

**Imperial College
London**

Communications and Public Affairs website

Competitor website analysis

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Introduction

A competitor analysis is an important technique to assess how direct competitors communicate including: the key phrases, terminology, format preferences, content types, content structure etc. It is a useful way to identify ways to improve content and also tell you what *not* to do in some cases. Although the focus in this analysis was fellow Russell group universities, other non-UK institutions were also considered, and one was analysed. The reason for this is because direct competitors may all follow a trend and share similar bad habits, so a different perspective on similar content is useful as well, even if the target audience differs greatly.

Competitors analysed

After looking at a number of other [Russell Group](#) university websites it is clear that there is much disparity about the way they present information about communications. This is partly because many universities have a marketing function, while others separate their internal communications and media relations which gives the content a different focus. Other universities such as University of Birmingham, present very basic information to the public with the more detailed information on the university's intranet. After this initial look, three UK universities were considered for a more in-depth review. This was due to similarities in organisational structure to Imperial and having some nice approaches to presenting similar content. They were:

- University of Glasgow
- London School of Economics (LSE)
- University of Oxford

In addition to this one non-UK university website was analysed: Stanford University in California.

Analysis questions

When analysing each of the websites, the following questions were considered:

- What language and labels do they use? Is there a pattern across universities?
- What are the primary communication messages and top tasks?
- What content types and templates are they using?
- What content is unique to them and what is Imperial's equivalent?
- How detailed is the content?
- What content mediums are they using and how? Video, pictures, maps...?
- What tone of voice do they use? Does it reinforce their brand?
- Which aspects of the site are good?
- Which aspects do not work well?
- What are their target audience groups, and do they prioritise any particular group?

Summary

These observations were based on a very high-level review of these sites in order to inspire some ideas for presenting similar content at Imperial. All four of sites these demonstrate some really good approaches to certain content in terms of design, layout and writing, but as well as the good points, all these sites have negative aspects, which we should try and avoid with the CPA site. Here is a summary of the main good and bad points of each site:

University of Glasgow

Good points	Bad points
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging and clear design on homepage – not cluttered • Clear hierarchy of content on homepage • Intro text on each page for context • Clear descriptive headings throughout 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation of news on homepage could be better to include images and dates and to be more distinguishable from other content. • Located in staff and student area of the site – may be difficult for external audiences to find • Not much information on the teams and services offered

London School of Economics (LSE)

Good points	Bad points
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good general use of relevant imagery • Nice presentation of contact information • Pages for each team talking about who they are, what they do, how to contact them etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unnecessarily large hero image on the homepage and landing pages

University of Oxford

Good points	Bad points
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear labelling and grouping of content on homepage • Good 'about us' and team information pages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quite formal tone • Common use of unrelated imagery • No cross-linking between service content and team pages

Stanford University

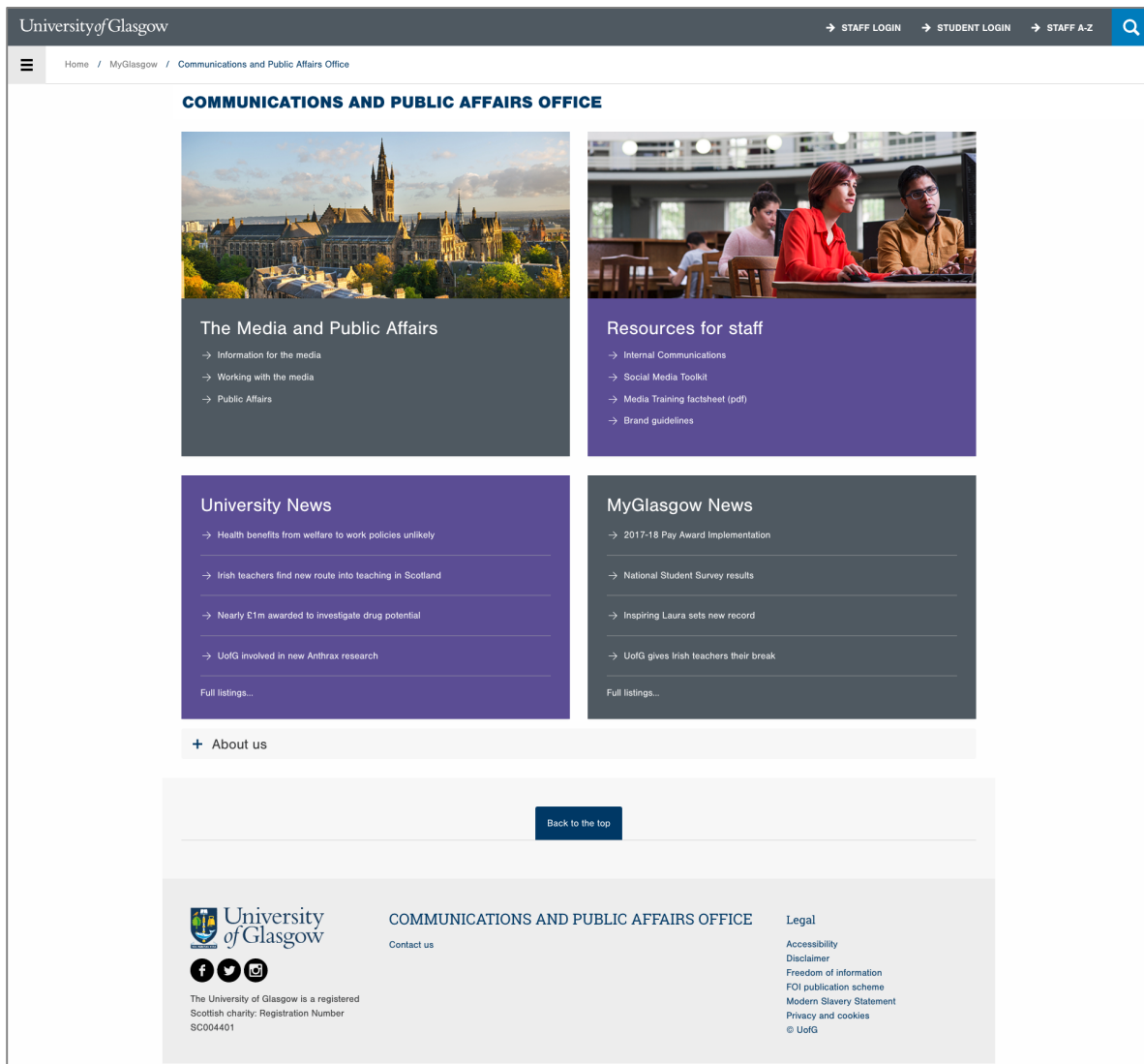
Good points	Bad points
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear split between the main audience groups • Good use of iconography • Good labelling and hierarchy of links on the homepage • Nice helpful tone and content • Presentation of policy type content • Single page of contacts for the whole Office 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of a subdomain for the website • Not clear how to find the site other than search • No introductory text on the homepage • Not a lot of information about the teams

Analysis

University of Glasgow

From this analysis, the University of Glasgow was considered the exemplar site. Like Imperial, University of Glasgow has a central [Communications and Public Affairs Office](#), the remit of which is comparable. One way in which the site differs is its positioning in the overall institution's information architecture: the Glasgow website has a *MyGlasgow* section/subsite which is essentially a section of the site for an internal audience, similar to an intranet, but the pages are publically-accessible. This is a nice approach as there is a different focus to the content. One of the challenges for any university website is the number of different audiences, both internal and external, all with their own requirements. This is one way to overcome this without having to go to the extent of developing a separate intranet.

The homepage design is very clean, but at the same time engaging. The headings are clear and concise, and each page provides some context. It is apparent that the creators of this site analysed the top tasks and most popular content to form a clear content hierarchy. For example, it can be assumed that most of the traffic to their website is either from an internal audience wanting to know how to work with the media, or the wider media and press wanting to work with the university. There is a similar trend at Imperial, based on the analytics work done in this project. The other content - news and resources for staff are further down the page, but the content is still very apparent and accessible.



Delving further into the content, there is some useful information which is presented in a very consistent way, with all the information the audience would expect.

Despite being a great example of a useful and usable site, there are some negative points too. Similar to the Imperial site, there are names and contacts, but not always information on the teams themselves - what they can, and cannot help with. The Glasgow site also does not have photos of staff, which makes it less friendly. Although cited as a positive previously, the positioning of the site, in *MyGlasgow*, may mean that the content is hard to find for an external audience, and when they arrive, they may not be sure they are in the right place. The clear labelling and presentation of content may alleviate some of those issues.

University of Oxford

At Oxford there is a [Public Affairs Directorate \(PAD\)](#) department that is responsible for “developing public understanding of the University and for promoting effective internal communication.”¹

Unlike Glasgow, the site is positioned at the top of the University of Oxford website.



The homepage of the site is visually engaging with clear labelling of the different sections of the department. It can be assumed that there is some data to support the ordering of these sections, as there is no other obvious grouping or order.

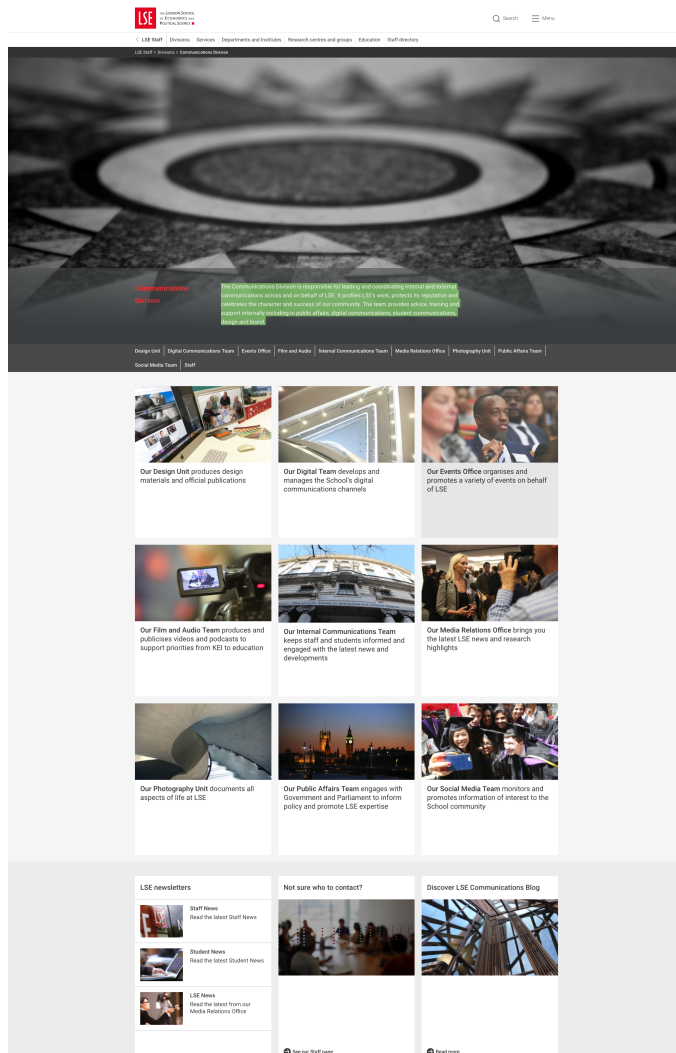
The tone and feel of the site is quite formal and not that welcoming. Exploring the site more, there are lots of images that do not relate to the work of the department, but they occupy a lot of real estate. However, the [About PAD](#) has the type of information you would expect to find although contact information is separate from the team pages, with no cross-linking. This leads to a bit of a disjointed experience.

¹ <http://www.ox.ac.uk/public-affairs>

London School of Economics (LSE)

LSE has a [Communications Division](#), its remit is “leading and coordinating internal and external communications across and on behalf of LSE. It profiles LSE’s work, protects its reputation and celebrates the character and success of our community. The team provides advice, training and support internally including in public affairs, digital communications, student communications, design and brand.”²

This is a similar remit to CPA Division at Imperial.



The homepage is very visual with lots of images, most of which are relevant to the content being described. The ‘hero’ banner image however, does not seem to serve any real purpose and occupies a lot of page real estate. This issue is also apparent on the major section landing pages. On inspection of the actual content, there are some nice presentation ideas such as contact information

² <https://info.lse.ac.uk/Staff/Divisions/Communications-Division>

and use of the right sidebar, but it does appear that there are elements of 'style over substance' on some pages. They also have pages for each team which has some useful content about what they do, who they are and how to contact them. Overall, there are some aspects, particularly on lower level pages, that could be considered in this project.

Stanford University

The main reason for considering a university in the US is that generally the websites are more advanced in terms of content design and user experience (UX) principles.

Stanford has an [Office of University Communications](#), which provides some similar to services to those provided by CPA at Imperial. This site has its own subdomain which seems to be the approach Stanford have chosen for many areas e.g.

- News - <http://news.stanford.edu/>
- Events - <http://events.stanford.edu/>
- Annual report - <http://annualreport.stanford.edu/>

This is an unusual approach and seems to lend itself to the use of acronyms and abbreviations in order to keep the URLs short. From this approach, it is not clear where the communications section is located in the hierarchy of the Stanford site or how to navigate to it; it is not considered as an [administrative service](#). The site seems to be very self-contained with its own search and navigation. The only global elements of the Stanford site seem to be the logo banner at the top and the footer, although this footer does differ slightly on other Stanford sites.

Homepage

On initial inspection, the homepage is very clean and contains very little text, so this page is more for signposting content related to this area of the university.

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Stanford Office of University Communications. At the top, there is a dark red navigation bar with the text 'Stanford University Communications' and a search box on the right. Below the navigation bar, there is a horizontal menu with links: 'Home', 'News & Publications', 'For Journalists', 'For Faculty & Staff', and 'Contact Us'. The main content area features a large image of a Stanford building with a text overlay that reads 'Stanford Office of University Communications'. Below the image, there are three columns of content, each with a circular icon and a list of links:

- INFORMATION RESOURCES** (Icon: Information 'i')
 - [Stanford Report](#)
 - [University homepage](#)
 - [Stanford News](#)
 - [Event calendar](#)
 - [Annual Report](#)
 - [Stanford Facts](#)
 - [Common Data Set](#)
 - [Parents communications](#)
- FOR JOURNALISTS** (Icon: Document with lines)
 - [How we can assist you](#)
 - [News releases](#)
 - [Media contacts](#)
 - [Find an expert](#)
 - [Photos, video, & broadcast](#)
 - [Communications policies](#)
 - [News Service Library](#)
- FOR FACULTY & STAFF** (Icon: Group of people)
 - [How we can assist you](#)
 - [Working with the media](#)
 - [Stanford Identity Toolkit](#)
 - [Web resources](#)
 - [Video production](#)
 - [Communications policies](#)
 - [News Service Library](#)

At the bottom right of the page, there is a small button labeled 'SU Communications Intranet'.

There are three main content areas

- Information Resources – information outputs from the Office
- For Journalists – resources for journalists
- For Faculty & Staff – resources for staff

This clearly shows that the Office has two main audiences: journalists and staff. This is very similar to CPA at Imperial, but the main difference is that Stanford have grouped their content according to these audiences. This is one approach that could be considered for the CPA site.

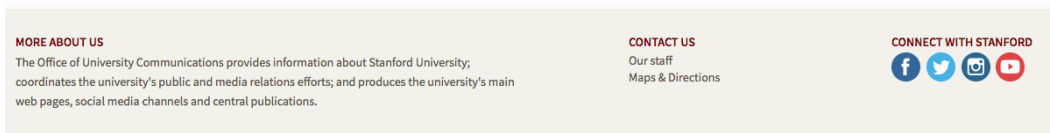
Good points

- Good labelling of the main content areas
- Clear labelling of the links
- Sensible hierarchy of the links

The use of iconography is good here as well as it gives a clear representation of the content

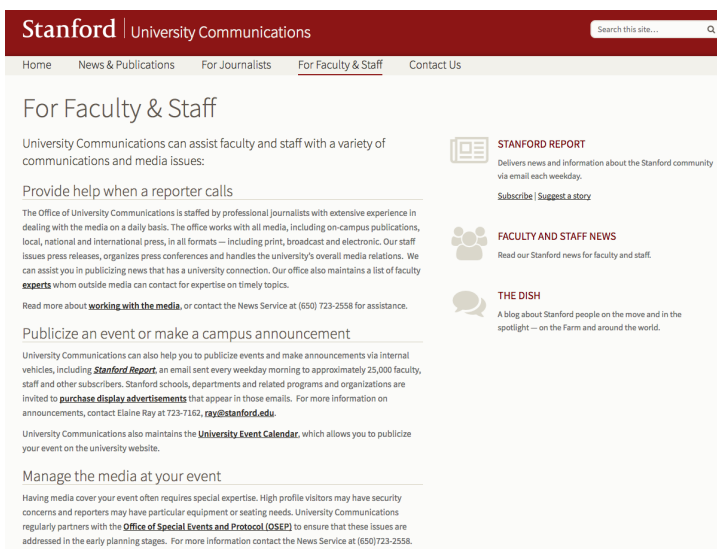
Bad points

No prominent introduction or contextual text about this page, this text appears in the footer, which is easy to miss.



Other content

Delving into deeper content Stanford provides some nice ‘How we can assist you’ pages for the two main audiences. These list all the main services and gives a brief summary of what is offered.



This type of content is representative of the type of helpful approach we want to achieve with the CPA website.

Other interesting content areas on the site include:

- [Communication policies](#) – a page listing all policies around the various services of the Office.
- One page [list of contacts](#) with generic contacts listed at the top