Provisionalism	6. Certainty

Table 1: Communication climate dichotomies /13/

Supportive environment is characterized by problem description. Problem orientation is a supportive climate opposite of control. Spontaneity, the opposite of strategy, is reflected in conducts that make real motives plain and generate trust that straightforward and honest interactions are taking place. Gibb /14/ found that productive groups emphatically supported their members rather than assuming a rational neutrality based on "pure" objectivity. Defensive groups are more

likely than supportive groups to have members intent on asserting superiority and exhibiting an unwillingness to participate equally in problem solving. Questions of certainty versus provisionalism. The provisional approach seeks numerous alternatives in order to find the most appropriate solution to a given problem. The supportive conditions are closely aligned to notion of ethical conflict conducts. In other words, communication climate may be approached as a representation of

what ways of communication are induced and deduced by agents in a certain environment /15/. This is why we analyze academic environment as an area where the knowledge and skill of communication is expected, i.e. not only exchange of information but also so-called sharing of visions, ideas, moods, feelings and attitudes. Communication in academic environment is specific with respect to situation, place, environment, time, purpose and participants of communication /16/. Academics are both communicants and communicators, controlling the communicate. Their communication is both one-sided and two-sided, with feedback and without any reaction to the message, "face-to-face" and indirect, intrapersonal, in a group, mass or public etc. Thus, they have numerous opportunities to communicate, and thus enter into interpersonal relations. Academics mutually communicate on the level employee-employee, employee-department head, employee-faculty management, department head-faculty management. Communication interactions happen also between academics and administrative staffs and also academics and students but these will not be treated further.

In academic environment, communication, its ways and effects become important factors also for the reason that they influence the way academics feel here, what they experience, how they perceive their feelings and, finally, the quality of their performance. It is possible to say that communication processes influence organizational climate of academic environment. They do not act on their own but in mutual relations with other factors and components of academic environment (organizational structure, service, traditions, culture, employees' competences etc.). Here communication helps or complicates work activities. There is still an opposite relation too. The type of organizational climate participates in the quality of communication /17/. A good example may be induction of the idea of forms of communication in an authoritative academic environment with disinterest in people and human contacts, with distrust among people, applying coercive means, with unsolved conflicts etc. in comparison with a university workplace where people help each other, treat the other with respect, participate in decision making and reaching work objectives, where the management is open to employees' ideas and supports everybody indiscriminately. The follow-

ing pages offer an analysis of communication in three areas of a faculty.

## Method

The study of organization and organizational climate has lately been attracting attention due to changes in the higher education area /18/, /19/, /20/. We start with a secondary data analysis of a survey the objective of what was to design a research tool (questionnaire) for measuring of organizational climate at academic workplaces. A possibility to evaluate the area of communication at a particular faculty turned out to be a value added.

Communication is regarded an important area of academic environment contributing to the specificity of organizational climate, as noted above. This is why it was studied also in foreign climate researches in the past. Some of them are stated as an evidence here: Creative Climate Questionnaire – CCQ /21/, School Climate Questionnaire (Schermann, 2002), Academic Staff of Universities Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire – ASUOCDQ /22/, Kocaeli University Organizational Climate Questionnaire – KUOCCQ /23/, Organizational Climate Determination Scale – OCDS /24/, Organizational Climate Assessment Scale – OCAS /25/. Attention of these researches was focused on e.g. democratic administration, risking, conflicts and violence, community and cohesion, support, trust, humour, openness, discussion, leadership style, professional conduct, morale, discipline, team work, participation in remuneration and decision making, control.

The created questionnaire of organizational climate was verified in a pilot survey and the pre-research stage on which we based our work consisted of 70 questions. The starting point of the questionnaire design was the composition of items covering academics' conduct, then conduct of department management and last but not least conduct of faculty management. University management was not a subject of the research what is caused by a great extent of autonomy of faculties. There were questions in each of the said areas that were explicitly focused on communication or communication outcome. Respondents were academic staffs who answered by means of a five-point scale: I definitely agree (1), I rather agree (2), I cannot judge (3), I rather disagree (4), and I defi-

nately disagree (5). The questionnaire returnability was 60 % (117 questionnaires). Cronbach's alpha was 0.94 for this version of the questionnaire as a whole. Thus we believe that other data and their interpretation can be of sufficient reliability. The

survey was carried out in November and December 2012 /26/.

Seven items were focused on communication or its impacts in the questionnaire area dedicated to academic staff's conduct (Table 2).

5 Work communication in our work group is efficient.
8 I am frequently not interested in cooperation with my colleagues on solving specialist problems.
9 There are frequent conflicts among the academic and non-academic staff of the faculty.
10 There are frequent conflicts among the academic staff of the faculty.
11 I respect my colleagues' specialist opinions.
22 I like discussing problems related to my specialization with my colleagues.
25 I always speak well of my faculty.

Table 2: Communication in items focusing on academic staff's conduct

Three items were focused on communication or its impacts in the questionnaire area dedicated to department management's conduct (table 3).

34 Tasks assigned by the workplace management (department, institute management) are comprehensible for the academic staff.
38 The academic staff receive sufficient feedback on the quality of their work from the workplace management (department, institute management).
39 If the workplace management (department, institute management) criticizes the academic staff's work, the opinions are well reasoned.

Table 3: Communication in items focused on department management's conduct

Seven items were focused on communication or its impacts in the questionnaire area dedicated to faculty management's conduct (table 4).

43 Criteria of evaluation of the academic staff's work are clearly articulated.
46 The faculty management does not admit its failures.
47 The faculty management makes decisions mostly "behind closed doors".
48 I can comment on important decisions of the faculty management.
54 Faculty events are announced in time.
61 Communication between the faculty management and my workplace (department, institute) is efficient.
66 The faculty management reasons conceptual changes properly.

Table 4: Communication in items focused on faculty management's conduct

## Outcomes

Indicators in each item are counted as median of value in items of each respondent. (Contrary to arithmetic mean) median is not influenced by a few extreme evaluations. It expresses the value that can be said that a half of the respondents evaluated faculty climate in a particular dimension with it or worse and a half better. Medians in each items vary from 1 to 5. Still, their variability is smaller: it means that it is less probable that the value would reach the minimum or maximum. This is why the median values under 2 or above 4

are unusual, and if they occur they definitely are worth attention.

Attention should not be focused on medians only. The interpretation should include variability of opinions too. Variability of evaluation is recorded by means of quartiles. The first quartile is a value that can be said that a quarter of the respondents evaluated the particular aspect of faculty climate with it or worse. Similarly, the third quartile is considered a value that defines a quarter of the respondents evaluating the particular dimension of faculty climate best. Then, approximately a half of evaluation of faculty climate is located between the values of both the quartiles. If these values are

located near to each other, the respondents evaluated the particular dimension in a similar way. If they are significantly different, the evaluations by the respondents are very diverse.

The above statistical parameters can be presented in a visual way too. Scales are oriented in such a way that lower values mean better climate in the particular dimension. Letter R is indicated at the item number on the x axe in case of a reversed

scale. See the following charts of the academic staff's conduct (chart 1), the department management's conduct (chart 2) and the faculty management's conduct (chart 3).

Correlation in all the below questionnaire items focused on communication is described by means of Spearman's rank correlation coefficient for ordinal data on the significance level of 0.01.

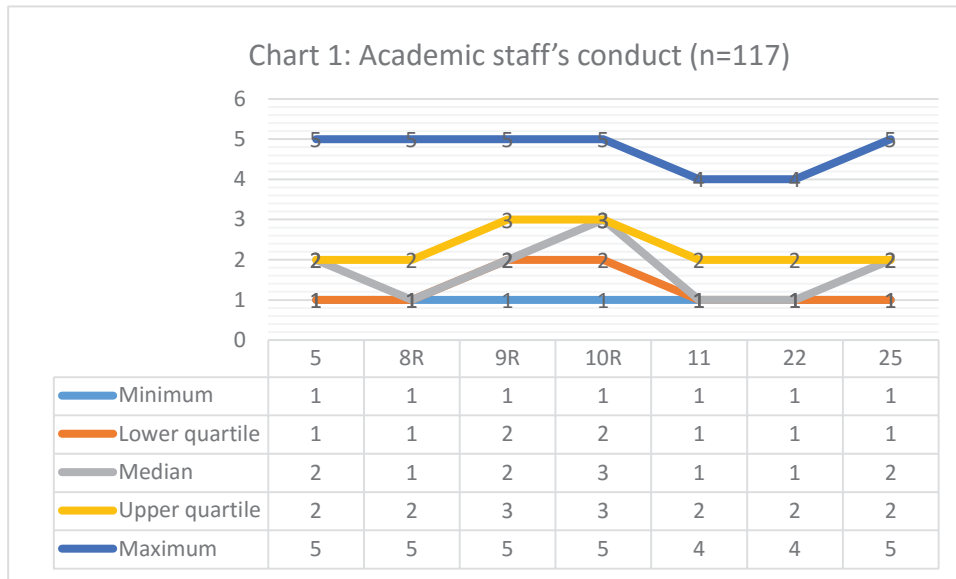


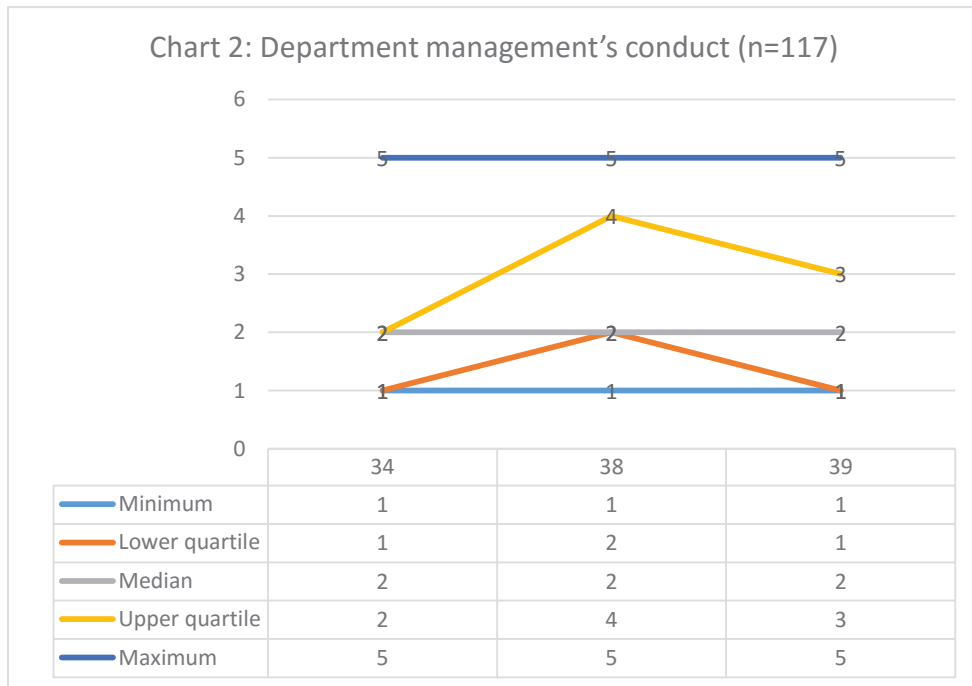
Chart 1 shows more positive evaluation of communication in the academic staff's conduct; the medians and the values of quartiles reach lower values. What turned out to be a statistically significant (considerable) correlation in the analysis of communication in the area focused on the academic staff's conduct was the correlation between

items focused on frequent occurrence of conflicts among the academic staff (item 10) and the academic and non-academic staffs (item 9). It is possible to talk about confirmation of low dependence in items of coefficient between 0.2 and 0.4 (comp. table 5, the statistically significant table cells are shaded).

Items (item numbers and wordings)	Academic staff's conduct (item numbers)						
	5	8	9	10	11	22	25
5 Work communication in our work groups is efficient.	X	-0.090307	-0.083663	-0.279916	-0.099367	0.165663	0.261876
8 I am frequently not interested in cooperation with my colleagues on solving specialist problems.		x	0.268446	0.185936	-0.225940	-0.307375	-0.209877
9 There are frequent conflicts among the academic and non-academic staff of the faculty.			x	0.447338	-0.049942	-0.240391	-0.154091
10 There are frequent conflicts among the academic staff of the faculty.				x	-0.091037	-0.125470	-0.320153
11 I respect my colleagues' specialist opinions.					x	0.210239	0.164569
22 I like discussing problems related to my						x	0.263773

specialization with my colleagues.							
25 I always speak well of my faculty.							x

Table 5: Spearman’s correlations of communication in the field of the academic staff’s conduct. The marked correlations are significant on the level  $p < .01000$

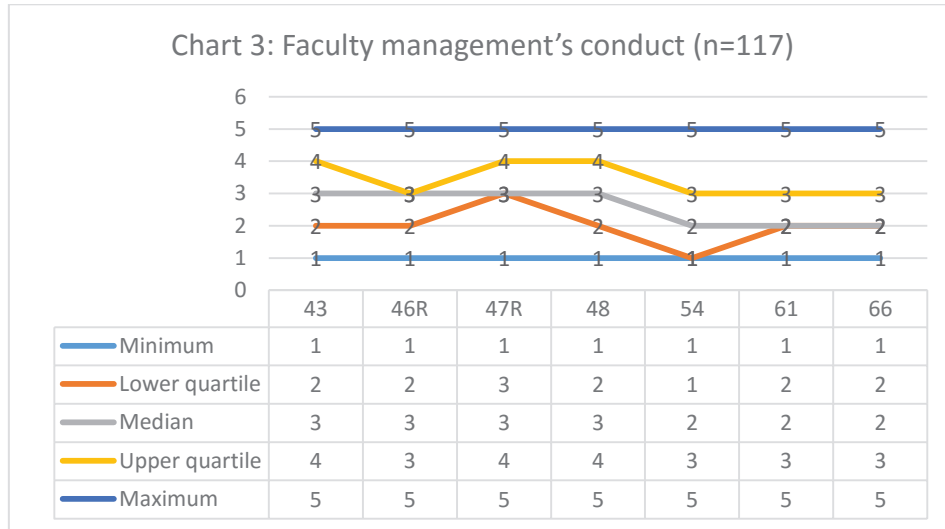


When interpreting the items focused on communication with the department managements, the item related to feedback on the quality of the employees’ work (item 38) gives more negative results as shown in chart 2. The analysis of communication in the area of the department managements’ conduct showed a statistical significance in all the three correlated items (table 6). Mean statis-

tical dependence was proved between the item of sufficient feedback from the department managements to the employees (item 38) and good reasoning of the criticism of the academic staff’s work by the workplace management (item 39). Small dependence was proved in other correlations.

Items (item numbers and wordings)	Department management’s conduct (item numbers)		
	34	38	39
34 Tasks assigned by the workplace management (department institute management) are comprehensible for the academic staff.	x	0.343586	0.372391
38 The academic staff receive sufficient feedback on the quality of their work from the workplace management (department, institute management).		x	0.568470
39 If the workplace management (department, institute management) criticizes the academic staff’s work, the opinions are well reasoned.			x

Table 6: Spearman’s correlations of communication in the field of the department managements’ conduct. The marked correlations are significant on the level  $p < .01000$



The respondents stated in the analysis of the faculty management's conduct that the faculty management frequently makes decisions "behind closed doors" (item 47R) what is indicated by the values of median and quartiles that are based on the reversed scale of the negatively articulated item (chart 3). Most statistically significant correlations were found among the items focused on communication and from the field of the faculty management's conduct (table 7). There is an exception in the form of a single item where correla-

tion was not proved – the opportunity to express one's opinion about the faculty's important decisions (item 48) in relation to timeliness of announcements of events at the faculty (item 54). Another exception is the correlation of prevailing decision making of the faculty management "behind closed doors" (item 47) with timeliness of announcements of events at the faculty (item 54) that turned out to be significant at the level  $p < .05$ .

Items (item numbers and wordings)	Faculty management's conduct (item numbers)						
	43	46	47	48	54	61	66
43 Criteria of evaluation of the academic staff's work are clearly articulated.	x	<i>-0.478699</i>	<i>-0.534886</i>	<i>0.358757</i>	<i>0.257812</i>	<i>0.525386</i>	<i>0.527163</i>
46 The faculty management does not admit its failures.		x	<i>0.633791</i>	<i>-0.454158</i>	<i>-0.305480</i>	<i>-0.533605</i>	<i>-0.626062</i>
47 The faculty management makes decisions mostly "behind closed doors".			x	<i>-0.530142</i>	<i>-0.193635</i>	<i>-0.442610</i>	<i>-0.559634</i>
48 I can comment on important decisions of the faculty management.				X	<i>0.171734</i>	<i>0.285545</i>	<i>0.447819</i>
54 Faculty events are announced in time.					x	<i>0.357113</i>	<i>0.321258</i>
61 Communication between the faculty management and my workplace (department, institute) is efficient.						x	<i>0.571879</i>
66 The faculty management reasons conceptual changes properly.							x

Table 7: Spearman's correlations of communication in the field of the faculty management's conduct. The marked correlations are significant on the level  $p < .01000$ . The correlation in italics is significant on the level  $p < .05$ .

### Discussion

What was found about communication and its manifestations in three areas observed in the faculty organizational climate questionnaire? The ISSN 1333-6371

field of communication among the academic staff dealt with efficient work communication, their interest in cooperation with their colleagues on solving specialist problems, the frequency of conflicts among the academic staff and among the academ-

ic and non-academic staff, respect for specialist opinions of one's colleagues, willingness to discuss specialist problems with one's colleagues, the way of presentation of the faculty by the academic staff in public. The values given in the charts and the correlations tables show mutual correlations and correlate the most positive evaluation of the academic staff's conduct from the three analyzed areas. It could be said that the academic staff's conduct in collegial on this level.

The field of communication among the academic staff and the department managements was focused on comprehensibility of tasks that come to the academic staff from the workplace management, the amount of feedback from the department (institute) management to the academic staff on the quality of carried out work and sufficient reasoning of criticism of work performed by the academic staff. The values and correlations also indicate relative satisfaction with communication, with the exception of evaluation of the item focused on provision of feedback on the quality of the academic staff's work.

The field of communication among the academic staff and the faculty management proved clear articulation of the criteria of evaluation of the academic staff's work, the faculty management's attitude to its own failures, the way the faculty management made decisions, timelines of announcements of faculty events, communication among the faculty management and the departments (institutes), the way of reasoning of conceptual changes from the part of the faculty management. The chart shows a shift of values toward higher values in the last area, and thus it indicates the need to pay more attention to the faculty management's communication with the academic staff. At the cost of slight simplification it is possible to state that collegiality in communication is disappearing with the increasing hierarchy of management at the analyzed faculty.

## Conclusion

Communication in an organization of the university type provides interesting material for study. Answers regarding the state of communication can be provided by data that are subject to a secondary data analysis. The tool for organizational climate research turned to be useful for these purposes. Despite the fact that the study of communi-

cation was not primary in this case, it provided answers to questions focused not only on communication but also on other relationship, causes and consequences that are related to this process. It turned out that within the organization of the faculty its organizational climate is perceived most positively on the communication level among the academic staff; there is relative satisfaction in the field of communication among the academic staff and the department managements with the exception of provision of the department managements' feedback on work performed by the academic staff; what is experienced in the most negative way are communication processes among the academic staff and the faculty management.

And what can be said as a conclusion? In order to make people /27/ (Vališová, 2002, p. 2), i.e. academic staff too, able to make connections, exchange information, understand each other, change attitudes, thus fulfil the purpose of natural communication even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is necessary to develop their abilities and skills of efficient conduct, rational decision making in extreme and conflict situation, adequate control, problem solving, discussion, reasoning, persuasion and negotiation.

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## Notes

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## KOMUNIKACIJA U AKADEMSKOM OKRUŽENJU I NJEZIN UTJECAJ NA ORGANIZACIJSKU KLIMU SVEUČILIŠTA

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### Sažetak

Rad se fokusira na percepciju komunikacije u akademskoj okolini između sveučilišnog osoblja. Konkretno, na komunikaciju među academicima, odjelima i fakultetskom ili sveučilišnom upravom. Dan je kratak pregled osobina čeških sveučilišta, posebno u društvenom i kulturnom području u odnosu na organizacijsku klimu sveučilišta kao organizacije. Teorijska polazišta su prikazana kroz rezultate istraživanja provedenih na nastavničkim fakultetima. Slijedi tumačenje rezultata o ulozi komunikacije u organizaciji sveučilišta od strane sveučilišnog, odnosno o ulozi komunikacije na njihovim odjelima, među sveučilišnim osobljem ili sa upravom.

### Ključne riječi

percepcija, komunikacija, akademsko okruženje, češka sveučilišta