

Role Summary

The Head of Communications and Engagement is a senior strategic leadership role responsible for strengthening and protecting Durham University's profile across international, national and regional audiences. Working within the Global Division, you will lead integrated communications activity that supports institutional priorities, student, staff and stakeholder engagement, student recruitment and revenue generation.

You will report to and deputise for the Director of Communications and Engagement and work closely with the Head of Corporate Marketing. You will provide trusted advice to senior leaders across a large, complex and high-profile organisation and functional team leadership.

Strategy

A central responsibility is to develop and deliver evidence-led communications strategies that translate the University's objectives into clear, coordinated activity. The role requires a strong strategic and ideas-driven thinker who can anticipate emerging opportunities, risks and reputational challenges, assess their implications and recommend responses. You will define outcomes, shape major campaigns and guide multidisciplinary teams from strategy through to implementation.

You will use audience insight, performance data, political awareness and knowledge of the higher education environment to inform decisions. You will establish standards and measures of success, oversee relevant policies and processes, and continually improve communications services, especially digitally. The role combines long-term strategic planning with the agility to respond quickly and effectively to fast-moving or sensitive issues.

Leadership

You will provide visible, empowering and people-centred leadership. You will line manage the external and internal communications teams, setting a vision and clear objectives, maintaining high professional standards and ensuring resources are aligned with strategic priorities, including budget management. Responsibilities include recruitment, induction, delegation, performance management, professional development, succession planning and supporting staff wellbeing.

Beyond direct team leadership, the role will make a significant contribution to a University-wide strategic communications community of practice. You will build capability, share good practice and encourage and support more integrated working across communications, marketing, development and alumni relations. You must be comfortable leading through influence, bringing together colleagues from different disciplines and helping teams remain focused and effective during periods of pressure or change.

Digital and Social Media

The role requires substantial expertise in digital communications and social media strategy, policy and operations. You will lead integrated approaches that connect digital and social channels with media relations, campaigns, events and stakeholder engagement. You will ensure that channel activity is audience-focused, insight-led and aligned with the University's reputation and strategic goals.

You will bring frontline experience of managing digital and social communications across varied and complex issues. You will advise senior stakeholders on digital opportunities and risks, establish appropriate governance and standards, identify areas for innovation, and support teams to make effective use of platforms, tools and performance data. Strong digital competence, including familiarity with a broad range of communications technologies, is essential.

Media Relations and Reputation

You will bring extensive national and international media relations experience, supported by established relationships with journalists and a strong understanding of the contemporary media environment. You will advise on media strategy, manage enquiries and lead responses across routine, high-profile and sensitive matters. You will monitor political, sector and media developments and apply this intelligence to proactive profile-building and risk management.

A particularly important responsibility is supporting the University's 24/7 out-of-hours communications function. Alongside the Director of Communications and Engagement and the Head of Corporate Marketing, you will provide senior strategic advice during evenings and weekends when major incidents or issues arise. This requires excellent judgement, resilience, discretion and the ability to remain calm and decisive amid ambiguity and pressure.

Skills and Experience

You will need significant senior-level strategic communications experience in large, complex and high-profile organisations. You should demonstrate excellent written, verbal, interpersonal and influencing skills; political astuteness; sound ethical judgement; and the ability to build productive relationships with senior colleagues and external stakeholders.

You will succeed by combining strategic authority with operational credibility, professional integrity, creativity, empathy and a proactive commitment to continuous improvement.

Location and Further Information

The full-time role is based at the **Palatine Centre in Durham City**, with hybrid working arrangements and an expectation of a minimum of two days a week in the office, increasing according to business needs including in-person meetings or events. More regular on-site working is particularly expected during the first 6–12 months to build knowledge of the University, its people and stakeholders. Occasional working from **Boldon House, Pity Me**, and travel for strategic or sector events and stakeholder meetings will also be required.

We would be particularly interested in speaking with you if you have senior level strategic communications experience in large, complex organisations such as, but not limited to, Government departments and agencies.

For an informal discussion or further information, contact Claire Whitelaw, Director of Communications and Engagement, at c.m.whitelaw@durham.ac.uk.

This document summarises the key elements of the role.

In applying for the role, it is essential you read the full job description, including the details of what is required to submit an application. (separate document).